

43. Shipwreck ahead

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Since ancient times, people, especially writers and poets have pictured life as a journey or a voyage. John Bunyan's best known book 'Pilgrim's Progress' is based on this theme. I am sure that while you were in high school, you were told to do a book report of an epic poem 'Odyssey' by Homer. This book's theme also came from a journey. We sometimes use the 'voyage' metaphor in everyday conversation: "Smooth sailing!" or "Don't make shipwreck!" or "Sink or swim!"

Paul had long wanted to preach the Gospel of Jesus in Rome, but he had not planned to travel as a prisoner. Why would the author of this Book Dr. Luke devote such a long section of his Book to describe the voyage and shipwreck? Could he not summarize it with a couple of paragraphs? Of course he could, but Luke was a skillful writer who was inspired by the Holy Spirit to show how the Lord used apostle Paul to influence the unbelievers around him during this voyage, even in the midst of a shipwreck in the cold wintery Mediterranean Sea.

Dr. Luke was certainly not writing an allegory, but he did use this dramatic event to show how one man's faith can make a big difference for him and others "in the storms of life" even if they were not following the Lord at that moment.

A. BON VOYAGE? NOT!

Acts 27:1-12 And when it was decided that we should sail to Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to one named Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment. 2 So, entering a ship of Adramyttium, we put to sea, meaning to sail along the coasts of Asia. Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, was with us. 3 And the next day we landed at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him liberty to go to his friends and receive care. 4 When we had put to sea from there, we sailed under the shelter of Cyprus, because the winds were contrary. 5 And when we had sailed over the sea which is off Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra, a city of Lycia. 6 There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing to Italy, and he put us on board. 7 When we had sailed slowly many days, and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, the wind not permitting us to proceed, we sailed under the shelter of Crete off Salmone. 8 Passing it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea. 9 Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, 10 saying, "Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives." 11 Nevertheless the centurion was more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship than by the things spoken by Paul. 12 And because the harbor was not suitable to winter in, the majority advised to set sail from there also, if by any means they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete opening toward the southwest and northwest, and winter there.

As you can see from the map here, their journey began in Caesarea. It was late August, A.D. 59. The winds were light and westbound. The centurion Julius had secured the passage aboard a coastal ship that would take them to another port where he could find another ship sailing for Rome. If everything went well, they would reach the imperial city Rome by the end of October.

At Myra, they went on board a much larger grain ship from Alexandria, Egypt that carried 276 passengers and its cargo – grains. Rome depended on Egypt for much of its grain supply, and the Roman government gave special consideration to those who ran these ships.

In v9 Luke mentioned the 'Fast'. He was referring to the Day of Atonement which fell normally in September/October, but in this case, it was October 5. Every ancient sailor knew that sailing was difficult from mid-September to mid-November, and impossible from mid-November to February, because the sun and stars might be overcast for days on end which meant that they would be lost without a direction to harbor in the middle of the sea. That is why sea traffic was completely ceased in winter time during that period. No, they did not have GPS or night vision goggles to see where they were going.

The centurion now had to decide whether to winter at Fair Havens which had a unprotected harbor or try to reach the safer port by sailing 40 miles west along the coast of Crete. Against the prophetic warning from Paul, they chose to sail to Phoenix. I am sure that they thought that Paul should stick to his preaching rather than navigating the ship.

By this time, Paul had already experienced two shipwrecks according to 2 Corinthians 11, so he knew a few things about what was coming ahead. Carnival Cruises, Royal Caribbean, and Princess Cruises no longer welcomed Paul, because he was considered a ship wrecker.

B. IN THE TEMPEST

Acts 27:13-20 When the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their desire, putting out to sea, they sailed close by Crete. 14 But not long after, a tempestuous head wind arose, called Euroclydon. 15 So when the ship was caught, and could not head into the wind, we let her drive. 16 And running under the shelter of an island called Claudia, we secured the skiff with difficulty. 17 When they had taken it on board, they used cables to undergird the ship; and fearing lest they should run aground on the Syrtis Sands, they struck sail and so were driven. 18 And because we were exceedingly tempest-tossed, the next day they lightened the ship. 19 On the third day we threw the ship's tackle overboard with our own hands. 20 Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up.

Think about it, folks, by now the sea water spray is freezing cold; rain and horrible winds are constant; you cannot light up a fire to warm yourself; drenched supplies, clothes, everything above and below decks is soaked with cold sea water; every able-bodied man would take turns to pump water out of the ship. The sea water is getting higher and the ship is getting lower. It was no wonder they were tossing every non-essential thing overboard to lighten the ship.

I am blessed not to get motion sickness easily. For those who suffer, here is some advice. If you know that you are going to face some motion sickness in the near future, eat banana. Because it is the only food that tastes the same when you have it for the second time in your mouth.

