

Surviving the Storm

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[0 : 00] There are some places you go to that you never forget. They stick in your memory forever. And for me, one of these is Malta. Bridget and I went on a cruise to celebrate special birthdays.

And one of the places I went to was Malta. And I remember going in. It was a bright, sunny day. The sea was very calm. And as you came towards Malta, you saw this stunning city on the hill above you, a big, fortified city.

You don't really get a proper impression with it from a photo. It was absolutely magnificent. One place I think I will never forget. I think Luke also would never forget when he came to Malta.

But his circumstances were very different from ours. Luke swam ashore. Perhaps he was clinging to some driftwood as the ship they were on had broken up.

after 14 days in a storm, a wild storm at sea. Not knowing where they were, not knowing where they were going and fearing for their lives.

[1 : 06] And I'm sure as Luke came to Malta, he was very thankful that God had preserved his life and everyone else on board. Thankful too, as we saw in the reading for the great hospitality offered to them by the Maltese people.

And I think we can be thankful to Luke or thankful for Luke for the account that he gives us or in the passage that he's read to us.

It is really tense. It is in many ways quite exciting. And it draws us in as a great adventure. And of course, Luke was recording it firsthand.

It's clear from the way Luke writes his book, the Book of Acts, whether he is there or not there. He talks about we or they. This is definitely one of the we passages. Luke had come through the storm and he gives us a very vivid account of it.

And there were two things that particularly struck me as I was thinking of this chapter over the last week. The first thing is that God, in his mercy, provides for us, but he doesn't always provide in the ways that we expect.

[2 : 23] And the second thing is that we have opportunities as believers, as Christians, and knowing the Lord Jesus, we have opportunities to influence others, even if we're not in positions of formal authority.

And I hope we'll see both of these as we go through this morning. But I want to begin by just walking through the passage. I have read it beautifully, but there's a lot in it. So let's just go through again and just make sure we understand what is going on.

So if you've been following in previous weeks, you'll know that Paul had come to Jerusalem. He was hoping to end up in Rome, but he'd come to Jerusalem. When he was in Jerusalem, he was arrested. He was in prison in Caesarea for two years, no doubt chafing at the bit to get away.

And then he is sent away to Rome because he appeals to Caesar. He is sent away to Rome as a prisoner. And that's where we pick it up this morning. Paul, along with Luke, and with another man called Aristarchus, who was one of those who had accompanied Paul to Jerusalem, they joined the boat that is going ultimately towards Rome.

I always like a good map. So let's put a map up and we'll walk through it just to get a feel for the journeys of Paul. And his companions start off at the bottom right in Caesarea, and they're heading up to the top left, which is Rome.

[3 : 49] So first of all, they're on probably a relatively small ship that takes them around the coast, around the top of Cyprus, and they come to this place called Myra.

Relatively uneventful part of the journey, I think, although they're the first signs of bad weather, of stormy weather, as they make that bit of the journey. But that is the relatively straightforward bit.

Now, the boat they were on was probably quite a small boat. It wasn't one that would either be going to Rome or would be suitable for going to Rome. So they then pick up a much bigger boat at the port there.

And that's where their problems begin. So the idea would have been they would have gone west, so gone left in the map there. But actually what happens is they get into really stormy weather, and they have to head south, and they end up in Crete.

Now, a big part of the problem with that is that they were running against a very tight deadline. If you're sailing in the Mediterranean, there are parts of the year when it's safe to sail, and there are parts of the year when it's not safe to sail.

[5 : 03] And Paul and his companions landed in Crete just about the time when it was becoming unsafe to sail. He refers, you may have noticed in the passage, to it being after the Day of Atonement.

It was probably early October. And it was getting to the point where it was going to be very stormy weather on the seas, and you probably didn't want to be making that hop from Crete over towards Italy, probably Sicily initially.

And so there was a decision to make. They were in a place in Crete that wasn't a very good harbour, it wasn't in many ways a very safe harbour, and the question was how much further could they get before the weather set in.

