



Acts 27:39-28:10
Conduct in a Crisis, Pt 2

Summary: Crises present opportunities for ministry if we're willing to take them.

One of the things you hear said a lot lately is "these are unprecedented times." I've used the phrase myself to describe the bizarre, chaotic, year it has been. But I recently heard someone say a better way to describe 2020 is not unprecedented, but *unrelenting*.

Because, there have been other challenging times in history. Millions of people died during the World Wars last century. There was the Black Plague which claimed somewhere between 75 to 200 million lives in Europe over a seven-year span. Floods and famines have killed hundreds of millions of people throughout history. As of Friday, the US death toll for COVID-19 was 213,000, including one from our church – some of you remember Douglas James who passed away last spring, one of the first cases here in Fairfax County. But do we also remember that on December 26, 2004 a typhoon hit the Indian Ocean and killed over 225,000 people in a matter of hours?

Like I said, maybe unprecedented isn't the best word to use but 2020 has certainly been relentless. It just keeps dragging on as issue after issue is heaped up, one on top of the other, with each one making the others worse.

We've been cooped up, gotten worked up, and we're now fed up with the pace of issues and challenges coming our way. Things are hard, challenging, frustrating, they have upended our lives and made us mad.

But things have been bad before and that means we can go back and learn from others who suffered, especially other believers, and most especially other believers in Scripture.

This is why it is fascinating to be in the final chapter of Acts right now and see what happened there.

We have been reading about the Apostle Paul who was in Jerusalem one day worshipping God in the temple when a mob tried to kill him suddenly. Then he was taken into custody by Roman soldiers who showed up to break up the crowd. He was questioned and put on trial several times as politicians and officials worked to sort things out.

That situation dragged on for two years and included two assassination attempts against Paul until finally, he appealed to have his case heard by Caesar.

Then he was sent, under guard, by boat, to Rome, for the appeal. He recommended against the timing of the trip due to the potential of bad weather, he was ignored, and sure enough the weather came - they were caught in a storm where everyone eventually gave up the

hope of survival. But Paul was praying, and God answered his prayers – everyone on board would live.

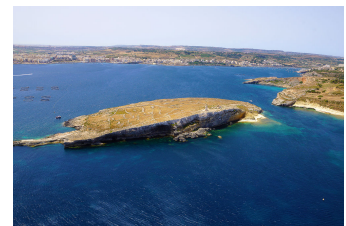
When we left off last week they could tell they were near land but that doesn't mean they're safe. In fact, they're about to run aground and the ship is going to be destroyed. The passengers will survive but there are even more challenges waiting when they come ashore. In other words, Paul is facing, what must feel like unprecedented, unrelenting challenges in his life.

So, let's jump back into the story and see what we can learn about difficult times, about why God lets them happen, and about how we should respond as we see this bit of history unfold.



Remember, the ship Paul is on has been blown around the Mediterranean, trapped in a storm for two weeks. They don't know where they are, but the winds have blown them to the shores of Malta, a small island 475 miles from their last port on the island of Crete.

Acts 27:39 When it was day, they did not recognize the land; but they observed a bay with a beach, onto which they planned to run the ship if possible. 40 And they let go the anchors and left *them* in the sea, meanwhile losing the rudder ropes



The rudders were used for steering – they were paddles with long poles and were likely tied in place during the storm so they didn't swing around and hit someone during the storm.

; and they hoisted the mainsail to the wind and made for shore. 41 But striking a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves.



Most historians agree, they place they landed is St Paul's Bay¹ and they probably ran aground on or near this small island in the bay, named St Paul's Island. In fact, there's a statue of him there today.²



As the front of the ship was stuck in the rocks or mud the waves of the storm pounded the back of the boat and the whole thing was being broken apart.

¹ St Paul's Islands By Jeffrey Sciberras - Own work, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=13972279>

² Statue By Frank Vincentz - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=34307979>

They had a lifeboat, but if you remember, the sailors tried using it to escape on their own so the soldiers cut it loose and let it float away. It's going to be everyman for himself now.

