

Abandoned Hope

Acts 27:1-20

¹ And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. ² And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. ³ The next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. ⁴ And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. ⁵ And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. ⁶ There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board. ⁷ We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. ⁸ Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

⁹ Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, ¹⁰ saying, "Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." ¹¹ But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. ¹² And because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

¹³ Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. ¹⁴ But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. ¹⁵ And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. ¹⁶ Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. ¹⁷ After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. ¹⁸ Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. ¹⁹ And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. ²⁰ When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned. – Acts 27:1-20 ESV

Back in chapter 19, Luke reported that Paul had been compelled by the Spirit of God to visit Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. Paul was constantly receiving input from the Spirit, providing him with direction and even preventing him from going certain places. His ministry was motivated by his desire to obey the commission given to him by Jesus, but it was directed by the Holy Spirit. In chapter 16, Luke records just such an occasion.

*⁶ Next Paul and Silas traveled through the area of Phrygia and Galatia, because the Holy Spirit had prevented them from preaching the word in the province of Asia at that time. ⁷ Then coming to the borders of Mysia, they headed north for the province of Bithynia, but **again the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go there.** – Acts 16:6-7 NLT*

And somewhere along the way, Paul had been given what had to have been a Spirit-inspired desire to go to Rome. Acts 19:21 reports Paul's impassioned statement: "I must go on to Rome!" And now, after his hearing before King Agrippa and Festus, he was on his way. But this journey was not going to be an easy one. He was still a prisoner and he was on his way to stand trial before the emperor of Rome, still facing charges that could result in his death. Nothing about this phase of Paul's life was easy or trouble-free. It seems that with every step he took, the difficulties increased in number and intensity. And yet, he was innocent of any wrongdoing, a fact with which both the governor and the king concurred.

Luke spends a great deal of time chronicling this portion of Paul's life. He provides a great deal of detail, describing each phase of Paul's journey to Rome with what appears to be keen interest. But why? It seems that Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was trying to show that Paul's desire to go to Rome, while Spirit-inspired, was not a guarantee of a trouble-free journey. God was sovereign and orchestrating each step of Paul's trip to Rome, but that did not mean that Paul would not experience difficulties or go through trials along the way. Paul's confrontation with the Jews in the temple courtyard and arrest by the Romans, had stretched into more than a two-year delay. He had been moved to Caesarea for a hearing before Governor Felix but had remained in confinement when Felix found himself unable to arrive at a decision as to Paul's fate. And Paul had remained there for two years, until Felix had been replaced by Festus. It was to Festus that Paul had demanded a trial before Caesar and now, he was on his way.

The beatings, imprisonment, false accusations, threats, and plots against his life had just been the beginning. His trip to Rome was going to prove equally as intense and full of inexplicable trials and tests. But it is essential that we read this account as Luke intended it to be read: With a knowledge that God is in control. None of the events described in this chapter happened outside the sovereign will of God. And no one understood that better than Paul himself. We must give careful consideration to the attitude and actions that Paul displays all throughout this story. There is no sense of panic or fear. At no time does Paul seem to consider the troubles surrounding his life as an indication that he was somehow out of God's will for his life. From the moment he stepped foot on the ship to the day he arrived in Rome, Paul was content and at peace with the knowledge that his life was in God's hands.

In verse four, Luke gives a short, but telling glimpse into what was to come: "...the winds were against us." The entire journey will appear to be marked by a supernatural, spiritual-based conflict. There is little doubt that much of what Luke describes is meant to convey the battle taking place in the heavenly realms, as Paul himself described it.

For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. – Ephesians 6:12 NLT

Paul was being led by God but being opposed by Satan every step of the way. Luke does not provide us with a step-by-step description or blow-by-blow account of how this battle unfolded. He does not attribute the storm to Satan. He doesn't even mention him. But his narrative provides us with a foreboding sense of the spiritual warfare going on behind the scenes.

