

“But We Must Run Aground”: Great Grace and Good Grief

Introduction

The Text

A. This is now our second week dealing with [Acts 27](#). And, though we’ll still really be looking at the whole of the chapter—because I read it to you in its entirety last week, and because it takes a considerable amount of time to do so—I thought it best to only read to you a representative sample of it here as a way of getting us back in.

1. So, remember, Paul is setting sail here ultimately for Rome. The conditions are a little challenging at the beginning, but things get utterly overwhelming by the end.
2. Let’s pick it up mid-story in [v. 13](#) and read down to [v. 26](#).

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. ¹⁵ And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. ¹⁶ Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship’s boat. ¹⁷ After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. ¹⁸ Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. ¹⁹ And on the third day they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. ²⁰ 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.

²¹ Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. ²² Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ 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.’ ²⁵ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ But we must run aground on some island.” (Acts 27:13-26)

Only Grace

A. I still remember . . .

1. Back when I was in college there at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, I was a brand new Christian and, for some reason, I was asked to help organize the fall retreat for one of the campus ministries I was a part of.
2. I was talking with one of the staff leaders at the time and he said something that stuck with me.

- a. I can't recall exactly how he put it now, but he said something like this: "You know God is behind whatever it is you're doing, you know you're really in the center of his will for you, when it all just goes smoothly, when it feels like you're 'skating on ice.'" I think that's the picture he gave.
 - b. To borrow imagery from the story in our text: "You know you're really on the right track with God when everything feels like it's 'smooth sailing.'"
- i. The sun is out, the sky is blue, the birds are singing, the wind is favorable, and you're cruising.
 - ii. It's just frictionless, free-flowing—"skating on ice" . . . "smooth sailing."

B. Now, I wonder what you think of that?

- 1. At the time, I thought: that makes sense, that sounds right, that seems good.
 - 2. But I'll tell you, after walking longer with Jesus, reading more of my Bible, I've come to the conclusion: it's wrong.
- a. To be fair, it's half right.
 - b. But, in my opinion, that makes it even more dangerous.
- i. Because you've got just enough Bible verses to put behind it to make you think you're good.
 - ii. And it can blind you to the more nuanced and complicated truth of things.

C. Of course, we know when God is with us . . . he does supply us with grace, he does open doors for us, he parts the waters, he makes a way, there is a sense of wind in our sails, he keeps us going.

- 1. But, we also know from Scripture, it's going to be hard.
- a. There's grace, but there's also grief.
 - b. As Paul says to those young believers in [Acts 14:22](#), when he's trying to encourage them to stay with it: "[through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.](#)"

D. If you have this oversimplified perspective on how things are going to go, then when it inevitably gets tough for you, you can get really confused. And more than that, you can get dejected, right?

- 1. "He must not be with me in this. He must be against me now. What am I doing wrong? Because I'm not 'skating on ice,' the ice is cracking and I'm in the water. It's not 'smooth sailing,' the waves are tossing and this ship is going down."
- a. Have you ever felt like that?

Only Grief

A. Of course, there are Christians who have overreacted to all this naive triumphalism and gone in the other direction, to the other extreme—towards a sort of pessimism or defeatism.

1. The Christian life isn't easy or fun, it's miserable.
 2. In fact, these folks start to feel like, if it's too easy for you, you must be doing something wrong!
 - a. Christians are supposed to be opposed, by man and by devil. So if you're not experiencing much of that, if you're having a good time of things, if you are skating on ice and smooth sailing, it's likely because you've sold out on Jesus and you're cuddling up with the gods of this world.
 - b. It's a sort of anti-prosperity gospel. You know you're on the right track with God if you're suffering.
- B. But this too has its own problems. This too is only partly true and therefore particularly dangerous.
1. Yes, of course, the journey to the New Jerusalem passes through the wilderness of this world.
 2. But there's manna from heaven and water from the rock all along the way.
 - a. There's grief, but there's also grace.

