

Make a Move

September 5, 2021

Text: Acts 27:8-44

Welcome to Crossroads. My name is Jonathan, and I'm one of the pastors here. Today is going to feel like story time as we follow an epic adventure in the life of the apostle Paul. We'll be reading from **Acts 27**, so you can turn there in your Bibles to follow along.

What do you do when you feel things are out of your control? Currently, my wife and I are getting ready to have our first child, which is super-exciting. But it's also a situation where I feel like most things are completely out of my control. When we're doing childbirth classes, I feel useless knowing that Anika is going to have to do all of the work. I'm really just a supporting role. On top of that, when we go into appointments, we hope that everything is healthy and going well. But there's so much that we don't know and have no control over. We hope that our October due date is going to stick. But we have plenty of friends who've had babies early, so we don't know what to expect. We're making sure that the nursery is ready ahead of time. Even getting pregnant was something where we realized we had little control over it. The entire process of birth is such a delicate and fragile thing. I wish I could say that I feel calm, cool, and collected when things are out of my control. But that's not really the case. The way I deal with it is, one, I feel super-anxious. I worry about everything, and then I worry about how much I'm worrying! And, two, I start to plan for everything. I write out to-do lists. I go through scenarios in my head. Right now, I'm in the middle of looking at my calendar trying to make sure I have everything in order before he's born. I don't love feeling like things are out of my control.

Let me ask another question. When I say the words, "God is in control," what kind of reaction do you have? This is a common phrase to hear in the church, and it's sure to get an "amen" or a head nod, especially in a worship service. Many of us feel a sense of consolation when we hear those words. It's a boost of trust and a much-needed reminder. It reminds you to loosen your own grip of control on life and relax.

Others of us may *want* to be filled with faith when we hear someone say, "God is in control." But if you're honest, instead of relaxing, you feel unsure. You might even feel ashamed to admit it to your brothers and sisters in Christ. You might think, "God is in control -- how?" When you look at natural disasters like floods, wildfires, or hurricanes in the south, or manmade disasters like the turmoil in Afghanistan, we don't know how to reconcile that with God being in control. So rather than feeling comfort, we feel the tension of questions of what you believe about God with the world around you.

Others might hear someone say, "God is in control," and you don't even pretend to believe it. Instead, you might feel cynical and think, "That's just a thing people say to make themselves feel better." To you, events in the world are just chaos and random. It makes no sense to you.

Whatever describes you today, or maybe you're a mixture of all three, I want to tell you, you are welcome here. God is big enough to handle wherever we are at, and

one of the benefits of being the church is hearing voices that stretch us. Our story we're going to read today will help us to not just know *that* God is in control but will also help us to see one of the ways of *how* God sovereignly works in the world.

Let's set the scene. The Apostle Paul is currently a prisoner. He's been arrested because of his message that a Jewish rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus was raised from the dead. He says that this Jesus is Lord instead of Caesar. This message was viewed as disruptive and a threat to Caesar, so Paul gets locked up. Because Paul is a Roman citizen, he has a right to a trial. So he's put aboard a ship with some other prisoners and cargo to head to Rome for his day in court. **Acts 27:8-11** *We struggled along the coast with great difficulty and finally arrived at Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. ⁹ We had lost a lot of time. The weather was becoming dangerous for sea travel because it was so late in the fall,^[a] and Paul spoke to the ship's officers about it. ¹⁰ "Men," he said, "I believe there is trouble ahead if we go on -- shipwreck, loss of cargo, and danger to our lives as well." ¹¹ But the officer in charge of the prisoners listened more to the ship's captain and the owner than to Paul.*

What Paul is saying to the officer is wisdom. If the officer listened to him, they'd be able to avoid getting shipwrecked, which, spoiler alert: that's what happens later in this story. This story shows us that **God moves through people**. What Paul is saying could help avoid a lot of trouble, but he's just a prisoner. So he's easy to ignore. But Paul is someone that God regularly moves through. The officer isn't able to see that. Who could blame him? It's reasonable to think that a ship captain knows a little more about traveling by boat than Paul would. But scripture regularly shows us that God loves to work through people! It's not that God can't do something without people. It's just that we'll see that often when God wants to move, He loves to partner with those who bear His image to accomplish His purposes. God uses Abraham's family to show what God is like. The Old Testament depicts God using ordinary people to speak his message called the prophets. It was normal for people to miss God speaking because they seemed just like regular people.