*We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived **with difficulty** off Cnidus, and as **the wind did not allow us to go farther**, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. – Acts 27:7 NLT*

*Coasting along it **with difficulty**, we came to a place called Fair Havens... – Acts 27:8 NLT*

*Since much time had passed, and **the voyage was now dangerous**... – Acts 27:9 NLT*

*Paul advised them, saying, "Sirs, I perceive that **the voyage will be with injury and much loss**, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." – Acts 27:9-10 NLT*

*...soon **a tempestuous wind**, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. – Acts 27:14 NLT*

*...we managed **with difficulty** to secure the ship's boat... – Acts 27:16 NLT*

*...**fearing that they would run aground** on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. – Acts 27:17 NLT*

*Since **we were violently storm-tossed**, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. – Acts 27:18 NLT*

*When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, **all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned**. – Acts 27:20 NLT*

All hope was abandoned. Or was it? There was at least one man in the boat who seemed to know that there was still hope, because there was still a God who had all things in His hands and under His control. Nowhere does Paul express fear that he had been abandoned by God. He did not view the storm as a sign that God was punishing him or somehow preventing him from arriving in Rome. His Spirit-inspired desire to go to Rome had not diminished. And as we will see in the next section of verses, God will provide Paul with clear confirmation that Paul will make it to his final destination without the loss of a single life. The storm was going to prove no match for God. And Julius, the Augustan Cohort in charge of delivering Paul to Rome; Aristarchus, the Macedonian traveling with Paul; and all the sailors on the ship, were going to

get a first-hand display of the power of God. They may have lost hope, but Paul hadn't. They may have feared for their lives, but Paul had an assurance from God that not a single life would be lost. Paul was headed to Rome. The winds would blow, the waves would crash, the boat would sink, the sailors would panic, but Paul would rest in the sovereign hand of God. His faith was in his God. His eyes were on the One who had called and commissioned him, not on the storms of life. And this story brings to mind a similar scene from the life of Jesus, when He and His disciples encountered a storm while sailing on the Sea of Galilee.

³⁷ But soon a fierce storm came up. High waves were breaking into the boat, and it began to fill with water.

³⁸ Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his head on a cushion. The disciples woke him up, shouting, "Teacher, don't you care that we're going to drown?"

³⁹ When Jesus woke up, he rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Silence! Be still!" Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰ Then he asked them, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" – Mark 4:37-40 NLT

Paul experienced the same storm the sailors did, but without fear. Paul had faith. He trusted God. And it seems that Luke is silently asking us whether we will do the same.

Take Courage

Acts 27:21-38

²¹ Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss.

²² Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ ²⁵ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ But we must run aground on some island.”

²⁷ When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. ²⁸ So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms.

²⁹ And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. ³⁰ And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship’s boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, 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.” 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 27:21-38 ESV

Earlier in the voyage, Paul had warned the ship’s officers of a bad premonition he had regarding the outcome of their voyage if they proceeded. And Paul had minced no words, saying, “I believe there is trouble ahead if we go on—shipwreck, loss of cargo, and danger to our lives as well” (Acts 27:10 NLT). But the soldier in charge of Paul and the rest of the prisoners on board had listened to the advice of the ship’s captain and crew, who had all agreed to keep sailing, in search of a safer port. Now, they found themselves in a predicament. They had sailed for days in violent seas, their ship battered by the waves and wind. The storm was so intense that it blocked out the sun during the day, thrusting Paul and his 275 shipmates into a perpetual state of darkness. For days on end, the sailors had battled the storm, unable to eat or sleep, at Luke indicates that they finally abandoned all hope.

But in the heat of the storm, Paul addressed the crew, reminding them that they should have heeded his initial advice. All that he had predicted had come true. And now they were on the brink of disaster. Things were out of their control. They had done all they could do, but the

storm had proven too great and their attempts to save themselves, too small. Yet, this wasn't a case of Paul telling them, "I told you so." He wasn't rubbing their noses in their failure to heed his advice. He was letting them know that His God was greater than the storm.

²² *"But take courage! None of you will lose your lives, even though the ship will go down. ²³ For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me, ²⁴ and he said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul, for you will surely stand trial before Caesar! What's more, God in his goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you.' ²⁵ So take courage! For I believe God. It will be just as he said. ²⁶ But we will be shipwrecked on an island."* – Acts 27:22-26 NLT

Right in the middle of what was probably the worst storm any of these sea-hardened sailors had ever experienced, Paul stood up and told them to take courage. He encouraged them not to fear. Can you imagine how ludicrous his words must have sounded to those men? Here was some Jewish prisoner and landlubber, attempting to calm their fears and assure them that none of them would die. All would turn out well. And, even more incredibly, this man was basing his words on a dream he had received from his God.

