

This morning we are continuing in Acts, as we are up to Acts 27. As we begin this chapter, Paul and Luke are on a ship with almost 300 heading from Jerusalem to Rome, as Paul is a prisoner who will stand before Caesar. This chapter has a great deal to tell us about suffering and where God is in the storms of our life.

*Acts 27:1-44 - When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. <sup>2</sup> We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us. <sup>3</sup> The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. <sup>4</sup> From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. <sup>5</sup> When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. <sup>6</sup> There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board. <sup>7</sup> We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. <sup>8</sup> We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. <sup>9</sup> Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them, <sup>10</sup> "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also." <sup>11</sup> But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. <sup>12</sup> Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest. <sup>13</sup> When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. <sup>14</sup> Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the "northeaster," swept down from the island. <sup>15</sup> The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. <sup>16</sup> As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. <sup>17</sup> When the men had hoisted it aboard, they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. <sup>18</sup> We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. <sup>19</sup> On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. <sup>20</sup> When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, **we finally gave up all hope of being saved.** <sup>21</sup> After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should*

*have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss.* <sup>22</sup> *But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed.* <sup>23</sup> *Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me* <sup>24</sup> *and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.'* <sup>25</sup> *So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.* <sup>26</sup> *Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island."* <sup>27</sup> *On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land.* <sup>28</sup> *They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep.* <sup>29</sup> *Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight.* <sup>30</sup> *In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow.* <sup>31</sup> *Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved."* <sup>32</sup> *So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it fall away.* <sup>33</sup> *Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food-- you haven't eaten anything.* <sup>34</sup> *Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head."* <sup>35</sup> *After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat.* <sup>36</sup> *They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves.* <sup>37</sup> *Altogether there were 276 of us on board.* <sup>38</sup> *When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea.* <sup>39</sup> *When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could.* <sup>40</sup> *Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach.* <sup>41</sup> *But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf.* <sup>42</sup> *The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping.* <sup>43</sup> *But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land.* <sup>44</sup> *The rest were to get there on planks or on pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land in safety.*

Paul is on a boat with Luke and Aristarchus and about 300 non-Christians, including soldiers, prisoners, and sailors. As he goes through this storm and survives this shipwreck, we learn two things:

## 1) The sovereignty of God in the storm

The first question about the storms is whether it's God's fault or our own? Has God caused the storm? Or is it the result of our own decisions or our own sins? I think the answer might surprise you.

Listen to Paul:

<sup>22</sup> *But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed.* <sup>23</sup> *Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me* <sup>24</sup> *and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.'* <sup>25</sup> *So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.*

God is absolutely sovereign, and he has declared that all will survive. He knows what will happen even before it does. Predestination, predetermination.

***Ephesians 1:11-12** - In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, <sup>12</sup> in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*

But then, on the other hand, Paul also says this:

<sup>30</sup> *In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow.* <sup>31</sup> *Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved."*

So, no one will die, but unless the sailors stay with the ship, they can't be saved? Which one is it Paul?

The answer is that God is sovereign, but at the same time we are absolutely responsible.

***Galatians 6:7-8** - Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. <sup>8</sup> The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap*

*destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.*

God is absolutely sovereign and what He says will come to pass. And yet at the same time, their fate depends upon their obedience, their decisions. How can both be true? We would expect it to be one or the other – either God has predetermined it all, and so nothing we do matters, or it is up to our free will, and so God is not in control. But the Bible says differently in many places. For example:

**Joseph being sold into slavery. Genesis 50:20** - *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*

**Jesus being betrayed and crucified.**

**Acts 2:23** - *This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*

Think of **Judas**. He is responsible and yet it was part of God's plan.

**Matthew 26:23-25** - *Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me." <sup>24</sup> The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." <sup>25</sup> Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you."*

Somehow it is not either-or, but both-and. God is fully sovereign, knowing the end from the beginning. And yet at the same time we are completely responsible for the decisions we make.

**Charles Spurgeon**, famous 19<sup>th</sup> century English preacher, put it this way: *"In God's word, the car of truth runs on two rails of parallel statements. A great many people want to pull up one of the rails. They will not accept two sets of truth. Predestination and free agency do not agree, so the modern Solomons assert. Who said? They do not agree? They do agree, as fully as two rails on a tram line. But some narrow spirits must set aside the one or the other. They can not accept both. This has long been a puzzle on paper, but in practice it is ease itself. So here, the practical action of the believer, throwing his whole might into his master's service, perfectly well agrees with his falling back upon the working of God and knowing*

