

We have been going through the book of Acts since the beginning of the summer, looking at the story of the early church that formed after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven. We are almost done, and today we will be looking at the next to last chapter, chapter 27. The second half of Acts focuses mainly on Paul, a converted Jewish Pharisee who becomes the leading missionary of the early church, preaching the gospel to Jews and Gentiles all over the Roman Empire. Unfortunately, he also faces intense opposition everywhere he goes, and as a result, in ch. 27 he is on a ship with his friends Luke and Aristarchus, along with 273 other people, on his way to Rome as a prisoner to stand trial before Caesar, even though he is not guilty of any crime. In this chapter they experience a storm that threatens to destroy them, and I want to use this account to consider the storms we face in our lives and where God is in the midst of them.

I'm going to begin in v. 8, as much of Luke's writing here reads like the original travel blog, as the ship makes its way through very windy weather.

Acts 27:8-44 - We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. ⁹ Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them, ¹⁰ "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." ¹¹ But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the "northeaster," swept down from the island. ¹⁵ The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. ¹⁶ As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. ¹⁹ 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 the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved. ²¹ 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. ²² But now I urge you to

keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. ²³ Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me ²⁴ 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.' ²⁵ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. ²⁶ Nevertheless, we must run aground **on some island.** ²⁷ On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. ³⁰ 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.** ³¹ Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." ³² So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it fall away. ³³ 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. ³⁴ 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.**" ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. ³⁷ Altogether there were 276 of us on board. ³⁸ When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea. ³⁹ 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.** ⁴⁰ 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. ⁴¹ 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. ⁴² The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ The rest were to get there on planks or on pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land in safety.

So Paul is on this ship with Luke, Aristarchus, and about 273 other non-Christians, including soldiers, prisoners, and sailors, heading for a trial before Caesar in Rome. And as we see Paul goes through this storm and survive a shipwreck, there is a lot we can learn about storms and where God is in the midst of them. The first is:

1) The sovereignty of God and our responsibility in the storm

If you listened carefully, you may have noticed a peculiar dynamic at play in the storm, something I learned from hearing Tim Keller preach on this passage. Listen first to verses 22-25. Paul says:

²² But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. ²³ Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me ²⁴ 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.' ²⁵ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.

What does Paul tell these men as they fear for their lives? Take heart, for God sent an angel to tell me that you will all survive. In other words, God is absolutely sovereign over this storm, and He has already decided that all will survive. He knows what will happen even before it does. The common word for this is **predestination**, or predetermination.

But then, five verses later, Paul says this seemingly contradictory thing:

³⁰ 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. ³¹ Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved."

Some sailors are trying to escape, and Paul tells the soldiers to put a stop to them, that unless the sailors stay with the ship, some of them will die.

So, God told me not one person on the ship will die, but if these sailors abandon the ship, some of you will die. Which one is it, Paul? Has God predetermined that everyone will be saved, or do their lives depend upon staying with the ship?

The answer, of course, is yes. It is both-and, not either-or. I hope you brought some Advil this morning, because this might make your head hurt.

If you have not noticed, the Christian faith is seemingly full of paradoxes. God is three yet one. Jesus is fully man and fully God. God is sovereign over this world and yet Satan is the prince of this world. And here we see another one. God is

absolutely sovereign and knows the end from the beginning, and yet at the same time we are absolutely responsible for the decisions we make. And we must hold both in tension as absolutely true, or we are in trouble.

God is sovereign, and yet we are completely responsible for our decisions. **Let me give you a couple of examples from the Bible.** In the Old Testament, Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, falsely accused of sexual assault by Potiphar's wife, forgotten in the prison by the cupbearer, but eventually elevated to second in command over all of Egypt, where he is able to save his family and the people of God from starvation. And when his brothers come down to Egypt for food, only to discover that the brother they sold into slavery is now the second most powerful person in the world, they are frightened for their lives. But Joseph says this to them:

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.

In other words, Joseph's brothers are completely responsible for their attempt to harm Joseph, but God is sovereign and has somehow orchestrated all of this in order to save His people. Predestination AND free will. And in the New Testament, the greatest example is Jesus. Judas betrays Jesus, the Jews arrest him, and the Romans nail him to the cross. And when Peter stands before the crowd at Pentecost, he says this to the Jewish crowd:

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.

Again – which one is it? Is it the fault of Judas, the Jews, and the Romans? Or was God orchestrating the whole thing? Yes! Jesus' death was part of God's preordained plan. AND the crowd is responsible for His death. Somehow, in a mysterious way that is just out of reach of our comprehension, the paradox of predestination and free will is not either-or but both-and. God is fully sovereign and knows the end from the beginning. And yet, at the same time, we are completely responsible for the decisions we make.

Charles Spurgeon, the famous 19th 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."

Or, as Paul put it in ***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, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

Why is it so critical to hold on to both the sovereignty of God and human responsibility? If you overemphasize predestination, you end up fatalistic, passive, or blaming God for everything. After all, God ordained it, so there was nothing I could do. Or God will do what He wants to do, so why do I need to bother with anything? In the 18th century, the emphasis on predestination among the Calvinist Christians had effectively halted overseas missions, because of the belief that if God wanted to save people, he would do it. But a man named William Carey argued that God's sovereignty did not take away the need for human responsibility, and he started the modern missions movement by going to India to share the gospel.

On the other hand, if you overemphasize human responsibility, then it can cause you to carry a much heavier burden than you were meant to. If you feel everything depends upon you, it can lead to great anxiety and fear, and, if you screw up, great despair, knowing that your bad choices can screw up your life and God's plan. Yes, we are responsible. But God is sovereign over it all, as somehow even our bad choices or the harm that is done to us becomes part of God's good plan. We need to keep those two truths in tension.

2) God's good purpose in the storm

Paul knows that while it is true that they are in this storm because the sailors did not listen to his warning, he also knows that God has a purpose, even in the storm. Look at how Paul trusts God's good purpose in the storm and displays a poise that none of the others possess. He is a great leader on this ship, bringing them encouragement and direction when they are afraid for their lives. Paul knows that God is very much present in this storm, and is always working for good.

So if God is sovereign over the storm, what is he doing in the storm? It's an important question. If God is sovereign and yet in His sovereignty He chooses to allow storms and suffering, what is His purpose?

I think that we see three main purposes in the storm:

1) God works for our good, to make us more like Jesus

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. ²⁹ 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.

The good he is working towards is to conform us to the likeness of His Son. His perfect Son who sacrificed His life out of love for those who were lost in order to reconcile them to God. God is conforming Paul to the image of Jesus through this suffering.

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) To teach us to rely on Him

2 Corinthians 1:8-10 - We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. ⁹ Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us

The storms show us that we are not God. We can not control everything. We need God. We need to stay connected to Him.

3) God uses our suffering to equip us to minister to others

God comforts us in our suffering 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, ⁴ 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. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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 19th 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. When we look at the cross, we know that even when God seems absent and unloving, He is always present and working for good.

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