Paul had faith, and his faith would prove contagious. He had heard from God and he believed what he had been told. So, he told the men, "*euthymeō*" – take courage. They were to be of good cheer. Now think about what Paul was saying. The storm was still raging. The waves were still crashing against the side of the boat. The rain was still pouring down. The noise must have been deafening. But Paul was telling them to take courage and he clearly stated why they should. "For I believe God. It will be just as he said" (Acts 27:25 NLT). Paul trusted God. Even in the midst of the storm. Nothing had changed. Their circumstances had not improved. Paul was telling them to trust a God they didn't know and couldn't see, while everything was crashing down around them. Paul had learned not to focus his attention on immediate circumstances. What was happening around them was not proof of what was going to happen to them. While they had abandoned all hope, they had not been abandoned by God, and Paul told them as much. "God in his goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you" (Acts 27:24 NLT).

This story reminds me of a poem written in 1774 by William Cowper.

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
 The clouds ye so much dread
 Are big with mercy and shall break
 In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
 But trust Him for His grace;
 Behind a frowning providence
 He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
 Unfolding every hour;
 The bud may have a bitter taste,
 But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
 And scan His work in vain;
 God is His own interpreter,
 And He will make it plain.

All the sailors could see was the storm raging around them. They were drenched from the incessant rain and weakened from going for days without food. They had lost all hope. They had probably called out to their various gods, begging for salvation. They had thought about their wives and children at home and the thought of never seeing them again. They had exhausted all their mental and physical resources trying to save themselves. And now, Paul was telling them that his God had everything under control. They would be safe. There would be a shipwreck, but not a single man would be lost.

As the storm progressed, the sailors determined that their best hope of salvation was to abandon ship. Under the pretext of setting out additional anchors to keep the ship from running aground on the rocks, these men attempted to lower the ship's skiff or lifeboat. But Paul warned the guards who were watching he and the other prisoners, that if the sailors did not stay on board, everyone would die. So, the soldiers cut the ropes to the lifeboat, allowing it to drift away in the storm. Now, they had to trust God. There were no other options. For the sailors, the lifeboat had become an idol, a false hope of salvation. But Paul knew that it would have failed them. They would not have survived the storm in a boat so small. Their best hope for salvation was to remain in the ship and under the watchful care of God Almighty. But their actions reflect those of every human being who, when caught in the storms of life, attempts to find a way out. They seek a way of salvation and escape. Rather than place their trust in a God they can't see, they rely on something more tangible in nature. When the Israelites had been set free from slavery in Egypt and found themselves in the wilderness, they began to wonder about this God of Moses. While Moses was up on the mountain talking to God, the people determined to make their own god, an idol made of precious metal. They sought to create a god of their own making, something they could see. Their leader had disappeared. He had gone

to the top of the mountain and they had assumed he was not returning. And the God that had rescued them seemed to have bailed on them. So, they took matters into their own hands and fabricated their own source of salvation.

Paul wanted everyone to know that the best course of action was to remain right where they were. They were to stay on the boat, not to abandon ship. What they believed was going to be the source of their death, would actually play a vital role in their salvation. They were going to have to trust Paul, who had placed his trust in God. And Paul was so confident, that he encouraged the men to eat so that they could regain their strength, assuring them, “For not a hair of your heads will perish” (Acts 27:34 NLT). Then, Luke tells us, “everyone was encouraged and began to eat—all 276 of us who were on board” (Acts 27:36-37 NLT). The faith of Paul had infected the entire ship. When everyone else on board had abandoned hope and the sailors had tried to abandon ship, Paul had remained confident in the faithfulness of God. Instead of fear, he had exhibited faith. When everyone else was panicking, he was trusting. While the crew had grown weak and abandoned all hope, Paul had remained strong. He was exhibiting the very characteristics he had encouraged the Corinthians to have. “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13 ESV). And his courage had made an impact on all those around him.

Shipwrecked, Snake-bit, and Sovereignly Spared

Acts 27:39-28:10

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.

