“Unless These Men Stay”: God Promises Good and Then Threatens Bad?

Introduction

The Text

A. This is now our third week dealing with Acts 27.

1. And, once again, for the sake of time, I’m not going to read to you the whole of the chapter as we did for that first sermon.
2. Instead, I’ll zero on those verses that are particularly relevant for what we will be attempting to discuss this morning. In this case, I want to read vv. 21-32.

B. While you turn there, let me at least just briefly remind you what’s happening in the context:

1. The opening verses of this chapter record how Paul, along with other prisoners and soldiers and sailors, board a ship and set sail for Rome—planning to travel, as people would in those days, along the Mediterranean coastline bit-by-bit towards their final destination.

2. But the wind and weather turn foul on them and things go bleak rather quickly. It looks to all on board as if their journey and, indeed, even their very lives are going to come to a miserable end in all of this.

    a. They conclude as much in v. 20, where Luke recounts something of their despondency for us: “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.”

        i. There they sit in the shadows on this sinking ship—helpless and hopeless in the gloom.

C. But now we pick up the story in v. 21, where a surprising slant of light, as it seems, begins to cut through . . .

[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.”
[27] When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about
midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. [28] So they took a sounding and found twenty
fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. [29] And fearing that we

might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. [30] And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, [31] Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." [32] Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go. (Acts 27:21–32)

1. And you remember, perhaps, how the story ends: through many twists and turns, ups and downs, back and forths . . . the people are preserved. As Luke puts it in the final verse of this chapter: "And so it was that all were brought safely to land" (v. 44).

A Third Sermon

A. The first sermon I preached on Acts 27 was, more or less, an overview of the whole chapter, looking at the storms we face and how we can get through them like Paul does here.

B. But then I said that, for subsequent weeks, my plan was to consider certain tensions that are present here in the narrative here and try to identify the truths that emerge out from them.

1. That's what we did last week.
2. That's what we're going to do again this week.

C. The tension we'll be considering here this morning is already hinted at in the title of this sermon: "Unless These Men Stay" [quoting v. 31]: God Promises Good and Then Threatens Bad?

1. Similar to last time, the first thing I want to do is help you see that there is (1) A Jarring Tension present here in our text.
2. And then I'll do my best to provide you with (2) An Attempted Resolution to it. How do we make sense of the tension and the seemingly contradictory bits we see here?

D. Just to be clear up front here: my ultimate aim in all of this is that you and I would come to see just how secure we truly are in Jesus.

1. Whatever storm you may be facing today—however wind-blown and wave-tossed you feel—he is the anchor for your soul, the ballast for your heart and mind, the bedrock for your feet.

E. But before we can really come to such a conviction, we have to deal with this jarring tension here in our text. Because, at first read, it sure seems to throw into question and threaten everything I just said.

1. So that's where we turn first . . .

(1) A Jarring Tension

In the Text

A. I imagine many of you caught this even as I read to you earlier, but let me make sure we all see it now together . . .

The Promise (vv. 22-25)

A. Paul is addressing this hopeless crowd of men on the ship and he makes a seemingly impossible promise there in v. 22: "There will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship."

1. What a crazy thing to say while the winds are howling and the waves are crashing.
2. Where could such confidence come from?

B. Well, Paul goes on to tell them: " [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. 23-24).

1. That's why Paul can be so confident.

    a. This is not mere wishful thinking on his part.
    b. He has a word from the God to whom he belongs.

2. And it's good news—for him and for all on board.

    a. It's interesting, the Greek word translated "granted" there is charizomai. It's a verb derived from a word you may know: charis = grace. It means "to give freely, to give graciously"!

        i. We might say, therefore, all these who are sailing with Paul shall be saved by grace. None of them deserve it. Yet still here he is promising it.

C. Therefore, Paul concludes in v. 25: "So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told." "[E]xactly as I have been told." "He said it. I trust it."

1. These words here were really the focal point of the first sermon I preached. That's why I put it in the title, if you remember: "Take Heart": How to Sabbath in the Storm.

    a. This is where we find calm in the chaos. This is what enables us to make it through. This word. This promise. God is with us. We belong to him. He has a good plan for us.

        i. We're secure . . .
        ii. . . . or are we?

