

ACTS, PART 42: DIFFICULTIES AND DELIVERANCE

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Very shortly, we will board the ship of Acts chapter 27, we will join the Apostle Paul, the gospel author Luke and others on this difficult and dangerous voyage. We will embark across the Mediterranean Sea and make our way towards Rome, the mighty capital of the Empire.

But before we do, I want us to consider how Paul got here and how we got here. Firstly, we'll consider how it is that Paul got here on this boat. I want us to think about how it is that Paul, once a powerful member of the religious elite in Jerusalem, wound up a prisoner on a life-threatening sea voyage. And I want us to also consider how those of us gathered here wound up at Sovereign Hope Church on this Sunday morning. Paul's journey and your journey may have something very important in common. Conversion.

If you are a Christian, and I know many of you are, I'm asking you to go back, just for a minute, into the past, and to consider your conversion experience.

For some of you, your conversion may have taken place very recently. For others, it may have taken place before you even entered Kindergarten. It is possible for a Christian to be unsure when conversion took place. It's also possible you're sitting here and thinking, I'm not a Christian or I'm not sure if I'm a Christian and I'm really not sure what I think of all this conversion talk. Let me just say that the Bible tells us conversion is real. It goes further and tells us that conversion is essential if we are to know God – but I accept that I can't convince you of any of that. My hope is that you'll find what I say today worthy of your consideration.

So once again, for those of you who can recall a conversion experience, or a period of time when you think that happened for you, I encourage you to reflect on that now.

If you were here last week for Pastor John's teaching from Acts chapter 26, you may recall the Apostle Paul his own conversion.

Paul's conversion experience is first described in Acts chapter 9. And then in Acts 26, Paul recalls this experience. In Caesarea, he boldly recounts the experience before powerful people associated with the government in Rome. Those listening include officials who have the authority to declare Paul guilty of stirring up riots and hand him over to the Jews who want to execute him. And before these figures who hold Paul's very life in their hands, Paul makes the same claim he's made before thousands of others.

Paul says and I quote. This is Acts 26, verses 22 and 23:

To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: That the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:22-23)

In essence, what Paul is saying that the Almighty God has a rescue plan for rebellious sinners. This plan is not new. It was not new even in Paul's day. Rather God had been announcing this plan to and through the Jewish people for centuries. And now he is announcing it to all the world's peoples.

The plan is this: The Christ must suffer and die upon a wooden cross. And then the Christ – Jesus, the Son of God – must rise from the dead.

Jesus had to die because justice had to be served and for justice to be served, sin had to be punished. Our sin had to be punished. The sin that that Christ Jesus was punished for was not his own. Jesus couldn't have been punished for his own sin because he lived his entire life without sinning. Jesus was punished for your sin and my sin. Our pride, our greed, our lust, our deep self-obsession. These sins are offensive to our righteous God and deserving of punishment.

And we can be grateful that our perfectly righteous God is also perfectly merciful. And it is because of God's mercy that the punishment you and I deserve was delivered upon God's own Son. Jesus died upon that cross and on the third day, God raised him by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus died and rose again – so that like Paul you may believe. And those who believe no longer have to live as rebels opposed to God. Those who believe – the forgiven – God calls his children.

If you can, go back to when God transformed you from a rebel who opposed him into his own child. This is conversion. This is why Paul has nothing to fear before people with the power to put him to death. He is a child of God. As long as he lives he will share the good news of Jesus boldly because when he dies he will experience life with Jesus forever. Reflect on your conversion. Reflect on what it felt like to discover you had become a child of God. Do you remember the first time it occurred to you that you would be living forever with Jesus?

I know that the circumstances surrounding every conversion are different, and I know that many of you were in the midst of a lot of difficulties. But I hope that whatever the circumstances were surrounding your conversion, I still hope your memories of that time fill you with joy.

That's our reflection on the message of Acts 26, our message from last week. A story of conversion and Jesus, who makes conversion possible. It fills our hearts with joy. Past, present and future sins all forgiven. All because of Jesus. The biggest problem we could ever have – our sin problem – is solved forever.

Now, we do still have a problem. It's a lesser problem, far less significant – but it remains a problem. And this is it: We're still stuck here. As Christians, we know one day we will be released from this problem-ridden, sin-filled world. We will enjoy the new heavens and the new earth, free of tears, free of death, free of mourning, free of crying, free of pain. But we're not there yet.