But, remember, they were also transporting prisoners. And according to Roman law, if a prisoner escaped, the guard was subjected to the same punishment the prisoner would have suffered. So,

42 And the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape.

In the eyes of the soldiers, it was easier to explain why they executed the prisoners than how they let them escape. But can you imagine living through this storm, two weeks at sea, giving up hope that you would ever be saved, and then you're executed within sight of the shore? Again, you want to talk about feeling like you're facing one trial after the other? I think the people on board this boat could identify with us. But watch this, because something super important is about to happen:

43 But the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from *their* purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump *overboard* first and get to land, 44 and the rest, some on boards and some on *parts* of the ship. And so it was that they all escaped safely to land.

Julius, the centurion, is willing to risk whatever else may happen for the sake of saving Paul.

You have to see this, because it's a major theme of the whole trip: *Paul makes a difference in the lives of the people he goes through a crisis with.*

Do you remember from last week? We saw that God sent an angel who told him – **God has granted you all those who sail with you.** And God can't grant you something unless you're asking for it. So, it seems, Paul was praying for the safety and salvation of everyone on the boat. Including the people who were responsible for them being in the storm because they decided to risk a trip during bad weather against Paul's advice.

Paul is going through a crisis, an unrelenting season of difficulty that has dragged on for years at this point, *and he's not pouting*, he's not pounding his fist, he's not raging, or murmuring, or crumbled up in bed discouraged and depressed – he pours out his concerns and questions before God instead.

And that has made a difference, for him, and for all those who are with him. *There are men who would have died if Paul had not been on that boat.* You know exactly what the soldiers would have done under other conditions. But they did not, in this case, because of Paul – or more accurately, because of what their boss thought of Paul.

The way Paul endured a crisis had an effect on others – a very positive, life-saving effect. And brothers and sisters, by God's grace and with His help, that could be you too!

You could make a positive difference during the unrelenting trials of 2020. You could have a positive impact on someone else's life and their experience of this crazy year. *But you have to follow Paul's example* and take your concerns and questions to God in the middle of the storm. *Have you done that? Are you doing that?* God is real, and He is there, He is here, ready to meet with you – in prayer, in Scripture, in worship, in daily life – as we take our burdens and concerns to Him.

Things really can turn out differently as we seek and serve King Jesus. We see it right here, and we see it other places in Scripture where people who know God made a difference in the lives of people who did not. That could be you!

So, the centurion steps up, and he says, don't do it; and everyone makes it to the shore - they survive the storm, which after all, is what God had told Paul would happen during a vision he had in the storm.

Here is where you want to say, "Phew, it's over, they made it." But it turns out there's more to the story.

Acts 28:1 Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta. **2** And the natives showed us unusual kindness; (Luke inserts himself back into the story – remember, he's traveling with Paul) **for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome,**

OK, now that's good...oh...wait...

because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold.

So let's get this straight - two weeks at sea, with no idea where you are or which way you're going – no motor, no oars, you haven't eaten in days except for the little bit of bread or porridge you had last night, you finally spot land and the sailors try to escape, the boat is falling apart, the soldiers want to kill you, and yeah, it's raining and cold too. Good times!

But we've got a fire! Let's keep that going.

3 But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid *them* on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand.

To quote my favorite daughter: "Are you serious!?!?" Is this unrelenting string of trials ever going to break? Will life ever be normal again?

4 So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live."

They figure Paul must have really done something wrong if the universe is this set against him. They assume he's getting clubbed by karma. Now, ironically, Paul had been a

murderer in the past, but he met Christ who forgave him and transformed him. Justice wasn't catching up to Paul, they had already met, and mercy triumphed over judgment.

5 But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. [or at least a favorite of the gods]

And that opened the door for the next thing that happened:

7 In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days. 8 And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him. 9 So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed. 10 They also honored us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary.