The Warning (v. 31)

A. Because then, as we keep reading, we come to something that seems to contradict all we've said to this point. For, you remember . . .

1. As the days and nights go on, as the tempest shows no sign of slackening, when it seems at last that they are going to wreck on the rocks—the sailors cook up a plan to save their own necks, even at the expense of the others.

2. Under pretense of dropping anchors from the bow, in truth they begin to lower the ship's only lifeboat into the water—thinking they'll have a better shot at getting to shore safely in that then in the ship.

3. And, just as they are about to board, Paul somehow—perhaps by some revelation of the Spirit—catches wind of it. And he sounds the alarm, crying out in warning to the centurion and the soldiers remaining on the ship, v. 31: "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."

    a. "If these sailors head out into the water now, we'll all be dead in the water soon!"

B. And I just want to ask: What in the world are we supposed to make of this?! What are you saying Paul?!

1. In vv. 22-25 you said there would be no loss of life. You said you heard it from God. You said it would play out exactly as you had been told.
2. And then here you are, just a few verses later, seemingly backtracking on all of that: "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."

C. Which is it?!

1. Are they going to be saved, or are they going to die?
2. Are the people on this ship going to make it to shore, or are they all going belly up out at sea?
3. Is God going to be true to his prophetic word and promise, or is everything up in the air and subject to the whim and will of man?
4. Does God make good on what he graciously gives, or can he just as easily take it back? Does he speak out of both sides of his mouth? Does he give with one hand and take back with another?
5. Are we preserved by grace, or can a few bad actors and a few bad deeds undo it all?
6. Does he keep us, or do we somehow have to keep ourselves?

    a. How secure are we really?!

Winding It Up Even Tighter

A. Just to wind this tension up even tighter, I do think, and most commentators seem to think, Paul is included in the list of people who will perish here if these sailors abandon ship. And when we realize this, then we really find ourselves in some serious trouble.

1. Because, as we've seen all through the book of Acts, and as I've mentioned in the past couple sermons, God has everywhere been telling Paul about his sure and certain plan and purpose for him.

    a. And a big part of that was that he get to Rome and testify of the gospel before the Gentiles there.

B. Do you remember this?

1. It shows up there in our text with what the angel says to him in v. 24: "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar."
2. But this is just a reiteration of what Jesus himself has already said to Paul back in Acts 23:11: "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."
3. And, what's more, we even have a third divine witness to all this. Before these words came to him from the angel or Jesus, Paul had already had this very fact impressed upon him by the Holy Spirit. Acts 19:21: "Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome.'"

C. And so, again, I just want to ask: Here in Acts 27:31, is all of this suddenly thrown into jeopardy? Because some sailors want to abandon ship a little prematurely? The whole course of Paul's destiny is derailed? Is God's promise and plan really that fragile?

1. Can a few renegade sailors really nullify the promises and upend the plans of almighty God for us?

    a. If so, then, let it be known: you and I, brothers and sisters, are helplessly imperiled.

        i. There is no hope. There is no assurance. There is no anchor for our soul in the storm, no ballast for our heart and mind, no bedrock for our feet. There is no calm in the chaos as I've been talking about in previous sermons.

        ii. And we have all the reason in the world to be anxious and afraid—because, though God says one thing to us today, if we (or anyone else) make one wrong move he can just as easily backtrack on it tomorrow.

D. Do you see what's at stake here? What are we going to do with this?

(2) An Attempted Resolution

Avoiding the Extremes

A. As we attempt a resolution, it seems to me there are two extremes we are trying to avoid here:

B. On the one hand, we do not want to say that the certainty of God fulfilling his promise and purpose for us means our choices and actions don't matter.

1. This would be overplaying his sovereignty to the neglect of my responsibility.

    a. "If he's promised and he's going to do it, I'll just sit here and let him do it. Who cares. I can coast, I can wander, I can even sin . . . and he'll still get it done."

    b. If God says no one travelling with Paul would die, well, then, as I heard one preacher say, you might as well jump off and go snorkeling out there in the stormy sea, because you'll be fine.

i. What you do will have no effect on the outcome.