And Paul says, don't try it. Just stay here. If you go from here, the ship's going to get destroyed. There will probably be loss of life. And at that point, Paul is outnumbered.

Paul, remember, is a prisoner. We'll come back to that. He's a prisoner, so really has no status at all on the boat. So Paul says, don't go. But the captain and the centurion who's looking after Paul and the prisoners, they decide they're going to go along the coast of Crete, probably a distance of about 40 miles, and find somewhere that's a bit more suitable, and then stay there for the winter.

[6 : 18] That place is called Phoenix, if you can see there on the map of Crete. So it wasn't a very big distance they were planning to go. They were going to go about 40 miles.

They ended up traveling about 600 miles. 600 miles in a boat that was totally out of control. They didn't know where they were. There was nothing they could do to help themselves.

They were just drifting along at sea. And they did a number of things to try and help the situation.

They came behind a small island that's talked about in the passage.

They took the lifeboat onto the ship. The lifeboat would probably have been dangling behind the ship, being towed along by the ship. So they took it on so that it was a bit more secure. They tied ropes around the ship to prevent it from falling to pieces.

Eventually, they started throwing things out of the ship and lowering the anchors to prevent them drifting towards Africa. So you just see the bottom of the map is the north coast of Africa, where there were some really dangerous sandbanks and rocks where they might have got destroyed.

[7 : 23] But basically, they don't know where they are and they don't know what's going to happen. They're in a huge storm at sea. It's dark all the time. The wind is blowing.

The rain is falling down. And it's a desperate situation. And they're all just about giving up hope when Paul intervenes and says, an angel of the Lord has come to me and he's revealed we're all going to be saved.

We'll wash up on some island. And that island, of course, turns out to be Malta, down towards the bottom left, the southwest on the map that's on the screen.

So they end up in Malta, but not in a straightforward way. They approach it at night. They recognize that they're coming to land and the sailors think, great, this is our chance.

We'll get the life boat and we'll go away. We'll save ourselves and just leave the rest to whatever happens to them. Paul thwarts that plan and they all end up together coming towards Malta, but they get stuck on a sandbank and the last little bit, they have to swim.

[8 : 32] Really terrifying experience for everybody. And yet an experience where we can see that God is ultimately in control. 276 people left the port on that ship.

Despite everything that happened, 276 people arrived in Malta, all of them safe. We then in Malta have the story of a number of things that happened to Paul.

As he was helping to get wood, a snake came out of the wood and extremely bit him, but didn't do him any harm. He was able to heal Publius' servant, the chief man on the island and do many other miracles as well.

And then the final bit, they wait three months in Malta and the last bit is pretty straightforward. They head first for Sicily, then for the bottom of Italy and work their way up. Last bit on foot and they're accompanied by some of the Roman Christians for the last part.

So that briefly is what happened. That is how Paul got from Caesarea, from the land where he came from, right up to Rome at the end.

[9 : 42] Not as expected. But as I said, there are two things that really struck me as I was reading this passage. And we're going to start by thinking about Paul's unexpected influence.

Now just think about the situation here. You've got Paul. He's a prisoner. He's in chains. Whether he was in chains all the time in the ship, we don't know. He might well have been chained to a soldier, more or less continuously.

Paul is a prisoner. No status at all on this ship. Yes, he was probably recognized as a celebrity prisoner, if you like, not just a normal murderer, robber or something like that.

Nevertheless, he has no formal status on the ship. And yet again and again, as you read through, it seems to be Paul who's actually in control here.

He's the one who's able to identify what's happening, to think through the situations and give wise advice, who has God on his side and receives messages from God, and who ultimately is the one who can give the assurance that they'll be brought safely to land and to do the things that bring it about.

[10 : 53] This man who is a prisoner, who is in that sense the lowest of the low on the ship, is ultimately the person who is able to save everyone there with God's help and to bring them to land.

And we might say, well, why is that? And how does that impact on us? And I think what came to me over the last few days is the opportunities that we too have to be influences for good, to be representatives of God, even when we're positions where we don't have a given authority, where we're not in a position of power.

