

ALL ABOARD FOR ROME

Acts 27:1-44

Acts 23:11 says, "And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem (the Jewish metropolis), so must thou bear witness also at Rome" (the Roman metropolis).

Chapter twenty-seven gives the story of Paul's voyage to Rome, where he was to be tried for his life. He had been arrested for preaching that Jesus was alive. His first trial was in Caesarea, but justice miscarried and he appealed his case to Caesar, which made it necessary for him to be taken to Rome. The journey across the Mediterranean was a very hazardous one. The navigation of the Mediterranean in Paul's day was suspended, in large measure, during the winter months. The period of activity on the sea ran from the middle of March to the middle of November. The larger ships, engaged in the grain-carrying trade from Egypt to Italy, could ordinarily continue in business, with some risk indeed, till the close of navigation. Such was the vessel in which the centurion had chosen to convey his prisoners to Italy. But, even with so large a vessel, it required expert seamanship to carry it safely against the rising winds and turbulent seas. More than one time Paul's life was in danger, but God was with him.

This story gives one of the most accurate descriptions in ancient literature of the methods of sea-faring in those early days. But the interest of the story for us lies in the way in which Paul, the man of faith, becomes the hero of the story. He was a prisoner on his way to Rome, to be tried before the court of Caesar. He had appealed his case from the prejudice and hate of Palestine, because he well knew he could not get a fair hearing before the Jews.

On board the ship in which Paul sailed was a world in miniature. Stern law was represented by Julius, the centurion; navigation was represented by the captain. Commerce was represented by the merchants who voyaged westward to buy and sell. Labor was represented by the hard-working sailors. The army was represented by the stern-faced soldiers. Science was represented by Luke the physician. Literature was represented by Paul the Apostle; and law-breaking was represented by the prisoners. On board that ship were to be found all sorts and conditions of men.

One cannot read this chapter without seeing the emphasis placed on storms, but Paul was passing through storms more vicious and violent than the winds that beat against him. He passed through storms of persecution, false charges, and hate. Life for most of us is made up of storms of various kinds and degrees.

There are lessons we may learn from Paul's conduct during this storm.

1. Men should not lose their heads at such times.
All except Paul lost their reason and were about to act foolishly because the seriousness of the situation threw them off their balance. Paul, alone, kept a calm, steady grip on himself.
2. Men should not lose their spirit at such times.
The crew were ready to commit suicide. They were hysterical. They were typical of men in general when they pass through great trials. When tragedy comes there are many who are willing to take their lives rather than face the consequences. They lose their grip, their hope and their nerve.
3. Men should not lose their opportunities at such times.
Paul took advantage of the occasion to tell his traveling companions about God and his hope in God. It was a good time for Paul to talk to them about their souls. He turned misfortune into fortune. Calamities are usually destiny-making occasions.

The ship was so severely beaten by the angry waves that it was about to fall apart. The mariners used every device known to navigation to save it and those on board. They undergirded the ship by means of ropes and chains. But after having done so, their fears were not allayed. They suddenly realized that they were in waters infested with quicksands. Speedily they set sail, and again were driven by a merciless sea. They labored with the storm all that day. The next day, thinking they would relieve the situation, they tossed the freight overboard. All on board that ship, except Paul and his companions, were alarmed as to their personal safety and final outcome.

When all hope of safety had fled from all aboard the ship, Paul told them of a heavenly visitor who had stood by him that night and had encouraged him with a message from God. This message brought the assurance that he and all on the ship would be saved, if they would stay on board. What was the secret of Paul's calmness in the storm? He recognized God's ownership. "For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am." "This is my Father's world; this dark night is His; I am His child, and He loves me too well to forget me; and I am safe because my Father rules the storm." Furthermore, Paul knew that he was doing his duty. He was on his way to Rome, the metropolis of the world, to which he had prayed that God might take him in order that he might preach the gospel of Christ there. But Paul never thought of going to Rome as a prisoner on a ship that seemed likely to go to the bottom of the sea. When we ask God for something He often sends the answer in a different way from what we expected. But, when God sends His servants upon His errands He always takes all risks. If you are on God's tracks and doing His work He will see you safely through.

In the midst of that storm Paul said, "Sirs, be of good cheer, for I believe God." "I believe God" was a bold pronouncement of his loyalty to God. There were many embarrassing problems which he could not explain, yet his confidence in God was unshaken. He believed God in spite of the predicament he was in. He believed God in spite of the unjustified persecutions heaped upon him. He believed God in spite of the dangers that faced him. He was bold and unafraid to declare his belief in his God. It was that belief which saved his life and the lives of his companions. How much hung on the faith of one man! His faith stopped a panic. It gave others confidence in a desperate situation. It gave them hope.

It is time we recovered this faith in the power of God to work through us and in us. The first thing it would do for us would be to make us see to it that nothing was wanting in us of that surrender, that utter openness to God in our own lives, through which He can work. The next thing it would do would be to make us fearless in the way of witnessing to our faith. For that was what Paul did. Paul gave his testimony, told his convictions, and shared his experience.

Paul's faith in God filled him with good cheer. And good cheer is always contagious. One cannot possess it without scattering it. The more good cheer one has, the more he wants to share it with others, and the more one divides it, the more he has for himself. It employs a strange science of arithmetic. It is increased by division.