2. But that can't be true.

a. Yes, God is sovereign and he will fulfill his promises and purpose, but our actions still do matter.
b. Paul is not bluffing when he's talking about these sailors here. He means it. If they abandon the ship, everyone will die.

i. Those sailors, understandably so, are important to the safety of all on board the ship. They're the only ones who know how to navigate it!

C. But, on the other hand, we cannot go so far in this other direction—respecting the legitimacy of human choice and action—that we somehow come to see God himself as subordinate to us in the process.

1. This would be overplaying human responsibility to the neglect of divine sovereignty.

2. We know clearly from Scripture: man's will cannot trump God's will. We see evidence of it on every page. Even our efforts to stand in his way only end up furthering his purposes.

a. That's the very meaning of the cross of Christ (cf. Acts 4:27-28). We meant it for evil, but he means it for good!
b. And that's why Paul can say most emphatically in Eph 1:11: "[God] works all things according to the counsel of his will." I looked it up in the Greek: "all things" [ta panta] means "all things".

i. Acts 27:31 doesn't somehow undermine this fundamental biblical reality.

D. So then, how do the two sides hold together—God's will, man's will, his sovereignty, my responsibility? How is it that the promises and plan of God still stand even though the warnings and threats are real?

1. Well, that's what I hope to untangle with the rest of our time together:

a. First, I'll tell you quickly what I think on the matter;
b. then I'll share with you what some smarter guys who've gone before us have thought;
c. then I'll provide some biblical support for it;
d. and, finally, we'll draw things to a close and briefly apply all this back to us.

My Quick Thoughts

A. So first, let me quickly give you my thoughts on this: My sense of it is that, while human actions do matter, and the warnings and threats from God in Scripture are real, these warnings are actually part of the means whereby our sovereign God keeps things moving forward according to his good plan and purpose.

1. They act as spurs put to the backside of his people, keeping them along the narrow way.

B. Considering Acts 27 in particular, if you noticed, ironically, he uses the warning of v. 31 as a means of fulfilling his initial promise back in vv. 22-25.

    1. What he said at the front does come to pass, specifically because he warns the people that if they keep going in a certain direction it wouldn't.

    2. Everyone on the boat is saved, Paul does go to Rome, just as he said. And the threat here is part of the way God ensures that it is so!

        a. It holds the people in line. It wrangles their rebellious wills back. It awakens them to danger and moves them to action.

        b. "[T]he soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go" (v. 32).
        c. And, hence, "all were brought safely to land" (v. 44).

            i. In the end, it does come to pass "exactly" (v. 25) as the angel, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit had said.

C. And just to be clear: God didn't just get lucky here.

    1. The warnings and threats he issues are not an indication that his promises and plans are vulnerable or up in the air in some way.
    2. No! These warnings and threats are, in truth, part of the way he goes about ensuring the fulfillment of his promises and plans.

Some Smart Guys

A. And let me assure you, I'm not really being all that novel or creative with my attempted resolution here. This has been a position of many in the church through the centuries.

    1. Let me just read to you a bit from guys much smarter than me for a few moments here . . .

B. First, consider the Canons of Dort which outline for us certain doctrinal positions decided on by an international assembly of Reformed theologians and first publicized all the way back in 1619.

    They put the matter most succinctly for us in Article 14: "As it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so He maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation upon it, by its exhortations, threatenings, and promises, and by the use of the sacraments."

        a. Did you hear it? The "threatenings" (i.e. "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.") are part of the means by which God "maintains, continues, and perfects" the work of grace he's begun in us.

i. Again, they are not an indication that his word to us is half-hearted or that our salvation is ever in question.
ii. But rather, however paradoxical it may seem, they are one of the ways in which he confirms his word to us and secures our salvation for all of eternity!

C. The Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, follows the same line of reasoning but gives us a much more expansive account of it.