Even if at work, we're in a relatively junior position, even if in our neighbourhood, we're not particularly influential or well-known, even in the church, if we're not in the leadership.

There are opportunities to be good representatives of God and to be influences on others. So let's just talk about a few things here. The first thing I think we notice about Paul is he has a very attractive character.

Did you notice by the time they got to Sidon, which wasn't very far away from Caesarea, he had so impressed the centurion that the centurion was happy for this prisoner to go and to meet the people, the Christians in Sidon.

[12 : 21] As you go in the boat, you can see respect building for Paul as time goes on. The people liked him, people took to him. And then when they came to Malta, what's happened? Paul was helping them to gather the wood.

He wasn't saying, well, I'm above this or I'm a prisoner, I shouldn't have to do that. Paul was pulling his weight, helping the people on the island, and then later helping them when they were ill.

So at the end, they were really honoring him and they really were attracted to him. Paul had a very attractive character. And that should be the case of us too, if we're Christians, that we should be demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit that Paul talks about in Galatians.

And we should be people who others can look up to and can think, yes, there's someone I can respect, someone who shows virtuous character, someone who is friendly and helpful.

We should be attractive to others. Now, there will be times when we can live like that. And just because we're Christians, people will be opposed to us and will try to do us down.

[13 : 30] But we have a duty to live as we can for the Lord Jesus. There's a lovely verse in 1 Peter 3, which talks about the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.

I like that. The unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. And that's what we, if we're Christians, should seek to have as we seek to emulate and to learn from the character of the Lord Jesus.

So Paul had an attractive character. Second thing Paul clearly had was personal authority. When Paul spoke, people listened.

Now, in this case, it's helped that the first time he spoke, he was right. He warned them of danger. And there was danger. And so they weren't so quick to dismiss him other times. But Paul had authority.

Paul was able to say with authority, you will be saved. No one will die on this boat. Paul was able to say, we all need to eat food now. We haven't been eating for the last week because it's been so

dreadful.

[14 : 34] We've been so tense and perhaps seasick. Now is the time we need to eat because as we come to land, we'll need strength. Paul is able to see and to say that the sailors are about to abandon ship and leave everyone behind.

And the centurion listens to him and acts on it. Paul is a man who, as you go through, you can see that he has personal authority.

And that's something that is good for us to have as well. That people know that we're those who are worth listening to. When we say things, we don't say them to be unhelpful or to be spiteful or to do people down.

We say things that are designed to help and to encourage and to move things forward. And if we're like that, people will listen to us.

We may not be the most talkative. We may not be the most loud. But if when we speak, people can see, yes, that is something that is worth hearing, then when we have something really important to say, we will do it with authority and people will listen to us as they did to Paul.

[15 : 48] Peter writes, same chapter referred to before, chapter 3, always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect.

I think that's a large part of the secret of gaining authority to show gentleness and respect, but to speak in a way which people believe and they understand that you have the right to say it.

One of my appraisals and work, one of the quite surprising things my boss said to me one time was he said, you're the conscience of the department. I had no idea that he thought like that.

Now it wasn't that I'd been going around saying, I'm a Christian, you can't do this, you can't do that and we must act in this way. But I think what he felt was I was someone who had the interests of customers at heart and sometimes would say, okay, that may seem commercially good but it's not good for our customers, it's probably not the right thing to do.

And so he felt that I had something worthwhile to contribute that when I spoke in these circumstances I had authority and whether he was right or not I don't know but that was his impression.

[17 : 05] And I think all of us, wherever we are, if we are careful in what we say and if we try to be helpful and positive then we will gain authority.

One of the things worth noting on Paul's authority, Paul's authority was used particularly to express a message of hope. This reassurance that everyone would be saved if they acted in the way that he suggested they should.

His was a message, yes, God is with us, God can help us, you can have hope for the future. And perhaps for us, one of the great opportunities to speak with authority is when people are going through difficult situations, when they're struggling with life and when they're looking ahead and saying, I don't know what's going to happen, we really don't have any hope.