Acts 27

- A. And I think there may be no clearer place in all of Scripture where this comes out, at least in story form, than here with Paul aboard this ship en route to Rome in [Acts 27](#).
1. Both sides, grace and grief, are woven together in our text. We can't escape the tension.
 - a. We are not allowed to get comfortable in one or the other extreme.
 - b. It's not all good, nor is it all hard.
 - c. Sometimes things oscillate from one to the other in the very same verse!
 - i. Great grace and good grief. The Christian life is this strange mix of both.
- B. So what I want to do this morning is just make sure you see (1) The Tension in our text; and then we'll consider together what's (2) The Point of it. Why does God do things this way?

(1) The Tension

The Center of God's Will

- A. Before I can really bring out the tension here, the first thing we have to be clear on is that Paul really is right in the center of God's will for his life.
1. As I mentioned last week, we know that God has planned for Paul to head to Rome to minister the gospel to the Gentiles there ([Acts 19:21](#); [23:11](#); [27:24](#)).
 2. And so that is what Paul's doing.

B. In other words, this hard stuff is not coming upon him because he's disobeying God in some way.

1. You might think of that storm at sea that came for Jonah.

a. Sometimes things do come unglued around you because you're not living in line with God's call and direction. And so God disciplines the children he loves to get them back on track with him.

2. But that is not the case with Paul.

a. Paul is right where God wants him to be.

b. And yet he's also stuck on a ship in a storm out at sea.

C. As mentioned, we like think that to be in the center of God's will for us means that everything's going to go right, everything should be easy for us.

1. But have you ever thought that maybe to be in the center of God's will for you sometimes means you're going to be in the center of a storm? Because that's what's happening here.

Great Grace and Good Grief

A. But it's not all storm, is it? As I've said, there's both grace and grief here, the good and the hard. Let me show you a bit of that tension now . . .

B. For one thing, remember, yes God is getting Paul to Rome now, but he's not heading over on a cruise-liner, right?

1. He's not traveling in comfort or style.

2. He's traveling in chains, numbered among the prisoners.

a. So there's grief to this.

C. But it's not all grief. Look at the grace shown to him there in [v. 3](#), as if God is making it plain: "I'm still with you even though this is hard."

1. Paul, as were told up in [v. 1](#), was put under guard of a centurion named Julius.

2. But, similar to how God gives Joseph favor with the Egyptian Pharaoh, and Daniel favor with the Babylonian king, here too God gives Paul favor with this Roman centurion: "[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.](#)"

a. Julius didn't have to do that. But he did.

b. It had to be a wonderful reminder to Paul that God is still near in this.

i. There's grief, but it's all interwoven with grace.

D. But, again, that doesn't mean it's going to be easy. So, as they set sail from Sidon, grief seems to take the upper hand once more:

1. So Luke tells us in v. 4: “the winds were against us.”
 2. And then again in vv. 7-8: “⁷ We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone.⁸ Coasting along it with difficulty” It’s hard going. We’re not moving fast enough. The winds are not favorable.
 3. And this sets them up for even more. Because now they find themselves out at sea later than expected, nearing the winter months when anyone who knew better would harbor up and wait for spring.
 - a. So we read of a “tempestuous wind” that “struck down from the land” (v. 14).
 - b. And they were “driven along” by it (vv. 15, 17).
 - c. They were “violently storm-tossed” (v. 18).
 - i. It’s a harrowing thing.
- E. But just when we’d be inclined to think grief has finally won out, grace pushes back into the frame.
1. Remember that angel that comes to Paul and encourages him. And he here relays what was told to him to these terrified sailors and soldiers and prisoners onboard the ship with him: “²² I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.²³ For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship,²⁴ 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.’” (vv. 22-24).
 - a. What a wonderful word! So much grace here. And we think: at last, all shall be well from this point forward, right?!
- F. Oh, but that’s not how Paul concludes things, is it? No. Here’s how it ends . . .
1. ²⁵ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.²⁶ But [oh yeah, don’t forget . . .] we must run aground on some island.” How would you like to hear that? “What island?!” “I don’t know. We’ll be okay. But it’s going to be wild.”
 - a. There’s grace, but there’s still grief.
- G. And then, after two more weeks of this out at sea, at last they sense the end is near. They can see the shore of some island and they hope to take refuge there.
1. So down in v. 40 we’re told that “hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach.” “Safety, land, here we come!”
- H. Oh but then v. 41: “But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf.”