Writing about the doctrine of perseverance—that those who are truly saved can never be truly lost—he says this: "The question is whether God upholds, continues, and completes the work of grace he has begun, or whether he sometimes permits it to be totally ruined by the power of sin. Perseverance is not an activity of the human person but a gift from God. . . . He watches over it and sees to it that the work of grace is continued and completed. He does not, however, do this apart from believers but through them. In regeneration and faith, he grants a grace that as such bears an inadmissible [incapable of being lost] character; he grants a life that is by nature eternal; he bestows the benefits of calling, justification, and glorification that are mutually and unbreakably interconnected. All of the . . . admonitions and threats that Scripture addresses to believers, therefore, do not prove a thing against the doctrine of perseverance. They are rather the way in which God himself confirms his promise and gift through believers. They are the means by which perseverance in life is realized. . . . It is precisely God's will, by admonition and warning, morally to lead believers to heavenly blessedness and by the grace of the Holy Spirit to prompt them willingly to persevere in faith and love. It is therefore completely mistaken to reason from the admonitions of Holy Scripture to the possibility of a total loss of grace. This conclusion is as illegitimate as when, in the case of Christ, people infer from his temptation and struggle that he was able to sin. The certainty of the outcome does not render the means superfluous but is inseparably connected with them in the decree of God. [Then, interestingly, he goes on to reference our text in Acts 27 . . .] Paul knew with certainty that in the case of shipwreck no one would lose one's life, yet he declares, 'Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved' (Acts 27:22, 31)" (Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 4, 267-68). The warning is a means of fulfilling.

D. Charles Spurgeon, the renowned Baptist preacher of the 19th century, puts the matter, as we might expect, most vividly and memorably for us when he says this: "God preserves his children from falling away; but he keeps them by the use of means; and one of these is, the terrors of the law, showing them what would happen if they were to fall away. There is a deep precipice: what is the best way to keep any one from going down there? Why, to tell him that if he did he would inevitably be dashed to pieces. In some old castle there is a deep cellar, where there is a vast amount of fixed air and gas, which would kill anybody who went down. What does the guide say? 'If you go down you will never come up alive.' Who thinks of going down? The very fact of the guide telling us what the consequences would be, keeps us from it. Our friend puts away from us a cup of arsenic; he does not want us to drink it, but he says, 'If you drink it, it will kill you.' Does he suppose for a moment that we should drink it. No; he tells us the consequences, and he is sure we will not do it. So God says, 'My child, if you fall over this precipice you will be dashed to pieces.' What does the child do? He says, 'Father, keep me; hold thou me up, and I shall be safe.' It leads the believer to greater dependence on God . . . ." ("Final Perseverance").

1. And with that, don't you see, the warnings drive you back towards the promises. The threat of one thing leads you desperate towards the other thing. That's how it works.

Other Biblical Examples

A. Let me show you now this same sort thing taking place all over the Scriptures. My hope is that this is where it will really start to come together for us. So, if you've been sleeping to this point, now would be the time to perk up a bit . . .

Example #1: Exodus 32

A. One example I thought of was God's dealings with Moses back in Exodus 32. I wonder if you remember?

1. Moses is up on Mount Sinai, receiving the tablets of the Law and other directives.
2. But down below the people of Israel are growing restless. And they forge that infamous golden calf and begin to worship it as an idol of some sort.
3. And God, of course, is aware of these things happening down below. And while Moses is up with God, God lets him in on something that he's tossing around in his mind, as it were. He says: "Moses, I'm already sick of these people. They're down the mountain, giving themselves to idolatry. I'm ready to just wipe them out in my wrath and start a new nation with you."
4. Exod. 32:10: "[L]et me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."

B. Now, why is God talking like this with Moses? What's he doing here?

1. Remember, to this point, he's already established his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
2. He's made a great deal of promises and spoken to them about his plans and purposes for them as a nation through which he will bring blessing to all the other nations of the earth.

    a. Is God really now just going to scrap all that? Not a chance.

C. So what's he doing?

1. He's using these threats to form and shape Moses' heart and actually push his plan for Israel further along.

    a. You see, Moses, upon hearing this from God, he immediately returns to the promises of old and says: "It can't be. You can't do this. What about your glory, your honor, your name? The nations will hear of it and think you're a liar. The Egyptians will hear of it and think you are cruel—that you just brought Israel out here to kill them. Far be it from you!"
    b. Exod. 32:13: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

2. And so God relents.

D. But the result here is that these threats have driven Moses deeper into the character and promises of God. He is being formed and shaped as a leader and a mediator—and a type and foreshadow of Jesus, really.

