

TRUST

Acts 27:31-44

After remaining two years in Caesarea, Paul was finally on his way to Rome where he would fulfill another objective of the mission to which God had called him. God had called Paul to be a messenger to the Gentiles and the Jews. He was also given an assignment to declare Christ before kings. In Caesarea, Paul had presented God's message of salvation to some high-ranking official, but Caesar was recognized as the most significant earthly ruler of the Gentile world. He was the leader of the most powerful nation the world had seen until that time and God was making it possible for Paul to take the message to Caesar.

Traveling long distances such as the journey from Caesarea on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea to Rome was difficult even under the best of conditions and, as Paul and his fellow travelers were to discover, it could be life-endangering when conditions were bad.

The trip to Rome began on a ship that took them to a city named Myra that was at the southwest tip of present-day Turkey. It was there that Julius a Roman centurion found a larger ship that was transporting wheat that could take Paul and several other prisoners in his charge to Rome. Their first stop was on the island of Crete and they slowly made it to an area named Fair Havens. They were forced to spend extra time there because winter was setting in and sailing had become dangerous in that area. As it turned out Fair Havens was not a good harbor in which to spend the winter and the captain of the ship was determined to move the ship to the other side of Crete to a port name Phoenix which had better accommodations.

Paul had a sense that such a move was dangerous and he passed on his concerns to Julius. Julius was then confronted with a decision of following the advice of the captain of the ship or to act on what Paul had brought to his attention. Apparently, a Roman centurion had more authority than the captain of the ship did and he chose to take the advice of the sailing "expert" rather than the words of wisdom coming from Paul. It would be just a day's journey to sail from Fair Havens to Phoenix, so it seemed reasonable to try to make it.

As it turned out, that option did not work. They encountered rough seas and contrary winds and two-weeks later they were about to lose the ship 600 miles away from Fair Havens.

There are a lot of lessons that we can uncover from examining that happened. The first is that God gives wisdom to those He has called to carry out His work. This wisdom finds application in all areas of life and is not limited to just spiritual things. We would do well to seek advice of Godly people rather than worldly "experts."

A second lesson is that sometimes it is better to just "wait upon the Lord" rather than follow the advice of those who say "Don't just sit there, do something."

A third lesson is that "often the majority will make the wrong choice" which was certainly the case of those who decided to leave what they judged to be an "unsuitable harbor." We may attempt to "improve" our condition (move to a better or more comfortable harbor) which has merit; however, unless God instructs us to do so, then we run the risk of having our ship being blown off course and falling apart. When that happens, we are then left with a situation of just holding on for survival.

A fourth lesson is that when we take unnecessary risks in life and do so on our own initiative, then we may find that we suffer great losses in an effort to just survive. In the storms of life we soon find that much of the cargo we carry around is really a hindrance and much of the acquired capability we have just weighs us down. As we cast these aside, then we will likely face desperation if we had our hope and faith in such things.

The centurion followed the advice of those with natural light rather than Paul who had divine light. The result was that they were driven by the circumstances that surrounded them and they were helpless in such a situation. If we are relying on our own wisdom, then we too can be swayed by “every wind of change that comes along.” Just as the ship’s crew could not see the sun or the stars because of the storms, many people are clueless as to where they are or where they are going. They have no point of reference and no absolutes in their lives.

Unfortunately, human nature is such that some of us have to be totally at the end of our strength before we will listen to God. The men aboard the ship were at such a point. Paul reminded them of the advice he had given them earlier (not to say “I told you so”) but to give validity to the advice he was about to give to them. Paul told the people on the ship that he had been visited by an angel from the God he served with a message that no lives would be lost, but that the ship would run aground on some island. We cannot know if the men who heard Paul believed that he had actually been visited by an angel. People were much more open to the supernatural then as compared to many people today. The potential skepticism did not keep Paul from sharing the information with those who needed to hear it. Our lack of boldness perhaps comes from our lack of belief that God will do what He has said He would.

In the midst of despair, there can be hope. Of the 276 people on that ship, four were Christians (Paul and his three traveling companions Luke, Aristarchus, and Trophimus). The world should be able to look to those who know God for hope when all seems lost. We in the church are to be salt and the light when decay and darkness are the other alternatives. We must learn from Paul and speak out regarding an alternative to just going down with the ship. Some people are in such desperation that they will listen to any message of hope. Unfortunately, the church is not always there with the message of the truth and those in desperation are likely to follow anyone who will speak with authority. The times in which we live are perilous times and many are listening for direction and some sense of what to do and where to turn. We must be careful to guard our personal witness and the witness of the church so that when we speak, the message will be clear and not confounded because “what we do” and “what we say” do not send the same message.

