

11:59: Last Minute Saves and Miraculous Comebacks in the Bible

Praying for Daylight / Acts 27 / Jeff Kennedy July 28, 2019

No test that the apostle Paul ever encountered was more traumatic than the last of three shipwrecks he endured on his way to be tried before Caesar in Rome. Luke gives us a firsthand report of it in Acts 27. And that account stands as a powerful analogy and parallel to the storms we face in life today.

Let's go back there.

With Much Difficulty

The dockside guard stencils a number on his forehead, then his hand. Paul is marked for judgment as a prisoner of Rome. Now he waits with the other inmates while the Roman centurion secures a vessel.

The trials before the Jewish court, governor Porcius Festus and the festooned and pretentious pawn of Rome, King Agrippa II, have all brought Paul to this moment. He *will* defend himself and his Gospel before Caesar. He *will* boldly proclaim his message to the Romans. But first, he *must* get to Rome in one piece.

After the trial **before** Festus and Agrippa, Paul and his two travelling companions, Aristarchus and Luke, are turned over to a centurion of the Augustan division named Julius.

Julius commandeers a shabby Levantine freighter that is bound for ports along the Mediterranean. The centurion intends to take this vessel as far as he can up the coastline and then transfer the prisoners to a ship headed directly for Italy.

The dockside guard orders the non-citizen prisoners to board the ship and they all shuffle—single file, in clinking chains across a tapered plank bridge. These prisoners are taken below deck and shackled to timbers, bulkhead door handles, and metal hasps on crates or to anything else the soldiers can find to attach them. But Paul is a citizen-prisoner who is allowed to move about freely on deck. At the very least, Paul has Julius' ear.

The freighter puts out from the Caesarean port, and just like that, the sails flap and fill with a westerly breeze and the ship heads for blue coastal waters. Luke simply **⁷We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. ⁸We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea.**

(Acts 27:7,8).

From Bad to Worse

Open water isn't an option this time of year, and so after a brief layover in Sidon, the ship tacks westward along the coastline and eventually lands at the port of Myra in Lycia. Julius transfers the prisoners to a larger Alexandrian vessel full of corn, grain, and spices from Africa, and they set course for Italy.

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Against constant headwinds, the ship makes it to a port called Fair Havens on the south coast of the isle of Crete in the middle of the Mediterranean. Paul warns the sailors and the soldiers, **“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.”**

Julius ignores Paul and relies instead on the experienced appraisal of the captain and crew. They can either wait out the winter at Crete, a dangerous option in a defenseless harbor. Or they can make a break for it and try to reach ancient Phoenix. They choose option two; the ship weighs anchor and heads across the Mediterranean toward Italy.

Before long they are caught in a violent northeaster and are driven off course. For fourteen terrifying and sleepless days the ship pitches and yaws as the waves crash against the deck in sheets of white foam. After abandoning most of the cargo overboard, the waterlogged crew reaches a point of complete despair.

And the worst is yet to come.

The Fuming Seas

It's midnight on day fourteen and they haven't seen the stars for days. The crew is exhausted. Morale is nonexistent. These experienced mariners know all too well the options. The boat will either break apart at the seams and crash against the rocks, or be driven inland and lodge in a mudflat or a shallow sandbar.

They decide to take soundings and experience a fleeting moment of hope.

“Twenty fathoms!” a crewman shouts.

“Fifteen fathoms!”

What fortune! They are being driven by the wind into the shore.

But all hope evaporates as they see, by a thin ray of moonlight, that the breakers are far from the beach. They are being driven toward the rocky shoals of Koura—a hidden, craggy sea floor waiting to demolish their vessel and drown them in the dark.

So they lower the anchors and this stops them from being immediately dashed against the rocks. The soldiers descend below to a watery cargo bay to unshackle the prisoners who reek of vomit, excrement and seawater.

The crew isn't sure how far they are from the shore and so they hang on in the night. Luke sums up the despondent scene in one plain sentence, **“They dropped four anchors, and prayed for daylight” (Acts 27:29).**

And now they wait. They hold on for dear life and pray they will last through the night. They pray that they will live to see another day.