That was the situation on this boat here. Well, we have a great message of hope through the Lord Jesus. That Jesus came into this world, that he lived, that he died for our sins and that through him we can have eternal life.

But more than that, through him in this life we can know his peace and his presence and his guidance. And even in the most difficult times we can have hope through the Lord Jesus.

[18 : 25] And that's a message we can give with authority. We can give it with the authority of the Bible. That there is hope for those who may appear hopeless. And however bad someone's situation, the Lord Jesus is able to help and to strengthen them.

Third thing I suggest that Paul gives here is practical wisdom. Now there is some miraculous stuff and we'll come on to that. But actually a lot of what Paul says is just common sense and experience.

Why did Paul think it wasn't safe to sail between the harbours in Crete? There's no indication here that it was because he'd had some divine intervention or seen a vision at that stage.

But Paul was a very seasoned seaman. He tells us in 1 Corinthians that he'd been shipwrecked three times before this and had spent a day and a night adrift at sea.

He knew what the Mediterranean was like. He knew the dangers that were present there probably even more than the sailors on that boat.

[19 : 33] And he used that as practical wisdom to say, really, you shouldn't be doing that. He had the practical nous and understanding to recognise that when the sailors were about to leave and were saying, oh, we're just getting lifeboats, that actually what they were doing was planning to run away and to leave the others behind.

He had the common sense to think, well, if people are going to have to swim potentially towards the shore, they need to have a bit of strength, so they need to eat. He demonstrated practical wisdom in the situation.

And we need to as well. Christian life is not all about God giving us great guidance and help and showing us clearly the way ahead.

God has given us the powers of observation. And as we go through life and as we learn often from bitter experience what works well, what doesn't work well, what should and shouldn't be done, then God gives us the common sense and the wisdom to put that into practice.

To learn from experience and to make sound judgements. And he expects us to do that. I was reminded of the parable of the talents and to some extent I think that's what that is about.

[20 : 52] People who've been given, the servants who've been given, some of them have a lot of money, some of them not very much money, but the question is what good, what use do you make of the things you've been given?

And we can apply that to spiritual gifts and that's perfectly relevant. I think it also applies to what God has given us in our intellect, in our practical skills, in our people skills, that we should use these and day to day we should show the kind of practical wisdom that Paul did.

Fourthly though, there is spiritual power. So the first three are really things about our character and what we do and what we say. But we need to know that without God's power and God's strength with us, then we are powerless.

And throughout this passage again, you see Paul's reliance on God. The angel appears to him. That is the thing that gives Paul the real assurance that no one will be lost.

Now Paul already knew he was going to make it to Rome. God had already told him that but this assurance that no one would be lost, that came by divine intervention by the angel. When they get him to the island of Malta, when Paul is saved from the snake, when he's able to heal others, that is again divine intervention that is spiritual power.

[22 : 15] Now we may not see angels. We may not be able to survive being poisoned or to heal others miraculously. But we too need God's power in our lives as we seek to serve him.

Because without God's power, then nothing that we try to do will be effective. The greatest miracle of all is when someone comes to know and trust the Lord Jesus and passes from death to life.

And we know that we can't do that. We have a part to play as Christians in talking to others about the Lord Jesus, in helping them to understand the glorious message of salvation.

But ultimately, unless we've got spiritual power, unless we're relying on God, then it will be useless. Paul displayed spiritual power.

And then finally, the last thing that struck me in this context here was that Paul had an appropriate witness on board that ship.

[23 : 17] Now I'm sure that Paul talked to them about the Lord Jesus, about the death of Jesus, about why Paul was in chains, and the importance to him of telling others the gospel message.

But that's not recorded in this passage. But there are a few things that are recorded that are really just Paul talking about his experience or doing things that should come naturally to us as Christians. So he says, when he says that the ship is all going to be saved, he makes it clear that that's because he's had a vision of an angel and he's been told that direct from God.

When he gives food to those on the ship, what does he do? What do Christians naturally do when we have food? He gives thanks to God for it. And I'm sure in quite an unobtrusive way and yet a very powerful way, Paul would give thanks to God that he was going to save them and that he had provided for those on the ship.