    1. So ironically then, the warnings and threats are part of the means by which God goes about fulfilling his plans for Israel. Do you see?

Example #2: Romans 8 and 11

A. To give another example, I am sure that, if you've walked with Jesus for any time at all, you've likely been greatly encouraged by the incredible stretch of promises that Paul strings together for us in Rom. 8.

    1. Many people consider this chapter to be the high point of the entire Bible, and for good reason!

B. If you were here, you may recall I referred to this chapter in my first sermon on Acts 27.

    1. I was talking about how secure we are in Jesus.

    2. And I quoted that part where Paul outlines all the potential obstacles we may face in this life, because it will be hard. But, nevertheless, he still comes out at the end with that stunning conclusion in vv. 38-39: "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

        a. What an absolutely magnificent thing to say! So many saints through the centuries have found solace in these words!

C. And yet, if we keep reading in the epistle, we come just a few chapters later to Rom. 11. And here we have, in my opinion some of the most frightening words in all the Bible.

    1. If I could sum it up for us, Paul says essentially this: "Though you are grafted into the people of God through Christ now, don't become haughty lest God cut you off at some later point. Continue in his kindness or you will know his severity" (cf. vv. 17-22).

    2. And, again, you wonder: What are we to make of this?!

        a. I thought you just said: "Nothing can separate us."
        b. Now you're saying: "Watch out or you'll be separated." What is that?!

D. Well, if I'm understanding the way God uses these warnings correctly, those who truly are his children will be awakened by them, moved by them to repentance and humility, driven by them back to the promises of Rom. 8 and the grace of Christ.

    1. And in so doing, ironically, the warnings are actually part of the way God keeps us secure, un-separated from his love. Do you see?

a. You cannot say: "Well, because I believe in Rom. 8 I can now live however I want and God will still love me and save me and bring me to glory."

b. No! A true child of God doesn't speak like that. You know God has a hold of you because the warnings and threats are taken seriously and they actually end up pushing you deeper into his promises and grace. "You're right, I would grow haughty and foolish, if you don't keep me! So keep me God!"

Example #3: Jude

A. Related to this is the last example I'll give you here. And it is probably the clearest and most poignant of all because the two realities are put unmistakably and unashamedly side-by-side.

B. In the book of Jude, after warning the saints of false teachers and coming judgment, Jude exhorts them like this: " [20] But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, [21] keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life" (vv. 20-21).

1. Now, if you stop reading here, this sounds like the keeping is ultimately my job—like it's up to me, or else.

    a. I better be building myself up in the faith, I better be praying fervently in the Holy Spirit,
    b. or I'm going to be falling away and growing cold to God.

2. And, in one sense, certainly we could say this is absolutely true. And we need to let these exhortations and warning land on us, move us, challenge us. Our choices and actions matter.

C. But as we keep reading, another player comes into view: namely, God. And we see what he's up to in all of this.

1. Jude moves from this call that we keep ourselves to this most glorious promise that God himself is, in fact, keeping us.

2. Here's how he ends his letter in vv. 24-25: " [24] Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, [25] to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."

D. The call for us to keep ourselves drives us to the only one who can truly keep us—and in so doing, we start to grow up more in our faith and we become more fervent in prayer.

1. Do you see? The exhortations, the warnings, the threats—they are part of the means by which God keeps you in his grace and continues to fulfill his good promises and purposes in your life.

    a. The warnings are a means of fulfilling.

Bringing Things to a Close

A. So, returning to that question I posed earlier: Can a few renegade sailors nullify the promises and upend the plans of God for you? Are his good purposes for his people really that fragile?

    1. Not a chance!

B. As I said at the start: Whatever storm you may be facing today—however wind-blown and wave-tossed you feel—in Jesus there is an anchor for your soul, ballast for your heart and mind, and bedrock for your feet!

    1. If, indeed, you are in Christ then you are secure today, tomorrow, and forevermore!

        a. Don't overlook the warnings.
        b. But don't overplay them either.

        c. Let them drive you back to God and his great and unchanging promises.

            i. You are responsible. Your actions matter.
            ii. But he is still sovereign. And he will not let you go!