Bills are still due. Work is still stressful. School is still overwhelming. Unemployment still brings anxiety. Marriage still involves conflict. The single life can still be filled with loneliness. Looking to broader world, we know wars still rage. People hunger and thirst. Tragedy strikes without warning.

This is Acts chapter 27. Life still hurts. The voyage is still difficult and storms can arise unexpectedly. Even with Jesus, life remains very, very difficult at times.

Yet as we look our text for today, we find God offering his people hope in the midst of extreme difficulty and suffering. While we as Christians eagerly await the joy of the life to come, we can find hope in the present.

Acts chapter 27, verse 1: “**And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and**

some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius.” (Acts 27:1) The time has come for the great missionary Paul to begin a journey he has long prayed to make. He will travel to Rome, the great capital of the empire, but he will do so in a very humbling manner. Paul will travel as a prisoner overseen. He will be under the supervision of a Roman military leader known called a centurion.

Paul has been held for some time by Roman authorities. In Jerusalem, Jews who once looked up to Paul as one of their own leaders came to be outraged by his teachings about Jesus. They accused him of stirring up riots. The various trials have, in general, left the Romans overseeing them a bit puzzled. The matter seemed to them more a religious dispute than a question over violation of any law. But in any event, Paul has chosen to exercise his right as a Roman citizen to appeal the case to Caesar. And to Caesar in Rome he shall go.

He won't be alone in this journey. You might have caught the “we” in that first verse, “that we should set sail for Italy.” Paul will be accompanied on the ship by Luke, the author of the book of Acts and the gospel that bears his name. Soon they will be joined by another Christian, named Aristarchus. The text doesn't explain how the two Christians gained permission to board the ship and go with Paul. One possibility is that they presented themselves as his servants. In any case, they got on board.

So Paul won't be alone on the voyage, but he will be outnumbered. Luke and Aristarchus are the only other Christians mentioned aboard a ship that may be carrying as many as 276 people.

Life will be overwhelming

Now if you're familiar with the book of Acts or you've been here for recent teachings, you might know that Paul and his fellow Christians have endured some pretty tough treatment at times. We've seen Christians in Acts encounter violent opposition, in fact. But in this particular case, in chapter 27, it is not recorded that Paul or Luke or Aristarchus were persecuted for their beliefs.

At this stage it turns out to be the weather that brings about hardship.

And the challenges begin to mount early on. Here is a map showing several of the key places that come up in this chapter.

MAP

This is a description of an early portion of the journey that takes them from the port of Sidon to Fair Havens on the island of Cyprus.

And putting out to sea from (Sidon) we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us...We came to Myra in Lycia...We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with great difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea. (Acts 27:4-8)

The winds were against them. They sail slowly for days. They arrive at one city, it says, with “great difficulty” as the wind prevents further travel. They set out and once again, “difficulty” is mentioned. What's going on here? The Lord desires for Paul to testify in Rome. God spoke to Paul in Acts 23 and assured

him that he would arrive there to preach the Gospel. And surely God is in control of the weather. One of Jesus' best known miracles is when he calmed a storm in Mark 4.

Why would an all-powerful God who loves his children more than we can imagine allow such difficulty into the lives of those same children? Especially in a case like this, where God's children are doing what they're doing to serve him.

This gives us pause when we read of it in the Scripture and it gives us pause when we encounter difficulty in our own lives.

Things continue to go wrong. Paul experiences rejection. The centurion rejects Paul's advice.

Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying "Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. And because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete...and spend the winter there. (Acts 27:9-12)

At first it appears that the centurion made the right decision, but suddenly, just when they thought they were going to make it to Phoenix, a storm appears. Sometimes life's most heart-breaking experiences are like that – they blindsides us, just as it appeared things would turn out the way we'd hoped.

Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. (Acts 27:13-14)

Sometimes when things go wrong it brings suffering. Christians suffer. People of every kind of belief under the sun suffer. Often, as is the case here, people of very different worldviews experience the same suffering side-by-side.

Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned. (Acts 27:18-20)

If you are a follower of Jesus, you have been rescued from the eternal consequences of sin, but you have not been rescued from the challenges of this life.

Going through the book of Acts has given us opportunity to reflect on some of the great difficulties Christians faced in the early church era. This chapter certainly gives us another opportunity to do just that. (The beauty of the Bible is that it grounded – without error – in the history it describes, and it also guides us today.) Consider life today in Missoula.