*that it is God who works all things for him. David's slaying of the lion and the bear and the Philistine is clear, but God's delivering him out of the jaw of the lion and the paw of the bear and the hand of the Philistine is equally clear. Make it plain to your own self. I believe that when I preach, I ought to prepare and study my sermon as if it's success altogether depended on me, but that when I am thus thoroughly furnished, I have to trust in God as much as if I had done nothing at all. The same view should be taken of your view and your service for God. Work as if you were to be saved by your works, and then trust Christ only, because it is only by him that you are capable of a single good work. Work for God with all your might as if you did it all, but then always remember that it is God who works in you both to will and to do according to his good pleasure. How is it that the Philistine be killed? By God, says one. True, but not without David. By David, says another. Yes, but not without God. Put the Lord on the march with David and you put the Philistines into untimely graves. When David moves to fight, God being with him, off comes Goliath's head. Nor champion's heads, nor demon's helmets can stand against the man of God. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge."*

Why is this important? We work as if it depends on us, but trust God as if it all depends upon him. Or as Paul put it:

***Philippians 2:12-13*** - *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed-- not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence-- continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

- 2) Second thing is to see how God uses the storm and the suffering of Paul for good.

Paul wanted to get to Rome to preach the gospel in the main city.

***Romans 15:25-29*** - *Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. <sup>26</sup> For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. <sup>27</sup> They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. <sup>28</sup> So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. <sup>29</sup> I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.*

He was arrested in Jerusalem, subjected to endless trials, imprisoned in Caesarea, threatened with assassination by the Jews, and then nearly drowned in the Mediterranean, killed by soldiers, and poisoned by a snake. Each incident seemed to be designed to prevent him from reaching his God-planned, God-promised destination. But God gets him there as a prisoner. He witnesses to Caesar. He writes prison letters – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians. By his suffering he shows the worth of the gospel.

This is a common theme. Evil and suffering happen, and they are terrible things - but God uses it for good. **The suffering is not good.** God did not create a world with suffering. But God works everything together for good. This once again is all throughout the Bible.

***Romans 8:28-29** - And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

Pharaoh tried to drown baby Moses.

Haman tries to kill the Jews but God uses Esther to exalt the Jews.

God tries to turn Job from God and instead we end up with a book that has encouraged people who are suffering for years.

The Sanhedrin tried to kill off the apostles and scattered them to the nations.

And all over the world today, persecution causes the church to grow.

As Joseph said, they intend it for evil, but God intends it for good. He takes the evil and makes it backfire so that it works good.

**The supreme example is of course Jesus on the cross.** What possible good could God bring out of this? But God brings the greatest possible good.

God created the world without evil, suffering, and death. We turned from him. But He is exercising his power over history in such a way that all the evil and suffering that is intended will be overruled so that it backfires and it only accomplishes good.

You may not see the good this side of heaven. But His word stands that He is always working for good.

So how do you view the storm? As God's punishment? As proof of God's absence? Look at the cross. It is neither. Jesus went through the storm. And even though there seemed to be no good earthly reason, God was working the greatest possible good. He was taking the punishment so that you would know that it is not to punish you. And he was very present.

**John 9:1-3** - *As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" <sup>3</sup> "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.*

Hold on to him and you will see Him bring good out of your struggle.

**Hebrews 12:1-3** - *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. <sup>2</sup> Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

Fix your eyes on Jesus.

So what good might he bring out of the storm?

### 1) He makes you like Jesus

Sanctification

**Romans 8:28-29** - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

**Isaiah 48:10** - *See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.*

Why is the furnace such a great metaphor for our times of suffering? Because the fire in the furnace has the potential to destroy or to refine. Gold is a precious metal. If you put it through fire it may soften or melt but it will not turn to ashes. **But it can be filled with impurities that can be destroyed. In the fire they burn off or rise to the surface to be skimmed off by the goldsmith. The fire tries to destroy the metal put into the fire but only succeeds in making it more pure and beautiful.**

The furnace is meant to be a refining fire, purifying your character. It may feel like it is destroying you, but it is destroying the dross, those parts that need to be destroyed so that you might be more beautiful, more like Jesus. The suffering can make you wiser, more compassionate, able to face the challenges of life.

- 2) **He shapes you so you can minister to others.**

God comforts us so that we can comfort others.

*2 Corinthians 1:3-7 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. <sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. <sup>6</sup> If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. <sup>7</sup> And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

You can speak to others in a way that I can not because of your experience. Nowhere has this been put more beautifully than by the 19<sup>th</sup> century London preacher Charles Spurgeon in his book "The Soul Winner."