Many people live their lives in a manner similar to what was happening to the ship. The winds of the world drive them and toss them about and they have no idea where they are going or even where they are. It is a frightful situation in which to be. The irony of such a life is that it is difficult to change it. Landing and coming to a more secure situation could be like crashing into the rocks along the shore. When a person is in such a condition, he truly needs the light of God’s word to shine in his life to lessen the impact of transition.

Call to Trust – 27:31-34

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 ship’s boat and let it go. ³³ As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. ³⁴ Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.” Acts 27:31–34 (ESV)

Paul had observed the actions of the sailors on the ship after they had dropped the stern anchors to keep the ship from crashing to some rock near the island they were approaching. He noticed that they were lowering a boat that had been on board the ship and he discerned that they (under the pretext of putting out more anchors) were going to abandon the big ship. Paul then warned Julius of what was developing.

MacLaren noticed that in verse 31 Paul told Julius that “you cannot be saved” unless the

crew stayed with the ship. Paul already had the assurance that he would survive whatever would happen and he would eventually “stand before Caesar.” A lesson to be learned from this interaction of Paul with Julius is that “human action is often required if we want to participate in the promises of God.” Knowing the will of God (all lives will be saved) is sufficient reason for those involved to do everything they can to accomplish His will. It is not an excuse to conclude that “it is going to happen whether I do anything or not.”

God had provided a message of salvation (of their physical lives) to the people on the ship. All had heard the message from Paul that they would be saved, however, all did not believe. They may have thought that what Paul said could happen and it might be true but they did not have faith in what he said. Their actions proved they did not believe. As James wrote in his epistle, “Faith without the works of faith is dead.” All they needed to do was to trust. But even while the salvation was being worked out, many wanted to try to save themselves. As people attempt to save themselves by what may appear to be “natural means” it puts other in jeopardy.

By this time, Julius and his soldiers had seen and heard enough from Paul that they immediately took decisive action to make sure that no sailors left the ship. That boat could have been useful to get people to shore once the ship ran aground; however, because some were going to misuse it to the detriment of all the rest, then its benefit was denied to all. This is difficult for most people to embrace. There are things in our lives that have the potential of being beneficial but they also can cause great harm if they are misused. If the temptation for misuse is too great for some, then the best overall thing we can do is to eliminate access to those things for the greater good of all.

Paul’s wisdom and leadership were once again evident as daylight approached and the situation that was developing (the ship about to run aground) that would require a lot of physical effort by all those on board the ship. The past two weeks had taken its toll on all of them and they had not properly eaten during this time. Paul sensed that a good meal would help give all of them the extra energy and strength to be successful in getting everyone to safety.

Act of Faith – 27:35-38

³⁵ And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. ³⁶ Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. ³⁷ (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) ³⁸ And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea. Acts 27:35–38 (ESV)

Many responsible people have a great tendency to hold back something for emergency situations. As they neared the end of their ordeal, it was time to use the provision to provide the needed strength to finish the job. Many Christians have resources they are holding for “a rainy day” which needs to be used to strengthen the church in these times when so many people are running away from God. We need to have a good sense of timing so that what we are saving does not wind up going down with the ship.

Paul’s positive attitude or outlook in the face of significant danger was an encouragement to all those on the ship. Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving to God for the food likely reminded them of the early message he had shared with them about God’s assurance that all would come out of this ordeal with their lives. Since the ship was not going to survive, there was no need to try to save the cargo of wheat that it was carrying and everyone joined in to throw it all overboard. That lightened the load and the ship would be able to get closer to the shore of the island before it was stopped.

Persistent Trust – 27:39-44

³⁹ Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. ⁴⁰ So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. ⁴¹ But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. ⁴² The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. ⁴³ But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, ⁴⁴ and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land. Acts 27:39–44 (ESV)

The people aboard the ship did not know anything about the island on which they were to land. However, they had come to the conclusion that “the unknown” was better than being on a sinking ship. Many people find themselves in such a situation in their lives and in times of great crises will make life-changing decisions. If the church is there for them, then those whose ships are breaking up will have a choice of a safe haven.

Earlier, we learned about the sailors' intent to save themselves and let all the others die. Now, as the ship was breaking up and everyone was going ashore, we see this same self-centeredness in the soldiers. They knew they would be held responsible for the escape of any of the prisoners assigned to them and the penalty could be death. So, they were planning to protect themselves.

In the eyes of the world, life is cheap. We see this in wars, drive-by shootings, and in the abortion of unborn children. Just as the centurion's intervention to spare the life of Paul enriched the world, our intervention in saving lives can enhance the quality of our world in the future.