When Publius needs the miracle of healing, then Paul prays and prays, I think, quite publicly for that healing.

[24 : 28] Doing things which as Christians should come naturally to us, not pushing forward and in what some would consider an objectionable way, always hammering the message of the gospel.

We need to tell people the gospel but we also need to witness just in a quiet way of our experience of God, of the fact that we do like to thank God for what he's given to us, particularly in practicing

grace around mealtimes and in praying for each other and praying particularly for those who are ill. We need to have, like Paul, an appropriate witness. And if we have all these things, if we have an attractive character, personal authority, practical wisdom, spiritual power, an appropriate witness, then we can have an influence that is far beyond any formal power or control that we have. people will respect us and people will be drawn to the Lord Jesus through us. As I said, sometimes they will turn against the Lord, sometimes they will turn against us and that is part of living in a sinful world.

But we need to show this kind of character and have this kind of influence if we are to be good witnesses for the Lord Jesus and to be a real help to others, particularly in coming to know him.

[25 : 54] So that's Paul's unexpected influence. Now fairly briefly, let me talk about God's unexpected providence which I think is the other key theme in this passage.

The last third of the book of Acts roughly is a description of Paul's journey to Rome. It kind of mirrors the gospel where the last third of Luke's gospel is the Lord's journey to Jerusalem and the cross and resurrection.

The last third broadly of Acts is Paul's journey to Rome, starting out with the collection that he made in the Gentile churches, then the journey to Jerusalem and then from there to Rome.

Now Paul undoubtedly thought or very likely thought that he would collect the money from the Gentiles to help the Christians in Judea who were going through a time of difficulty, a time of famine. He'd go to Jerusalem, he'd spend some time with the Christians there and then he would go on to Rome and effectively retrace his steps, head for Rome and then ultimately from Rome head to Spain which is the next place that he planned to evangelize.

And Paul maybe had it fairly clear in his head, God is providing a way for me to help the Christians in Jerusalem and then to go and encourage the Christians in Rome and then to go and reach those who don't yet know the gospel in Spain.

[27 : 16] But it turned out very differently. Paul ended up two years in prison, two years which he must have been really thinking am I ever going to get to Rome?

What's happening here? Why am I like this? He's taken on a ship in chains, he's taken to Rome as a prisoner, not as a free man and then he gets caught up in this terrible storm where it looks as if everyone is going to die.

Now God had confirmed to Paul way back in chapter 23, I think that's about two weeks ago we looked at that, that he would go to Rome, but he's languished in prison, he's in chains and he's in a shipwreck.

And God's unexpected providence means that he may not always protect us from the storm. In the gospel we have the story, more than one story of the Lord Jesus calming storms, of the disciples being saved from the storm and being able to sail to shore.

And sometimes God does that. Sometimes we come across a situation in life which is very difficult and we pray about it and God very quickly intervenes and things return to normal.

[28 : 30] We can see him working in it. But often and perhaps more often we go through the storm and are not protected from being in it.

Whether it is because we live in a fallen world and we will inevitably face opposition as Christians to the gospel as Paul did and a lot of what's happened to Paul here is a result of the Jews turning against him and wanting to get rid of him.

We will see opposition if we stand for the Lord Jesus and some people will not accept the message. Or it may be again a result of being in a fallen world that not through any man-made thing but things turn against us.

Paul being caught up in the storm perhaps many people being caught up in illness or in difficult family circumstances and we face storms in our lives and God allows us to go through them. Sometimes he protects us from them often he doesn't and he lets us go through them so that we will grow in our character as Christians so that we will become more dependent on him and it tests and ultimately strengthens our faith.

[29 : 47] I think over the last two or three years it's been very evident in this church that a lot of generally older people who have been pillars of the church for many years have gone through extremely difficult circumstances.