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They tether themselves to the deck, listening to the torsion and straining of the hull struts below. They wait, with bated breath, for the creaking mast to snap under hurricane winds. When morning light comes they will know just how far they are from or how close they are to the beach. But for now—they wait in dread as the surf pounds the daylights out of them.

And none of this, not one harrowing second of it, is news to God.

Right before his trial and this disastrous voyage, God's Spirit told Paul that just as he had testified before the Jews he would surely testify before Caesar in Rome (Acts 23:11). Paul has this promise. He knows that God *will* bring him to the Imperial City.

But what he didn't know, until he found himself in the middle of a fuming sea, was that the journey from promise to fulfillment would be fraught with catastrophe. He and his companions are brought to the very threshold of death.

They are right in the middle of God's will for them.

Jesus never promised us an unimpeded path to victory or happiness. In fact, He promised just the opposite, **"In the world you will have tribulation, but take heart; for I have overcome the world"** (Jn. 16:33).

1. Just because you're in a tough spot doesn't mean you're out of the will of God.

Acts 26:31-32: **"This man could have been released if he had not appealed to Caesar"**

Acts 23:11 **"Take courage, for as you have testified about me in Jerusalem so you must also testify in Rome."**

God has already told him he will be testifying about Jesus in Rome, presumably before Caesar. So this impossible situation isn't evidence that he has somehow missed God's will for his life. Notice that, as a prisoner, Paul has no decision making power. Now, God has given him influence—but not decision making authority. Paul is along for the ride. And when Julius and the Captain and his experienced crew don't listen to Paul's anointed intuition—he can do nothing but be along for a very bumpy ride.

Now, it might be true that you might be out of his will. It may be that you've made some choices that have gotten you where you are, experiencing the consequences of foolish decisions. But even if that were true that doesn't mean you are beyond the reach of his grace—out of reach forever—out of the reach of his care and grace and redemption.

2. Sometimes things get worse before they get better and then they can get even worse.

Notice in the story that the situation appears initially to be friendly, this journey was planned by the providence of God, and Paul even has Julius' ear.

27:13 "when a gentle south wind blew they thought they had good fortune." They are clearly trusting in a false god (goddess of fortune) to get them where they need to go.

27:14 "but soon, a tempestuous wind called the northeaster whipped up and we gave way to it and were driven along by it."

2 Cor. 1:8-11 "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, **far beyond our ability to endure**, so that we **despaired of life itself**.⁹ Indeed, we felt we had received 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 again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,¹¹ as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many."

Illus. I sat in my office counseling a man who had, by all measurements, a fantastic life. A growing business, lots of income, a seemingly beautiful and picture-perfect family and a caring Gospel preaching church. As he told me about everything God had so blessed him with, he began to weep uncontrollably. When I finally got him calm enough to speak, he told me what the problem was: "My wife doesn't love me. My kids hate the sight of me. And I hate my business and my life." As he unpacked all of that, he would burst into fits of sobbing at an abundant but empty life.

I felt moved to tell him something, and I've never shared it outside of that room. I just felt strongly impressed to tell him the truth in love. A loving, caring word from the Lord.

"Brother, it's going to get better. But before it gets better, it's going to get worse. And after it gets worse, it's going to get even worse. And just when you think you cannot go on any more. Just when you think you can't get up and go through the motions and take one more step in this bog of pain—Jesus' light is going to dawn. God is going to heal and restore and bless you."

He hugged me so hard I thought he was going to crack a deep rib. He left my office.

And sure enough over the next year his life got hard. And the difficult stuff got even worse.

Years later his life has begun again. He has gained perspective, God has healed his relationships and blessed him immensely.

The scars are still with him. The pain never really goes away. But he has a new start.

The next principle of surviving until daylight is...

3. In the midst of the unthinkable or the impossible, we must keep one ear to eternity. Paul and possibly his companions, are the only people on this ship who can hear God's Spirit speak to them in the situation they're in.