¹ After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. ² The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. ³ When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. ⁴ When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." ⁵ He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. ⁶ They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

⁷ Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. ⁸ It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. ⁹ And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. ¹⁰ They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed. – Acts 27:39-28:10 ESV

Paul was headed to Rome. While it would appear that his journey was the result of a decision made by the Roman governor, Festus, and in keeping with Paul's own request for a trial before the emperor, Luke repeatedly insinuates that Paul's trip was due to the sovereign will of God. Yes, the Romans were funding the trip and had provided the soldiers to accompany Paul all the way to Rome. The sailors were piloting the ship on which Paul was a passenger, but as we have already seen, they were far from in control of the situation, and completely unable to deal with the weather conditions hammering their ship. Until Paul had intervened and assured them of God's sovereign plan to spare all their lives, they had been ready to abandon all hope of survival. The sailors had even tried to escape by using the lifeboat but were prevented from doing so by the Roman soldiers. Through the words of an angel, God had made it clear to Paul that everyone would be spared, even though the ship would be lost.

Luke wants us to recognize that this entire affair, from Paul's arrest in Jerusalem to his repeated hearings in Caesarea and his departure for Rome, had all been part of God's divine plan for Paul's life. None of this had happened by chance. And while everyone from the Jewish high priest, the Roman governor, King Agrippa, the centurion in charge of Paul's safety, and the ship's captain, thought they were in control, Luke repeatedly reveals that it was the sovereign God of the universe who was in charge of any and all things – from the wind and the waves to the decisions of men. As the angel had foretold, the ship carrying Paul eventually ran aground and began to break up. Everyone on board was forced to abandon ship and swim for shore. And while they had no idea where they were, God did. Upon reaching shore, waterlogged but safe, they discovered themselves to be on the island of Malta. And as the angel had predicted, not a soul had been lost. Every sailor, soldier, prisoner and passenger had been spared by God. What had appeared to be a hopeless ending to a very difficult and doomed journey, had ended in no loss of life. And the shipwrecked survivors found themselves surrounded by the caring citizens of Malta, who Luke describes as having showed them "unusual kindness." They had built fires on the beach in an effort to warm the weary men who had washed ashore. So, not only had they survived the shipwreck, but they were greeted and well taken care of by the people of Malta. They hadn't washed ashore on some deserted island or along an uninhabited section of the Maltese shoreline. Again, the sovereign hand of God had been propelling them along and protecting them every step of the way.

But God was not done. As Paul was adding wood to one of the fires, a venomous snake escaping the flames, sunk its fangs into his hand. The natives of Malta, seeing Paul shake the snake from his hand, assumed the worst. They quickly made the determination that Paul was an ill-fated soul who, while having escaped drowning at sea, was destined to die for his sins.

"No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." – Acts 28:4 ESV

Yet, once again, Paul survived. He was far from ill-fated, cursed or doomed. He was under the watchful eye of God Almighty. His life was not destined to end as a result of drowning or poisoning. Storms would not take his life, neither would a snake. God was not done with Paul. Paul was under the impenetrable force-field of God's protective plan. There was nothing anyone or anything could do to him that did not first have to come through God's hands and with His permission. Paul had a confidence in God that matched that of the author of Hebrews.

⁵ For God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never abandon you."

⁶ So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me?" – Hebrews 13:5-6 NLT

In fact, what can the storms of life do to me? Or vindictive Jews? Or all-powerful Romans? Or governors and kings? Or even a deadly venomous snake? For Paul, the answer was nothing. Nothing at all.

When the people of Malta failed to see Paul swell up and drop-down dead, they had determined that he must have been some kind of god. How else could they explain such a miraculous scene? They had no concept of God Almighty. And while they believed in the idea of supernatural beings, knew nothing of Yahweh and were completely ignorant of Jesus, the Messiah. But it would not be long before they saw the power of God on display, as Paul was given the opportunity to perform a miracle in their midst, healing the father of a man named Publius. And Luke tells us that when news of this incredible event got out, “the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured” (Acts 28:9 ESV). Paul’s presence on Malta was eventful. From surviving a deadly snake bite to healing the sick, Paul was a walking advertisement for the power of God. And while Luke doesn’t report it, there’s little doubt that Paul was sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with everyone who would listen. He didn’t waste a single second of his time on Malta. Yes, he performed miracles. He healed the sick. He cured those who came to him with diseases. But based on what we know about Paul, he shared the good news of salvation made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And according to verse 11, God would provide Paul with a three-month window of opportunity to do so. He was still headed to Rome. That would be his final destination. But Malta would prove to be a divinely determined detour that had been a part of God’s divine plan all along. Stormy seas, helpless sailors, a shipwreck, and a poisonous serpent were no match for the sovereign will of God.