We find Christians and non-Christians stuck in difficult circumstances. Things can go from bad to worse, good advice is rejected, hopes are unexpectedly dashed. Acts 27 is a brilliant record of an ancient sea voyage and just as it is grounded in history, it also guides us today.

Yes, on the whole Missoula offers an excellent quality of life. But things go wrong unexpectedly here just like they do everywhere else. Just this past week, due to the storm, we've had people in our community go for days without electricity. Completely unexpected. Completely disruptive to many lives.

And many in our community lead lives that are disrupted on an ongoing basis. Consider chronic sickness or pain. We have friends, neighbors – perhaps we ourselves – carry on under the clouds of depression or the unpredictability of mental illness. We share our offices with those who are mourning the loss of loved ones. We sit down in classrooms next to those who go home and suffer unspeakable abuse. We know we live in a world – and a community – that is hurting. When we or our loved ones are suffering it as if storms conceal the stars for weeks. We can't tell which way we are going. When will this end? Am I headed out of this darkness or it is only beginning?

Suffering does not fit on a scale. To ride out this storm alongside Paul would be torturous. But the person who smiles and serves you your coffee tomorrow morning might think it sounds preferable to the next meeting with the divorce lawyer.

Suffering does not fit on a scale and sometimes the pain a person is going through is completely invisible to others. Christians, please remember that this week when someone you do not know wrongs you – when a stranger sins against you. Instead of quietly cursing that person to yourself, pray! Pray that person would encounter Jesus right in the middle of whatever it is he or she is going through. Forgive, you who have been forgiven so much.

Life was difficult in the first century and it's difficult today.

Now, no matter how hard it gets. No matter how heartbreaking. No matter how many times you say, I cannot take endure this any longer.

Be assured that God remains in control.

Life will be overwhelming at times

God remains in control

We know that God always remains in control, because God always fulfills his promises. You may have a very loyal, very honorable friend. I hope that you do. And when this friend makes you a promise, you know this person will do everything possible to fulfill it. And maybe this person will still fall short. Maybe circumstances will simply prevent your friend from keeping the promise. Maybe the promise of this loyal friend will go unfulfilled.

When a human being makes a promise, the best we can hope for is for it to mean, "I'll do everything possible to keep my promise."

But we know that a promise by a human is never truly a 100% guarantee. There just too many things beyond the control of even a diligent, well-intentioned person.

Only a promise from God is absolutely assured.

Let's return to the ship. Darkness conceals the stars. They don't know where they are and cannot navigate. The crew is throwing overboard equipment that would normally be considered critical.

All hope, Luke writes, has been abandoned.

And then God speaks to Paul through an angel and makes him a promise. And Paul shares this promise to bring hope to the crew. Paul stands among the desperate men on board the ship and he speaks.

"Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on some island." (Acts 27:21b-26)

Paul predicts that the ship will be lost, but says God promises that all aboard the ship will survive. Pretty astonishing, considering how we just read that "all hope of being saved was at last abandoned." At the end of verse 20.

And as we look to close of the chapter, we find the fulfillment of this promise God has made.

Firstly, the ship is lost.

...they made for the beach. But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. (Acts 27:40b-41a)

Yet amazingly, all aboard make it to the island safely. The island is called Malta, and you'll be hearing more about Paul and his companions on Malta next week. This is how they get there.

The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, and the rest on the planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land. (Acts 27:42-44)

So against all rational odds, in spite of the storm, in spite of casting off cargo and tackle, in spite of the shipwreck, in spite of the soldiers plotting to kill the prisoners so that they don't have to get back to Rome and try to explain to their superiors how the prisoners got away – God's promise is perfectly fulfilled.

MAP

Taking another look at this map, we can see how far Paul and the others have travelled. And in spite of the fact that the sailors completely lost control of the ship, God delivered them to Malta, exactly where he wanted them to be. Next week we'll hear about how God uses our Christian travelers in Malta. For now, just consider how remarkable it is that they ran into that little speck of an island at all. God never relinquished control. He allowed his people to suffer, yet at the time of his choosing, he lifted the suffering and delivered them to exactly the place he intended for them to be. Consider also, that they have made considerable progress in the direction of Rome. God's plan will be fulfilled.

Another important thing we can observe here is that when we say that God is in control – he’s in control of everything and everyone. God is even in control of people who do not worship him or believe in him.

Let’s reconsider a shorter portion of the verses we just looked at.

The soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. (Acts 27:42-43a)

The Roman centurion, who is never described as a Christian, intervenes to protect Paul and the other prisoners. And it’s not the first time that God has used the pagan centurion in a way that proved beneficial to Paul.

We’re going to back up just briefly to Sidon, the first port of call after the ship departed from Caesarea. This is the third verse in our chapter.

The next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. (Acts 27:3)

Julius the Roman centurion allows Paul, a prisoner, to leave the boat and visit other Christians in Sidon. Now a soldier or two presumably went with Paul to make sure he came back, but nonetheless, this is extraordinary. Imagine the joy Paul and his friend must have experienced when they were reunited. Imagine the looks upon the faces of Paul’s friends when he told them how Julius had given him permission to come and be with them. Imagine the praise they gave God that day.

They would have understood very deeply that day that our God is truly in control of all things and all people. Our sovereign God.

Now you might be listening to all of this and thinking, that worked out very well for Paul. But I’m not sure that influential people are looking out for me in my life. You’re possibly thinking through your life and saying to yourself, my boss doesn’t seem to like me, my teachers and professors won’t cut me any slack, my elected officials don’t even know who I am. And I’ve certainly never had God send an angel to speak to me directly.

You can still find great comfort in the fact that even at the worst of times, God remains in control. You can find this reassurance in the Scripture.

If you’ve been coming to Sovereign Hope for any length of time, you’ve likely heard this before and I’m going to say it again today because it’s so important:

The primary way God speaks to us is through his Word.

That’s why we encourage you to read your Bible at home daily. And if you happen to be someone for whom reading or reading comprehension do not come easily to you, there are lots of audio and video resources as well as lots of clear guides to the Bible available. Regardless of how familiar you are right now with the Bible, regardless of what obstacles hold you back from reading God’s Word, there are pastors and many other people at this church who would love to help you figure out how to make the Bible a part of your life.

God spoke to Paul through an angel. Praise our almighty God. He can do that.

And the primary way he wants to speak to you is through his Word.

That's why we gather here every week to hear teaching from the Bible. The fact that the Bible provides the content for our teaching is far more important than the teacher. Have you thought about that? Our Christian culture can get very caught up in preacher style and personality, can't we? That preacher is so funny and that one, he's such a gifted communicator. *Is he teaching from the Bible?* That's the important question.

Do you remember the verses I quoted you from the previous chapter, Acts 26? Here's part of it again:

I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: That the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:22b-23)

Saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass. In the Old Testament, God promised a Christ. Here's one example of that promise. This is from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah was one of the prophets Paul was referring to. Now this was written down hundreds of years before Jesus, yet the language is as clear and plain as anything written by those who came after.

Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted...but he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 52:13, 53:5)

God promised Paul that everyone on board that seemingly doomed ship would survive. And he delivered.

For hundreds of years, God promised the Jews a Messiah. He delivered Jesus, a Savior for the Jews and all the people of the world.

Make God's Word a part of your life every day.

Discover rediscover and believe in God's sure promises. They will give you the hope you need to carry on through tough times. They will remind you that no matter what comes your way, God remains in control.

God's word will reassure you. It will also challenge you, and call you to action.

Life will be overwhelming at times

God remains in control

God expects you to act

And this is the final point I'm going to draw out of Acts 27 and leave you with this morning. We've seen how great challenges arise, even in the lives of God's own beloved people. We've been reminded that even in the midst of life's most difficult circumstances, God never relinquishes control.

Now, I'm going to remind you even as your faith in our sovereign God grows, you must be ready to take action. Sometimes – and I hope you would never do this – sometimes when people come to understand that God is all powerful and always in control, they become passive. I should put more time into that job application, but you know what, God will decide who gets the position. I really should share the gospel with my friend I go hiking with, but really what does it matter, only God can save her.

When we do this – and we all do in subtle ways – we are twisting God's truth. You can believe in a God who is always in control, and believe that same God calls you to obedient action. God alone will determine the ultimate outcome of your actions. Yet passivity is not a lifestyle option for a Christian.

Consider Paul in Acts 27. Paul believes in a sovereign God. Paul knows that God has fulfilled his promise of a Savior through his Son Jesus. And while it's possible Paul encountered doubts as the situation grew dire aboard the ship – Paul is human, let us not forget. While it's possible Paul had doubts, he knew that God was ultimately in control of events. He knew the Scripture teaches that.