God worked through people to create the Bible. He used the processes of writing and storytelling so that we would have His word to us about what he has done to make salvation possible in Jesus. Even salvation is something God chooses to involve humanity in. When we were unable to save ourselves, he came as human in Jesus to do that which we could not do ourselves! But it was easy for people to miss how God was working through Jesus. When he was born, he was just a baby in an unremarkable family. When he was older, someone once asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" The people from his hometown had a hard time believing he could be anything special because they knew his parents. It all looked so ordinary.

We can miss how God moves because we assume if God is working, it must look like some mystical or transcendent experience. If God wants to say something, it must be a voice speaking from a cloud or an incredible vision. This is the mistake the crew of the ship makes with Paul. **We miss God moving when we think everything depends on us and not God.**

This is the view of what we would call "naturalism," which only trusts what can be naturally explained. This perspective considers what is provable to be valid. It places the highest value on what can be measured and observed by objective means. Naturalist tendencies are common in a secular society that has learned to think that all

there is the natural world. It's not that what's observable is bad or wrong. Personally, I'm grateful for all the advances that have come to us through this kind of thinking, like in medicine and science. I have some good friends who are followers of Jesus that work in the field of science, research, and medicine. What they do is playing an important role in being the hands and feet of Jesus. Their way of bringing healing is one of the ways that God works in the world. It's not that what can be measured objectively is invalid, it's just incomplete. If we come to a naturalist view that only values what we can see and measure, we're missing out on a bigger picture.

We can't prove to someone concepts like love or purpose, and yet these are the things that we wake up pursuing every day. Some of us as Christians are functionally naturalists. We've placed God inside of a box where we don't open ourselves up God prompting us to move. We pray safe, lifeless prayers that are so routine that we make it impossible for God to move through us. If this is you, I'd like to encourage you to **move with God through prayer**. It can be tough to know where to start with prayer if you come from a more naturalist perspective. So, if this is you, let me meet you halfway. There are now piles of research that show the beneficial effects of prayer on our brain. Those who pray regularly experience greater emotional health, reduced stress, and even a stronger immune system.¹ There are natural benefits to prayer. But it goes beyond that, too.

I was always someone who struggled with prayer. It's safe to say one of the reasons for that are my skeptical impulses that come from a naturalist point of view. But as I began to follow Jesus with others, I wanted to have the kind of peace and joy that I saw in those who always prayed. Not only that, they regularly shared ways that they heard from God and saw him answering their prayers. I knew I needed to start working at it. One of the things that I learned from my friends who prayed is that I could be honest. I didn't have to pretend when I talked to God. There were some days that I even prayed, "God, I'm not sure what good this prayer is doing." But I also learned to start praying specifically and persistently for things and journaling what I was praying about. When I started keeping track, I saw God answering! Our baby is a huge answer to prayer for Anika and me.

I grew in praying for others, too. I had opportunities in my Life Group to do that. I noticed that as I would listen in prayer for them, thoughts would pop into my head. Sometimes it was just a scripture. Other times I felt unsure whether the thought was me or God. But I felt like my group was a safe place to try out sharing, so I did. More than a few times now, I've had a thought that seems random to me, but when I share it, the person goes, "How did you know that? That's exactly what I'm going through!"

As followers of Jesus, we can trust that the Holy Spirit works through our thoughts. If God lives in us, we can trust Him to work, even when it feels outside of our comfort zone.

Paul was open to God moving in any way he wanted to. ²⁰ *The terrible storm raged for many days, blotting out the sun and the stars, until at last all hope was gone. ²¹ No one had eaten for a long time. Finally, Paul called the crew together and said, "Men, you should have listened to me in the first place and not left Crete. You would*

¹ <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104310443>

have avoided all this damage and loss. (Just what everyone loves to hear when things are going terribly wrong -- "I told you so!")

²² But take courage! None of you will lose your lives, even though the ship will go down.

²³ For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me, ²⁴ and he said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul, for you will surely stand trial before Caesar! What's more, God, in his goodness, has granted safety to everyone sailing with you.'

²⁵ So take courage! For I believe God. It will be just as he said.