What started with a shipwreck eventually turned into a celebration. But there was an awful lot that happened along the way. Here in 2020, we're still in the middle of the storm, we haven't made it to the celebration yet, so let's think through some things we can learn from Paul's experience.

First and foremost we learn, that some times bad things happen to good people, even while they are trying to do good things.

And that can be really, really, hard to take.

How many of you have experienced something like the viper biting Paul? You tried to step out and serve, you tried to do something good for someone else, maybe it was an act of kindness, maybe it was something you would call ministry – it could be anything for anyone, the point is you were trying to do something good, and it didn't go as planned. Has any one ever had that experience?

I know I have, it's actually how I wound up pastoring this church. I came to Virginia to go to seminary and get my degree so I could go back into the military. We thought it was a good idea for how we could serve God. It was supposed to be a good thing. But it didn't work out according to our plans and Madeleine and I spent what we still call our year in the desert where everything seemed to fall apart, savings was running out, we didn't know what to do, and we couldn't fix the situation ourselves. Everything in life hurt with that constriction and tightness you feel deep down in your soul. It got to the point where it was a struggle to even pray, because, what good would it do?

We can look back now and say, "Wow, what an amazing thing God has done!" But I'll tell you, in the middle of it all, life was hard. We had no idea what was going on or how much longer it was going to last. It felt like a struggle for spiritual survival, because it was.

Christians, we have to remember, the Bible is very clear, God has always tried to tell us, this world is falling apart, it's a spiritual battleground, and there are good guys and bad guys, real angels and demons, and those spiritual bad guys are actively trying to make things worse in the world. Now, that may sound crazy to you, but I'm just trying to remind you of what people have accepted and understood all throughout human history.

Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica and tells them:

1 Thess 2:18 Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us.

So, what do you do with that? How do you respond to that? Did that really happen? Does that still happen today? Or, is Satan just like Sauron trying to take over Middle Earth or Palpatine trying to take over the Republic, the Joker trying to take over Gotham, or Voldemort – oops, I said his name, trying to take over Hogwarts?

The Bible says clearly: Satan is real - though he is not God's equal – it's not yin and yang. From the first pages of the Bible to the last we're told there is a devil who is organizing resistance to God that he actively works against the good things of this world and that he tempts us to join him in that rebellion.

We are also told in very beginning of Scripture that when humanity joined the rebellion against God, the world began to fall apart. Now, in the final pages of Scripture we're told one day the world will be remade, just like we are remade when we come to Christ. But until then, there will be earthquakes, and floods, and famines, and flus. There will be Black Death and Spanish Flu and HIV and COVID and whatever comes next. We will stop them, or slow them, for a time, and then something else will come. This is the way it is on a sin-soaked planet.

We are also told, from the first pages of Scripture to the last, that there is conflict between human beings. Adam threw Eve under the bus after eating the forbidden fruit – God asked what happened and he said, "It's all her fault." They made up after that and had a few kids but their first born wound up murdering their second. Flip to the end of the book and you find people still doing that kind of thing at the end of history. Here in Acts you find soldiers willing to kill prisoners because it's easier than tracking them down if they run away – there's no value to human life.

Fast-forward to today and you have fierce legal battles over when, where, and how it's OK to kill a human child – we kill unborn women in the name of women's rights. If a police officer kills a black man it's a national headline, but if a doctor kills an unborn black man while the boy is still inside his mother's womb, no one says a word. Friends, if you call it abortion, what is it that you're trying to abort? A human life.

So, we're up against Satan, a world that is falling apart, and other people who oppose us for all kinds of reasons and who push destructive philosophies, policies, and ideas – like

abortion in the name of ‘rights.’ And we haven’t even said anything about ourselves yet – what about the fact that we get in our own way? We bring hurt and suffering onto our selves at times through our own thoughts, speech, and actions, and we, of course hurt others. The world is full of sin and so are we.