Yet look how active and engaged Paul is throughout this chapter. He speaks his mind in a meeting to determine whether the ship will sail from Fair Havens or whether they will stay the winter there. The centurion doesn't take Paul's advice, but the point is he's there, elbow-to-elbow with soldiers and sailors, hashing it out. He doesn't consider this type of thing insufficiently spiritual. Here's the text:

Since much time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, “Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.” (Acts 27:9-10)

The Fast refers to the Day of Atonement, a holy day for Jews. It's likely mid-October and sea travel on the Mediterranean at that time usually ended mid-September. Paul by this time was an experienced passenger on the sea, and he was simply offering good advice from his experience.

Once this advice is rejected and the ship ends up in a storm as a result, Paul speaks up once again. This instance we're already taken a pretty close look at. Paul shares what God has revealed to him through an angel. The people on board ship will survive.

Applying these examples in your own life, look for opportunities to speak up and offer those around you sound advice from your life experiences. Even more importantly, look for opportunities to share truth that comes from God's Word with others.

Paul's not done yet. A little while before the shipwreck, sailors tried to escape the ship. They were lowering a small boat alongside the ship in hopes of making a getaway. The centurion, the soldiers and prisoners would have been left on the ship without any sailors.

Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.” Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go. (Acts 27:31-32)

The soldiers foil the sailors' plot because of Paul's timely warning. In the verses that immediately follow, we find Paul taking care of a very basic need. He's insisting that the men on board the ship have something to eat. The text doesn't tell us why they went as long as they did without eating. One possibility is that the ship is tossing and turning with such violence that they can't keep food down. Or perhaps they've lost their appetites because of so much stress and anxiety. Whatever the explanation, Paul takes action once again.

As the day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.” And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. Then they were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. (Acts 27:33-36)

Again and again, we see Paul the prisoner intervening for the benefit of those around him. We know enough about Paul from Acts to be sure that he's praying for the salvation of those on the ship with him. We can be

confident he shared the news of Jesus' death and resurrection because he shared that with everybody. And we see him taking timely, practical actions that are really quite varied. Sometimes he uses these opportunities to give praise to God as he did when he broke the bread. Other times, like when he warns of the sailors attempting to escape, there's really nothing overtly spiritual about what he does at all.

It's not formulaic. Paul's a human being doing the best he can to serve God and interact well with the people around him.

As we spend time in God's Word and in prayer strengthening that relationship with God, we will find ourselves more inclined to take bold and timely action, benefitting those around us. And we will trust more and more that the outcomes of those actions are always up to God.

Life will be overwhelming at times

God remains in control

God expects you to act

So we accept that difficult days will come. We never forget that God is in control. And we should remain ever ready to share God's truth and to take any action we believe is timely and beneficial for those around us.

Conclusion

I want to leave you with a story I heard recently. I think it underscores some of these things.

I had the opportunity to spend some time a couple weeks ago with some Christians who have dedicated their lives to bringing the good news of Jesus to the Middle East. At great risk, they are teaching from the Bible in nations dominated by Islam.

And one of them told the story of a young Muslim woman. This young woman, during a time of difficulty in her life, began to wonder if Christianity held any answers for her. Like many do in the Middle East, she used the internet to learn about our faith. And with great eagerness and curiosity, she found a sermon online. She clicked play and she watched a video of one America's most famous prosperity preachers.

She encountered a pseudo-Christian teacher told her that as a Christian's faith grows, so too will that person's bank account grow. And likewise, as your faith grows, your health will surely improve. If you're a Christian and you're not healthy and wealthy, you must lack faith. The greater your faith, the more often things in your life will simply go the way you'd like them to go.

And you thought Hollywood was exporting spiritual corruption.

So how did this Middle Eastern woman respond to this popular preacher? She made two observations – and remember this is someone who is a Muslim, not a Christian convert. She said, “I like how positive this preacher is. I like his cheerfulness. But – she went on – this offers nothing to someone who is truly suffering.”

You may never experience anything as dramatic as Paul and Luke and Aristarchus did on their voyage from Caesarea to Malta. But you will encounter hurting people, just like the Christian who told me this story encountered this young woman. And if you seek to understand the whole counsel of God's Word, and if you strive every day to apply God's wisdom in your life. If you do these things, you will find yourself, slowly but surely beginning to take action in ways that bless others, just naturally. And you will find the words – often God's own Words – to offer hope to those so desperately in need of it.