God shows up in a supernatural way with Paul! Now, look at what happens a little later. *³¹ Then the sailors tried to abandon the ship; they lowered the lifeboat as though they were going to put out anchors from the front of the ship. ³¹ But Paul said to the commanding officer and the soldiers, "You will all die unless the sailors stay aboard." ³² So the soldiers cut the ropes to the lifeboat and let it drift away.*

Paul is assured by the vision, but he doesn't say, "God said He's going to save us. He said it, I believe it! Now, let's just hang out and sit back and wait until that happens!" No. He believes that people's actions matter, too. Paul reasons that if those on the ship are going to survive, it's likely going to happen through the sailors who are specially trained to navigate this situation. Paul believes that God is in control and that He will work through ordinary people! **We miss God moving when we think everything depends on God and never us.** This is over-spiritualizing. Over-spiritualizing is the polar opposite of naturalism.

Back in June, a traffic camera caught a car blazing through an intersection at 120 MPH and taking off the front of another car. [Photo shown on the big screens.] The car spun out of control but then kept going until she plowed into another car sitting in a driveway and eventually ran in the house. When the police came, the driver explained that she wanted to "test her faith" by "letting her fear go and let God take the wheel." Carrie Underwood did not respond when questioned for a comment. But what did happen was her 12-year-old daughter in the car was taken to the hospital for head injuries.

This example is unfortunately not an isolated incident. There's a small contingency of churches known for handling poisonous snakes because of their interpretation of one of Jesus' teachings, even as some have been bitten and died. The Christian Science religion misuses the Bible to say that sickness is an illusion that can be corrected by prayer alone. This belief has proved lethal multiple times as its adherents' own children have died after their parents denied them medical care.

Some over-spiritualize by suggesting that you don't trust in God enough by using medical intervention. Some Christians have avoided clinical therapy or medication for depression or anxiety, feeling that for some reason it makes them weak Christians who don't trust God enough. All of these examples violate the wisdom and commands of scripture by putting God to the test, something that the devil tempts Jesus to do in the desert. It also ignores how God uses ordinary people and means to accomplish His purposes. When we say, "God provides," he will provide for us. But we also have a role to play in working for provision. As St. Augustine once said, **Without God, we cannot. Without us, He will not.**

God loves to exercise his sovereign nature through people. We can say "God is in control" with confidence when we let Him be sovereign over our lives. Someone once said, "If you pray for a mountain to move, make sure to bring a shovel!"

Heather Thompson-Day is an author and teacher who's seen how God's hand and our hand work together. She shared a story of being a professor where she noticed one of her students would never engage in her course. Her head was always down every class. She would never raise her hand or interact. One day, when this student walked into class, Heather had a thought that popped into her head -- *give her the money in your wallet*. Heather was a Christian, but from a background where no one ever talked about how the Spirit could speak and work through us. So she had generally learned to ignore this kind of prompting. She started to argue with herself. "I can't just hand her cash. That would be inappropriate." She dismissed the thought and carried on with class and the chance passed her by. Over the next week, the prompting happened again. She had been praying for God to use her, but this wasn't what she had in mind. But this time, she nervously asked her student to stay after class. Heather and the student had no relationship, so this was going to be weird. The student stayed after and Heather fumbled through, "I know this is going to sound strange, but I'm a Christian. When you walked in here today, God told me to give you this \$40. I'm so sorry if I'm making you uncomfortable. This money is not from me. This is between you and God." And she put the money in her student's hand and prayed that she didn't decide to file a complaint.

Her student's face was in shock. She explained that she was a single mom, and before stepping into the class, she did something she hadn't done in years, which was to pray. She had recently asked a friend to help get a box of diapers for her 6-month-old. The friend couldn't help, but offered prayer instead, which the student didn't even believe in doing, but was polite about it and went along. Thompson writes: *I've never ignored the voice of the Holy Spirit again. If I had not answered that voice, whispering a second time for me to open my wallet, maybe God would have found another way to help her. Or perhaps God's response to this 19-year-old single mother who was barely able to pray actually relied in some mysterious way on my willingness to respond to the Spirit's stirring. Over the years, my student and I have stayed connected. God has continued to work in her life, and she's now a believer in Jesus. But even then -- when she barely believed in God and did not even want to pray -- her prayer mattered. This is the God we get to serve. And this is a God I want to do my part to co-labor with. I saw God answer the cry of a girl who didn't even believe in prayer.*²

God is in control as He works through people. As His church, we are a move of God. What does God want to do through you? Let's pray today, and as we do, let's be ready to act.

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/teach-us-to-pray/she-didnt-believe-god-heard-her-cry-heather-thompson-day.html>