All of this is part of the reason why, sometimes, bad things happen to good people, especially people trying to do good things.

Friends we do not live in a Christian Disneyland. The Kingdom of God is not the Magic Kingdom. There are spiritual forces at work *right now* fighting for influence and control over the lives of human beings. And the only really effective way to oppose them is through spiritual means – through prayer and fasting and worship and truth – supported by physical actions. Through praying, like Paul, for the people around us and then serving them, even in the storm.

Are you doing that? Don’t just pray for yourself and your needs, pray for this crazy world we live in and for the people around you. Pray for the people who irritate you. Pray and ask God to help you love them. Pray and ask God to draw them nearer to Himself. Remember, it doesn’t matter who the other side is in your opinion, the thing they need most is Jesus - so can you pray asking God to change your heart and theirs?

We want to develop new responses, new reactions to events. When things trigger you, because things are going to trigger you, let them trigger you to pray. Take your anger, your confusion, your frustration, your sadness, your loneliness to God. 1 Peter 5:7 tells you – cast all your cares upon God because He cares for you.

Anything that agitates you – pray about it. Go to war spiritually for it, resist the devil, resist destruction, resist division and the Scriptures teach that he will flee.

And then, as you pray, look for places to make a difference through your thoughts, your actions, and your speech. As things change inside you let it be seen by other people around you.

Did you notice? Paul took every opportunity for ministry, even in a crisis. He tried to speak up and avoid the storm in the first place, then he prayed for people during the storm. He encouraged people to eat and regain strength before they abandoned the ship. And finally, when they made it to land Paul helped with building a fire for the same soldiers who tried to kill him – and for a bunch of prisoners who would have been killed if it hadn’t been for him. Paul let the light of Christ that was in him shine on the people around him. He sought to pray spiritually *and serve physically* – *BOTH!*

But did you also notice, that’s when the serpent struck. Christian, don’t be surprised if things get difficult when you step up to serve. The serpent strikes all the time. Do you want to know what it’s like in my house on a Saturday night, Sunday morning, or before a big women’s event? We have serpents strikes all over the place. What was it like in your house trying to get to church this morning? There are a few of you who almost didn’t come, right?

Christian, do not be surprised if you face opposition when you try to do something good. Peter explained it this way:

1 Pe 4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Look, how often was Jesus opposed as He tried to do good things for people? All the time. But, He's with you, He watches over you. He may allow you to be bitten at times, but He can also give you the strength to shake it off.

Last question – why would He do that? Why does God let us go through the storm? Why does God let the serpent strike? Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people, especially people who are trying to do good?

I can't explain all of God's ways or reasons to you, I don't understand them all myself, but I know this much is true: often God saves us through things instead of from things.

Sometimes He allows us to go through things we would rather avoid because it's going to produce something greater in the process.

We are outcome oriented, God is process-oriented. We are focused on the destination; God is concerned about what we learn and how we act along the way. And sometimes, what we learn and the way we act has an impact on other people – they see the way we suffer; they see the way we endure; they see our character and conduct and they notice something different. Crisis reveals character – what comes out of you in the storm, or when the serpent strikes, says a lot about what, or more specifically who (Christ) is in you.

So, if people see you suffer, if they see you endure all the difficulties they're going through, and you do it with peace and joy, and they see you looking for ways to love and lead and serve others, it gets their attention. You earn your credentials in the crisis. And then, sometimes, that affects their decisions which can also affect others. How many prisoners were saved because of what the centurion thought of Paul?

Friends, we are going through difficult times, unrelenting times, but they're not really unprecedented. Bad things have happened in the past and will happen again until the Lord returns. But how will we act in the midst of it all? I want to encourage you to pray – for yourself and others, to make a difference. And I want to encourage you to look for and take, or make, opportunities to do good – even in things as small as putting sticks on a fire – be a force of good. Make yourself available to God. And when the serpent strikes, because he will, shake it off, and keep on serving – people are watching and it does make a difference.

Let's Pray.