I won't convince them but many of us will know what they are. They've gone through times of real illness and of sadness and of difficulty. And I look at these people who are not just brothers and

sisters in Christ I would say they're more like uncles and aunts in Christ who have influenced me who have cared for me who have encouraged me and you think well why is it happening? Why are these people suffering so much? And the answer is quite simply that all of us are subject to the storms of life and perhaps those who suffer the most and who come through it that is happening so that the strength of their faith the goal of their commitment to the Lord Jesus is made plain to everyone and yes it keeps them depending on the Lord Jesus it helps them to grow further in their character helps them to look forward even more to when they will go home to be in heaven with the Lord Jesus but all of us will face the storms at one point or another in our lives and God will not always protect us from getting into the storm and of course he didn't protect his own son from the storm either that the Lord Jesus suffered much more than we ever will when he went to the cross at Calvary and took the punishment for our sins but if God won't protect us always from the storm he will always protect us through the storm if we're trusting in him he will bring us out on the other side better off better Christians and able to look back and to thank him for his grace and his providence Paul wouldn't have chosen I'm sure to go to Rome the way he did and yet the way he went to Rome gave him opportunities there were opportunities on the ship for witness and to demonstrate the great power and wisdom of God there was the opportunity in Malta that three months there such a contrast when he was in prison back in Caesarea three months in Malta where people were coming to him and he was able to heal and he was able to witness to the saving power of the Lord Jesus and then as he comes towards Rome when the Christians come out perhaps having heard of the difficulty of his journey Paul is encouraged and strengthened by God's people being there and being there to help him Paul knew he was going to reach Rome as we said earlier because he trusted God's promise and he knew he could rely on God's presence in the worst of times and for us too that's the case if we are going through difficult if you are going through a difficult time at the moment be assured that God will be with you and if you trust him he will bring you through it be assured that his promises are always secure and if we read the Bible we come across a promise of God there we can lay hold on it and we can take comfort and strength from it yes we'll go through the storm but God will be with us in the storm and God will protect us through the storm perhaps the second most famous storm in Christian history took place not between

Crete and Malta but off the coast of Ireland John Newton having been a slave himself in Africa was now a slave trader and off the Galway coast his ship went into a dreadful storm and the sailors on the ship feared for their lives and they spent a whole night trying to keep the ship from sinking not sure exactly what they were doing probably bailing water out and making everything secure and desperate for their lives and in his desperation John Newton who wasn't a Christian at that stage called on God for mercy and God did bring him through the storm and everyone else on the boat with him now at that point John Newton didn't immediately become a Christian everything was straightforward from then on but that was the first step in John Newton beginning to understand the grace of God and ultimately coming to know God and becoming a vicar down in

[34 : 33] Olney and John Newton of course was a very famous hymn writer we sang a version of one of his hymns right at the beginning Amazing Grace I want to end with a couple of verses from another of John Newton's hymn that is perhaps not so well known but I think directly relates to his experience of the storm and perhaps can help us as we go through storms in life here's what John Newton says be gone unbelief my saviour is near and for my relief will surely appear by prayer let me wrestle and he will perform with Christ in the vessel I smile at the storm since all that I meet shall work for my good the bitterest sweet the medicine food though painful at present will cease before long and then oh how pleasant the conqueror's song

I think the smiling there is symbolic rather than literal but you get the meaning if we have the Lord Jesus with us we can come through the storms of life and we can emerge at the end stronger we can be conquerors we can go knowing that God has preserved us and God has a place for us in heaven let's pray together Father we thank you for your word to us this morning we thank you for this passage that is in many ways so tense and exciting but also which brings out so much your goodness your providence and the responsibilities too that we have to influence others and to be forces for good and witnesses for the Lord Jesus in our world help us as we go into the coming weeks that we may face the storms of life with confidence that you are in control and that we may demonstrate the character and power of the Lord Jesus that we may be forces for good and may be witnesses to the saving power of Jesus to those around us we take time again to remember as we did earlier those who are going through the most difficult of times at the moment for those who are

in hospital for those who are in suffering at home for those whose future might appear uncertain and we pray as they go through the storm that they may know your presence with them and may be able to lay hold on your promises and on the fact that you are in control of everything we thank you for your presence this morning we commit ourselves to you now in the name of the Lord Jesus Amen