1. At this point, it seems things are really going to go from bad to worse. For, in light of this development, we're told that the soldiers wanted to quickly put the prisoners to death lest any escape in all this and it fall back on them.
- I. But, just then, in comes grace again, vv. 43-44: “⁴³ 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,⁴⁴ and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.”
1. And you think: “Oh, thank goodness! Now we can finally put all this behind us. Surely, now we're good, right? We're finally safe on the land!”
- J. But I wonder if you know what's one of the first thing that happens there on the island of Malta?
1. Paul's bit by a viper, some venomous serpent. And everyone thinks he's going to die (Acts 28:3). And you think: “Oh how wonderful, God. You saved me from a storm at sea just to kill me with a snakebite here on the land.”
 2. But Paul doesn't die. He's miraculously preserved (v. 5). He's shown grace!
- K. It would almost be comical if it wasn't so devastating at times.
1. But it's the Christian life—full of great grace and good grief.
- L. And I just want to spend the rest of our time together trying to answer the question: Why? What's the point?!

(2) The Point

Why Was It “So”?!

- A. Back in the last verse of Acts 27, again, Luke tells us: “And so it was that all were brought safely to land” (v. 44).
1. “And so it was” . . . but I want to know: Why was it so? Why did God do it like this?
 - a. If it were my job to bring you safely to land, this isn't how I would do it. I'd prefer something like “smooth sailing.”
- B. In case you forgot, God is, of course, over the wind and the waves. They blow and crash at his decree.
1. “[H]e brings forth the wind from his storehouses” (Jer. 51:16).
 2. He says to the waters of the sea: “Thus far shall you come, and no farther . . .” (Job 38:11).
 - a. So why not give favorable winds here?
 - b. Why not stay the waves and let them sail on glassy waters?

C. Why does he bring them “safely to land” like this?

1. Or to put it another way: Why does God often keep grace and grief together in our lives?

- a. Why not just do away with all the grief now?
- b. Why not “smooth sailing” to glory . . . starting today?

D. As I look at this story and the rest of Scripture, I see at least three purposes he has for us in this . . .

Purpose #1: To Keep Us in Line

A. God mingles grace with grief all along the path to glory because it keeps us in line.

Always Good → Arrogance

A. On the one hand, if all we ever got was the good stuff, if things only went well for us all the time, then our inevitable tendency would be towards pride.

- 1. We’d start to think that we’re better than we are, that we’re more in control than we are. Things would go to our head.
- 2. And we’d be prone to forget God and just how desperate we are every moment for him.
- 3. We’d be like spoiled kids who always get what they want and never hear “no.”

- a. Suffering doesn’t ruin your soul, it seasons it. It keeps you humble and attached to reality.

B. I think of Israel’s story, all through the OT, and this is a constant back and forth for them, isn’t it?

- 1. When things are going well for them, it goes to their head. They forget God, they no longer pray or seek him. They grow comfortable and complacent.
- 2. So God has to bring in trials, and then suddenly they come to, they remember who he is and who they are, and they cry out to him once more.

- a. But then he answers and things start going well, and they forget again.
- b. And on it goes.

C. I thought of what Paul himself says in [2 Cor. 12:7](#): “[B]ecause of the surpassing greatness of the revelations [Jesus had given him in the Spirit], a thorn was [also] given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, [why?] to keep me from becoming conceited.”

- 1. “It would go to my head. I would think I was better. So trials come in to keep me humble.” Here’s where you realize: grief is actually part of the grace!

Always Hard → Despair

A. But, on the other hand, neither do we only get the hard stuff, right?

1. If things were only ever hard, and there was no mingling of good things, no evidence that God is with us along the way, then we'd be given over to despair, to hopelessness, to darkness of heart and mind.
- B. I can't tell you how many times I've been in that place of discouragement with my ministry or something, going through a real rough patch, and then, almost in predictable fashion, suddenly there in my inbox will be some email for a person with encouragement for me about how God has used me in their life for something and they felt like they just needed to tell me.
1. And I'd just start crying. Just when you think God's done with you, he shows you he's not.
 - a. I don't get a ton of those emails, because it would go to my head.
 - b. But I get just enough of them to keep me going, to keep me hoping, to keep me in line. God is with me.