Acts 27:23-26 "Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong 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."

Hearing from God in the midst of trials requires

- **Faith**—you and I must believe and know that God can and may speak a living and active message into our storm.
- **Intimacy**—folks we must cultivate an intimate walk with the Lord.
- **Be willing to jettison plan B. Notice** the sailors (27:30) get out the life boats and try to sneak away and leave the prisoners to die on the ship. Paul warns them as a Word from the Lord "If you do that, you will not live. You must stay with the ship." And you may feel sometimes in some situations like you are on a sinking marriage, a career that's taking on water, a relationship or physical ailment that is wearing you down.

And in those times when we are most exhausted, most fatigued from our trial—feeling like we have nothing left to stand, nothing left to give—we are most tempted to take the shortcut. And Satan is always obliged to provide an apparent "life boat". But God knows that the shortcut will sink us for sure.

Instead, we tether ourselves to his word and we hold on for dear life—and as verse 29 says "we pray for daylight."

4. Take time to care for yourself in the midst of the exhaustion.

27:33-34 “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.’”

Paul recognized that the men on that ship had been so terrified by their situation, so preoccupied with the challenge that threatened their lives, they forgot to eat and take care of themselves.

But in the midst of the battle you must practice “soul-care.” Take the time to care for yourself so that you can acquire the necessary resources to face another day.

Illus. Do you know how Hitler lost to the Red Army in WWII? As he and his troops were trying to push into Russia, they overestimated their abilities and expertise—their ambitions got the better of them—they got bogged down in the heavy snow and muddy terrain and the supply trucks could not get through to the German forces—and any army that can’t be supplied can’t fight.

And if you and I don’t take the time in the midst of the fight to resource our souls. To stay healthy—physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually—we’ll be an easy mark for the enemy because we’ll have nothing to face the torrent of evil and discouragement coming against us.

I find that if I don’t take the time to slow down, meditate on God’s Word, breathe in his truth and exhale the toxic stuff of life—I have nothing to fight the battle with.

I also have to ensure that I am getting enough sleep and exercise. Without the rest and exertion of exercise you can’t burn off that stress properly. Important defragging happens in your sleep. That’s where your brain sorts and stores and files all the information you’ve taken in, that’s when your nervous system and can recover from trauma and bad news.

5. Eventually God rescues us but not always the way we hoped.

27:39 “When daylight came... 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. ⁴⁴The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land safely.

The purpose of trials is not to keep us in a never-ending storm with no end in sight. God loves to bring relief in unexpected ways.

And the way of salvation God has provided in this story is a broken ship, torn apart by the storm, shredded and in pieces—and that’s exactly what they go floating in on. Sometimes the only way we can experience salvation and relief is to come floating in on the pieces of a broken dream.

And we barely make it to shore holding on to the shards of a once mighty vessel.

I wish Jesus would end the challenges that I face sooner than he does. I pray he speaks and the thunder of his voice silences the raging seas within me (like he did in the boat with the disciples last week). But more often than not, this story is what rescue looks like for me.

1. When calamity strikes do you tend to immediately think you’re in sin, or that God is displeased with you? How can you begin to see trials, not as punishments, but as opportunities to receive God’s comfort and be equipped to pass that comfort on to others in ministry?
2. When things go from bad to worse and then *even worse*, how do you cope with that?
 - By relying on God’s presence in the Word and prayer?
 - By leaning on the Church as a family for help?
 - By linking with brothers in the Lord who can help you walk through it?
3. Is there something you thought you were supposed to do and it just never materialized, at least the way you thought it would? How are you “floating in” on the brokenness of that toward God’s will for you?
4. How are you taking care of yourself in trying times?
 - Physically? Are you taking care of yourself through diet and exercise?

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- Emotionally? How are you seeking to stay emotionally healthy?
- Spiritually? How's your walk with God lately? Have you been too busy or hurried to commune with the Spirit in the Word and prayer?