C. 3 SPIRITUAL ANCHORS

Acts 27:21-22 But after long abstinence from food, then Paul stood in the midst of them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me, and not have

sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss. 22 And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. Paul started this voyage as a prisoner, but he ended as the captain. He took over the situation when it was obvious that no one else knew what to do because they all lost their hope.

A crisis does not make a person; a crisis shows what a person is made of, and it tends to bring true leadership to the surface. Paul gently rebuked the centurion, pilot, and captain for ignoring his warning with his "I-told-you-so" remark. Soon they would discover that God had spared all of them only because of Paul.

At their most hopeless despairing moment, the Lord cast three spiritual anchors in their hearts through apostle Paul:

1) The Lord tossed out the Anchor of His presence.

Acts 27:23-32 For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, 24 saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.' 25 Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me. 26 However, we must run aground on a certain island." 27 Now when the fourteenth night had come, as we were driven up and down in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors sensed that they were drawing near some land. 28 And they took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and when they had gone a little farther, they took soundings again and found it to be fifteen fathoms. 29 Then, fearing lest we should run aground on the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern, and prayed for day to come. 30 And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, when they had let down the skiff into the sea, under pretense of putting out anchors from the prow, 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 skiff and let it fall off.

Twice Paul told them that they would not perish with the ship because God was with them and has promised to Paul that he would see Caesar and the rest of the people would be spared as well.

Nothing is more terrifying than facing danger alone. Ask any child who is afraid of the imaginary monster under the bed while mommy and daddy are sleeping in the other room. By the way, the typical bed time prayer is horrible:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
if I die before I wake,
I pray for Lord my soul to take

What kind of comfort is the child getting from that? But how about this?

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
His Love to guard me through the night,
And wake me in the morning's light.

Back to the stormy sea, does the Lord's presence mean, then, that the storm will quickly end? Not necessarily. He didn't promise the storm would end, only that His stabilizing presence would see them through it. In fact, they went on ten more days to get the first glimpse of God's promised island. By the way, the ship had been driven over 500 miles off course.

At the glimpse of the island, some of the crew members decided that they would take it from here with their own strength. Doesn't that sound like what we often try to do right after the Lord gives us the first break from our trial? Stay with the Lord, you will be safe.

2) The Lord cast the Anchor of Practical Encouragement.

Acts 27:33-38 And as day was about to dawn, Paul implored them all to take food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day you have waited and continued without food, and eaten nothing. 34 Therefore I urge you to take nourishment, for this is for your survival, since not a hair will fall from the head of any of you." 35 And when he had said these things, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat. 36 Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves. 37 And in all we were two hundred and seventy-six persons on the ship. 38 So when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship and threw out the wheat into the sea.

Think about the people's situation in this ship. For fourteen days, they've been fighting against this tempestuous storm for their lives and have not eaten anything. I am sure that they were absolutely exhausted and drained.

Paul took bread and prayed over the meal he was about to have and gave thanks to the Lord in public. This is a good example for some of us who tend not to pray because of others. Don't worry about what others think about you. You give thanks to the Lord for His provision of the food. When I have a meal with some of my Sheriff Department deputies, I pray before the meal. Some of them already start to eat, then they stop chewing and just sit there politely until I finish.

3) The Lord lowers the Anchor of Absolute Faith.

Acts 27:39-44 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; 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. 42 And the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape. 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.

Just as the Lord had promised, all of them made it safely to shore, and not one was lost. I have a feeling that Paul had been sharing the Gospel with his fellow passengers and that some of them had trusted in the Lord as a result of this experience. Dr. Luke does not give us the details, but can you expect Paul to do otherwise?

D. APPLICATIONS

Through this third shipwreck apostle Paul endured, we need to learn several timeless truths and applications:

1) A shipwreck can come to us even when we are going in the right direction of the Lord.

Satan didn't want Paul to go to Rome, because it was the strategic center of the empire and the very headquarters of evil. Satan tried to delay and fight Paul every way he could.

2) A shipwreck has a way of revealing true character .

Remember what I used to tell you regarding character? Reputation is what others think about you; but character is what the Lord truly knows about you. I am sure that you've heard this as well: "Christians are like tea bags, you don't know how strong they will be until they are in hot water."

3) A shipwreck and tempestuous storm cannot hide the very presence and purpose of God.

The Lord promised to Paul that he would see the emperor and he did. Nothing can hinder the will, purpose, and presence of the Almighty God, nothing .

4) A shipwreck and tempestuous storm gives us opportunities to serve others and bear witness to Jesus Christ.

At the beginning of the voyage, Paul was ignored; but at the end of the voyage, he was listened to. He earned their respect to be heard because he spoke God's truth without compromise, but with love.