Always Both → Humble + Hopeful

- A. So it's always both. These two come together: great grace and good grief.
1. God gives us just enough grief to keep us humble, and just enough grace to keep us hopeful.
- B. God uses them like those bumpers in the bowling alley.
1. Just when we start to think we're awesome in and of ourselves, he brings in some trouble to humble us and we're brought back into our place of reliance on him.
 2. Just when we're starting to think he's abandoned us entirely, he gives us some "wink" from heaven, some evidence of his grace, a reminder that he's still with us and still got us.
 - a. And with this we're kept in line.

Purpose #2: To Push Us Forward

- A. This is a point I have made often as we've gone through the book of Acts, so I don't plan to spend too much more time on it again here.
1. But I do think it is worth mentioning simply because, when the trials come for you, it's really hard to believe this. You have to get it settled in your soul now!
 - a. When you hit a hard patch, it feels like your life is going backwards, like the winds are driving you in the wrong direction!
 - b. But God uses the hard stuff to push you forward in his plan for you.
- B. I mentioned this last time, but consider Paul's story as it's played out in the last few chapters of Acts:
1. God uses persecution in Jerusalem to get him to Caesarea.
 2. And he uses the trials there in Caesarea to get him on board this ship.
 3. And he uses the storm on this ship to get him to Rome.

- a. It's not the way you and I would have done it.
 - b. But it's how God gets him where he wants him to go.
- C. To give you one other somewhat fun example from our text . . .
 - 1. I mentioned how tragic it would have seemed that, just when these guys were making for the beach, they struck a reef, and "the stern was being broken up by the surf" (v. 41).
 - 2. That sounds terrible. But I wonder if you noticed: What do these guys do with the planks of boat that are broken off here?
 - a. They ride them to shore (v. 44)!
- D. I remember hearing Britt Merrick—the previous pastor of a thriving church down in Santa Barbara and son of the famous surfboard shaper Al Merrick—say that this is the first and only reference to surfing in all the Bible :)
 - 1. And I love that. Because it gives us a wonderful perspective on our suffering.
 - a. You might look at the broken ship of your life and think: "It's over. God's making a wreckage of my dreams."
 - b. But he's not. Do you want to know what he's doing? He's shaping a surfboard for you to ride to land.
 - 2. But you have to decide:
 - a. Are you going to sit on that sinking boat and grumble as it goes down?
 - b. Or are you going to grab a plank and ride the waves?
 - c. Are you going to sulk in your suffering or you going to surf it?
- E. If you know anything about Britt Merrick and his story, then you know he doesn't just surf waves, he's surfed a lot of suffering.
 - 1. A while back his five year-old daughter Daisy was diagnosed with cancer. And, after three and a half gut-wrenching years of trying everything they could to fight it, cancer won. The whole thing was quite public and nightmarishly painful.
 - 2. But still God used that whole experience to get him back into shaping boards and now he's running the family business and ministering to the surfing community.
 - a. You can find some of his story online at thesurfersbible.com. It's there that he writes the following: "At this point in my life, having reached the age of 50, I've encountered both tremendous success and heart-wrenching pain. What I've found is that Jesus has been present through it all, and He surpasses all of it. Life can throw crazy challenges at us, but what remains constant is Jesus' presence and his ability to carry us through. He's greater and better than any circumstance we face."
- F. And this really leads us to the last purpose I want to highlight . . .