*Some years ago, I was the subject of fearful depression of spirit. Certain troublous events had happened to me; I was also unwell, and my heart sank within me. Out of the depths I was forced to cry unto the Lord. Just before I went away to Mentone for rest, I suffered greatly in body, but far more in soul, for my spirit was overwhelmed.*

*Under this pressure, I preached a sermon from the words, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" I was as much qualified to preach from that text as ever I expect to be; indeed, I hope that few of my brethren could have entered so deeply into those heart-breaking words. I felt to the full of my measure the horror of a*



*soul forsaken of God. Now, that was not a desirable experience. I tremble at the bare idea of passing again through that eclipse of soul; I pray that I may never suffer in that fashion again unless the same result should hang upon it.*

*That night, after sermon, there came into the vestry a man who was as nearly insane as he could be to be out of an asylum. His eyes seemed ready to start from his head, and he said that he should utterly have despaired if he had not heard that discourse, which had made him feel that there was one man alive who understood his feeling, and could describe his experience. I talked with him, and tried to encourage him, and asked him to come again on the Monday night, when I should have a little more time to talk with him.*

*I saw the brother again, and I told him that I thought he was a hopeful patient, and I was glad that the word had been so suited to his case. Apparently, he put aside the comfort which I presented for his acceptance, and yet I had the consciousness upon me that the precious truth which he had heard was at work upon his mind, and that the storm of his soul would soon subside into a deep calm.*

*Now hear the sequel. Last night, of all the times in the year, when, strange to say, I was preaching from the words, "The Almighty hath vexed my soul," after the service, in walked this self-same brother who had called on me five years before. This time, he looked as different as noonday from midnight, or as life from death. I said to him, "I am glad to see you, for I have often thought about you, and wondered whether you were brought into perfect peace." I told you that I went to Mentone, and my patient also went into the country, so that we had not met for five years.*

*To my enquiries, this brother replied, "Yes, you said I was a hopeful patient, and I am sure you will be glad to know that I have walked in the sunlight from that day till now. Everything is changed and altered with me."*

*Dear friends, as soon as I saw my poor despairing patient the first time, I blessed God that my fearful experience had prepared me to sympathize with him and guide him; but last night, when I saw him perfectly restored, my heart overflowed with gratitude to God for my former sorrowful feelings. I would go into the deeps a hundred times to cheer a downcast spirit: it is good for me to have been afflicted that I might know how to speak a word in season to one that is weary.*

*Suppose that, by some painful operation, you could have your right arm made a little longer, I do not suppose you would care to undergo the operation; but if you*

*foresaw that, by undergoing the pain, you would be enabled to reach and save drowning men who else would sink before your eyes, I think you would willingly bear the agony, and pay a heavy fee to the surgeon to be thus qualified for the rescue of your fellows.*

*Reckon, then, that to acquire soul-winning power you will have to go through fire and water, through doubt and despair, through mental torment and soul distress. It will not, of course, be the same with you all, nor perhaps with any two of you, but according to the work allotted you, will be your preparation. You must go into the fire if you are to pull others out of it, and you will have to dive into the floods if you are to draw others out of the water. You cannot work a fire-escape without feeling the scorch of the conflagration, nor man a lifeboat without being covered with the waves. If Joseph is to preserve his brethren alive, he must himself go down into Egypt; if Moses is to lead the people through the wilderness, he must first himself spend forty years there with his flock. Payson truly said, "If anyone asks to be made a successful minister, he knows not what he asks; and it becomes him to consider whether he can drink deeply of Christ's bitter cup and be baptized with His baptism."*

No matter what suffering you go through, God's desire is to use that to save others, to encourage others. Because of the sufferings of Christ, we know that our sufferings are not the end of the story. We know that He loves us, and that He is with us. And so we can trust in Him, and we can draw on that strength in order to minister to others.

Christ suffered for us, for our comfort, and in the same way we will suffer for others, for their comfort. The abuse you suffered, when given to God, will be used to comfort others who have been abused, to let them know that they are not alone, that they are loved, and that their abuse was not the end of the story. Consider another quote, from Brennan Manning about a play by Thornton Wilder:

*There's a scene in Thornton Wilder's play "The Angel that Troubled the Waters"*

*The scene is a doctor comes to the pool everyday wanting to be healed of his melancholy and his gloom and his sadness. Finally the angel appears. The doctor, he's a medical doctor, goes to step into the water. The angel blocks his entrance and says, "No, step back, the healing is not for you." The doctor pleads, "But I've got to get into the water. I can't live this way." The angel says, "No, this moment is not for you." And he says, "But how can I live this way?"*

*The angel says to him, "Doctor, without your wounds where would your power be? It is your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men and women. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children of this earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. **In love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve.**"*

There is a weight that comes from your suffering. There is a substance. You are not just speaking head knowledge, but from a life that has experienced it.

God is always working for good. Specifically, to make you like Jesus, and to mold you into someone who will minister to others.

Trust in Him through the storm, for He is always working for good.