Paul was a prisoner, but he was the happiest man on the ship. Though a prisoner, he was master of the ship. Though he was a prisoner, he was the most popular and the most dreaded man of the group. Paul was not a peddler of grief and gloom, yet he was not the foolish type of optimist.

Good cheer does not depend upon external conditions, but upon an internal state of mind and soul. The inference in these verses is that God took charge of a bad situation. The further inference is that the men on the ship were saved for Paul's sake. They did not deserve to live, but the Lord had respect for Paul, who had doubtless included them in his prayers, and, in answer to Paul's prayer, God had spared the lives of his enemies. This

was a gracious prayer, and it was a gracious work of divine grace. The third inference in the passage is that God works by divine decree. It was His plan to save these men. It was not their plan at all.

The records make God wholly responsible for the preservation of the lives of these men. The Bible clearly teaches a divine plan for all things, both in the physical universe and in the moral universe.

In the hour of prayer, Paul reached the ear of God and received an answer from Him, apparently without any qualifying conditions. There was a definite commitment from God that all who sailed with him should be saved. It appears that their salvation was a part of God's plan. It is hardly reasonable to conclude that God changed His mind about the matter, nor is it fair to say that He altered His plans to suit the wishes of Paul. If saving their lives was part of the divine plan, it must have fit into an eternal plan. It was not a sudden burst of sentiment, nor a disruption of a long-standing purpose to do otherwise.

But Paul's prayer was as much of divine plan as the saving of the lives of these men. Their lives were not a thing apart from prayer. If the storm was a part of the divine plan, so was Paul a part of it. If their deliverance was a part of God's plan, so was Paul's prayer, as a means of intervention, a part of God's plan.

Paul said, "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved." This brings a new element into the divine plan. Does it mean that if they disobey God, He will change His mind and let them perish? No, it means rather that their abiding in the ship was as much a part of God's plan as saving their lives was, and all was built around the will of God. It is not always possible to separate the human and the divine element. They are inseparably linked in all of God's purposes.

Salvation is not without divine conditions. If a man is to be saved, he must repent of his sins. Repenting is the condition on which salvation hangs. If God leads man, man must be willing to yield to God's leadership. God's plan included man's will and man's cooperation. Except Noah had remained in the ark he could not have been saved. Remaining in the ark was as much a part of God's plan as building the ark.

A little later these men did not abide in the ship. They were forced into the sea, yet they did not perish. Why this seeming conflict? There is no conflict in it at all. In the first instance there was willful rebellion for which they would have to suffer. In the second instance there was no rebellion involved, but a force of circumstance over which they had no control. In such an hour, God kept His promise to save them, even though they were not in the ship.

When these men were cast into the sea, those who could not swim got to shore by clinging to boards and pieces of the ship. Were these bits of rubbish a part of the divine plan? Without doubt. They were as essentially a part of God's plan as the storm was, or as the ship, or as Paul's prayer, or as remaining within the ship. These boards were made to serve the purpose of God.

The doctor may be a part in the divine plan in the recovery of a sick man. God could heal him without a doctor, but many times He uses the doctor, who is a part of God's plan. Plowing the field is as much a part of the divine plan as gathering the harvest. All the common sense of man, the practical application of the means and implements at the disposal of man may be a part of God's plan. We cannot separate the divine and the human. The human must take into account the divine element, and the divine takes into account the human element.

God brought them to a port of safety. He always does if we will let Him have His way. Men are driven to their destruction, when they refuse to submit to God's protection.

All were saved. There were 276 on board that ship and not one was lost. What good news! When the roll was called, all answered, "Present." This is our promise when the roll is called in heaven. Not one of God's saints will be missing.

There are always two elements that help to shape our lives, the human and the divine. These two are clearly seen in this story. The human element is impotent and unable to bring us to port. The divine element is made more manifest because of the weakness of the human element.

The seamen undergirded the vessel, they cast out their precious cargo, they did all within their power to make their landing a safe one, but all seemed in vain. They were driven on in the face of the storm, hopelessly and helplessly.

Men must gain their ports in life by shifting their sails to suit the winds. These sailors brought their vessel to port by a different route than the one determined beforehand. They passed on the other side of Cyprus, contrary to plan. They had to adjust their course according to the winds that blew. Our plans in life must often be changed because of contrary winds.

Men make their progress in the face of difficulties. Using whatever caution we may, we find that human wisdom is not enough to meet the needs of the journey of life. We may change our course, but the storm meets us on the other side, as it did Paul and his companions. We are driven to God by contrary winds.

There come times when God must intervene and take our lives in His hands. He must overrule our wills, our plans and our purposes, and give new direction to our course and new shape to our structures. The winds are in His hands, the rocks are in His hands, and the raging billows are in His hands. Without God, there are enough natural elements to wreck us, but with Him, there are not enough threatening dangers to overwhelm us.

The mariners had hope so long as they had human and physical resources on which to depend, but when these failed, they were driven to God. Is it not strange that men need to be driven to God by disaster? When He gives health men forget Him; but when sickness comes, they pray. When prosperity is ours we become worldly; but when misfortunes come and tragedies break about us, then we become humble. Joys make us wicked, but sorrows make us prayerful.

The last star had gone out for the mariners. Reason had failed them. Physical force and natural resources had been exhausted. They were left to the mercy of tragedy--"all hope was then taken away." Such is life without hope in God.