Purpose #3: To Reveal His Glory

To Us

- A. The fact of the matter is, suffering often sets the stage for us to see something of God and his glory that we otherwise couldn't.
 - 1. You might think of the fact that right now, the stars are still burning bright, radiant and awe-inspiring right above us.
 - 2. But if you walk outside and look up you won't see them. Why? Because it's not dark.
 - a. There are certain glories you'll only see in the darkness of night.
 - b. In fact, if you've ever gone out stargazing before (like my family loves to do), you know: the darker it is the more glorious they appear.
 - 3. So, as hard your trials can be, God's not trying to hurt you. He's trying to show you more of himself.
- B. You might think again of what Paul says there in [vv. 23-24](#)—how God met him, not before the storm, not after the storm, but right there in the middle of it: “[T]his very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship,²⁴ and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul’”
 - 1. On solid ground, when the sun is out and all is well around you, that word from God wouldn't mean all that much.
 - 2. But right there in the tempest, in the dark night, that word would shine like a star, wouldn't it? It would mean everything (cf. [2 Cor. 1:8-10](#)).
- C. This is what Jesus does with his disciples in the Gospels, right? Do you remember that?
 - 1. He has them all get in a boat with him.
 - 2. And while they're out at sea a great storm rolls in and they're taking on water and it looks like it's going to end real bad for them.
 - 3. The disciples are freaking out.
 - 4. But, I love this, Jesus is asleep. Mark says he was “[asleep on the cushion](#)” ([Mark 4:38](#)). He's as comfortable and peaceful as can be.
 - 5. And so they wake him up and they start accusing him: “Don't you care? What's your problem? Do something!”
 - 6. And he's just like: “What are you so worked up about? The wind the waves?” And he turns to the storm: “Hush.” And it all just stops.
 - 7. And Matthew tells us, as you might expect, at this point, “[the \[disciples\] marveled, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?’](#)” ([Matt. 8:27](#)).
 - 8. All their attention shifts from the storm to the Son. They see his power, his authority, his greatness, his goodness, his glory.
 - a. That was the point of the storm at sea for them. And that's the point of the storms he permits in your life.

- i. He's not trying to hurt you.
- ii. He's trying to reveal himself to you! He's trying to show you something of himself you could never have seen otherwise.

To Others

A. But there's another aspect to this that comes out with particular force in the story of our text.

- 1. You see, God doesn't just bring us through hard times to reveal something of himself to us, Christians.
- 2. He's also looking to reveal something of himself to others—to those outside the Christian faith, to those who are watching you and learning from you what kind of God he is.

B. I didn't have time to read this part of the story this morning, but we did look at it last week, if you were here. You'll see it there in [vv. 33-36](#) in particular.

- 1. If you recall, even though back up in [vv. 21-26](#), Paul had encouraged these guys who were with him onboard the ship not to worry and to eat food and things,
- 2. later we come to realize that two weeks has passed out at sea and they're still worried and they still haven't eaten.

- a. They heard the word of promise from him but they didn't believe it, they hadn't taken it in and appropriated it. If they had they would have stopped fretting and eaten some food as he said.

3. It's all the way down in [v. 36](#) when we finally read of them settling down and eating.

- a. But what was it that convinced them to do so?
- b. I'll tell you what it was. They saw Paul do it. Look at [vv. 33-36](#) now: “³³ As 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.’³⁴ 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.’³⁵ 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.³⁶ Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves.”

C. Don't miss this part of your evangelism and witness.

- 1. People don't just need to hear your words. They need to see your life.
- 2. These guys didn't care about his words. But when they saw his peace it drew them in.

D. And, of course, it was peace in the midst of the chaos. That's what made it look so compelling.

- 1. If you have peace when all around is going well, people don't see Jesus in you. They just assume you're doing good because stuff in your life is good.
- 2. But if you're still good even when all has gone wrong, that's when they step back and scratch their heads and wonder: what is it that's keeping you together in this?

- a. That's when they're primed to see Jesus.
- E. When God takes you through a hard time, he's giving you an opportunity . . . to shine for him before others!
 - 1. Are you dealing with budget cuts at work? People's jobs are on the block?
 - a. While everyone else is freaking out, and jockeying for position . . . be the guy or gal who has a strange peace—because your life and identity and worth isn't attached to your work. It's attached to Jesus.
 - 2. Do you have some sort of health issue that's threatening to upend your life?
 - a. Show the doctor that your hope and peace aren't found in health and wealth and prosperity, but in Jesus who has overcome the grave for you.
- F. So, as John Piper would put it: "Don't waste your suffering."
 - 1. Don't waste it grumbling and complaining and pushing for things to be different.
 - 2. God's trying to reveal something of himself to you and to those around you. You don't want to miss that!
- G. Listen, I know some of this might not be what we want to hear: that the Christian life isn't always "smooth sailing."
 - 1. But it's so important that we see this, that we accept this, that we let God have his way with us in this.
 - a. Because, however crazy it sounds, the Bible is clear: in both the grace and the grief, God is always working . . . for his glory and your good!