

Ministry in Natural Disaster

Life Question: *How can I hold things together when the world seems to be falling apart?*

Background Passage: Acts 27:1–28:10

Focal Passage: Acts 27:14, 20, 22-25, 33-36; 28:2, 7-10

Scripture Outline

Disaster Strikes (Acts 27:14,20)

Encouragement Given (Acts 27:22-25)

Physical Needs Attended (Acts 27:33-36)

Kindness Shown (Acts 28:2,7-10)

Biblical Setting: Defending himself against the Jews' false accusations, Paul appealed to stand trial before Caesar. Festus granted Paul's appeal and sent him to Rome. Along the way Paul's shipwrecked off the coast of Malta. After spending the winter in Malta, the voyage to Rome resumed.

Biblical Truth: Believers who rely on God's strength can help others trust Him during times of natural disaster.

Life Impact: To help you help others during times of natural disaster

A study of the shipwreck Paul and his companions endured will help us trust God when we face natural disasters, like the tornado that devastated Moore, Oklahoma on Monday, May 20, 2013. We also can learn from this study how to encourage and minister to others who encounter natural disasters.

Discussion Questions:

- *How do people normally react when faced with a natural disaster?*
- *Where can a person find strength to hold things together when his or her world seems to be falling apart?*

Disaster Strikes (Acts 27:14, 20)

¹⁴ **But not long afterward, a fierce wind called the “northeaster” rushed down from the island. ...**

²⁰ **For many days neither sun nor stars appeared, and the severe storm kept raging. Finally all hope that we would be saved was disappearing.**

Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem. Falsely accused by the Jewish religious leaders, he was transferred to Caesarea for trial. As a Roman citizen, Paul had the right to have the emperor in Rome hear his case, so he appealed to Caesar. Festus granted Paul's appeal. Festus and King Agrippa later agreed that Paul could be set free, but because of his appeal to Caesar they had to send him on to Rome.

Acts 27–28 gives the details of Paul's journey to Rome. Luke used the terms *we* and *us* repeatedly in the chapters because he accompanied Paul and was an eyewitness to the events. He was inspired to give us many specific details about this journey, an exciting account of shipwreck survivors. Periodically we are reminded that shipwrecks can be deadly. Luke's account also reminds us that God can protect us during natural disasters.

Ancient ships normally stayed close to coastlines. These ships sailed in the open sea only when necessary. Paul's ship sailed from Caesarea to the southern coast of Asia Minor. Then it sailed near the island of Crete (27:1-8). At Fair Havens, a port on Crete, the ship's leaders discussed what to do next. Normally ships did not sail during the early fall, and all sailing ceased from November to February. The "Fast" (v. 9) was the Jewish Day of Atonement, which occurred in late September or early October.

Paul warned the leaders that further travel would be disastrous; they could lose the ship and cargo and also their lives (v. 10). The Roman centurion who was taking Paul to Rome listened to "the pilot" and "owner of the ship" rather than to Paul (v. 11). The leaders decided to try to reach Phoenix, a better harbor on Crete (v. 12).

Verse 14. As the ship sailed toward Phoenix, a gentle breeze soon turned into a **fierce wind**. The Greek word translated by the phrase refers to a severe swirling wind typical of cyclones or hurricanes. This *wind* had earned the nickname **the northeaster**, identifying a severe winter storm on the Mediterranean Sea.

The *wind* blew the ship farther west, and it passed the island of Cauda (27:16). The sailors took all the precautions they could, but the situation was desperate. On the storm's third day, they threw the tackle overboard.

Verse 20. The situation was so grim during the storm that **all hope that they would be saved was disappearing**. Able to see **neither sun nor stars**, the sailors could not determine the ship's position.

Discussion Questions (Acts 27:14, 20)

- *What happened to Paul and his shipmates?*
- *What was the response of the passengers and crew?*
- *Does being a Christian make you exempt from problems in life?*
- *Why then do some people blame God and turn away from Him when disaster strikes?*
- *What differences have you observed between the way a Christian and a non-Christian react when faced with a natural disaster?*

Encouragement Given (Acts 27:22-25)

²² **Now I urge you to take courage, because there will be no loss of any of your lives, but only of the ship.** ²³ **For this night an angel of the God I belong to and serve stood by me,** ²⁴ **and said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul. You must stand before Caesar. And, look! God has graciously given you all those who are sailing with you.'** ²⁵ **Therefore, take courage, men, because I believe God that it will be just the way it was told to me.**

Verses 22-25. The people on board the ship had felt so desperate that they had not eaten a solid meal for several days. Paul told them they should have listened to his advice at Fair Havens (27:21). Rather than gloat over his accurate prediction, however, Paul encouraged them. He assured them no one would die in the shipwreck. Paul was giving them bad news and good news: the bad news was that the ship would crash, but the good news was that everyone would survive the wreck.

Paul knew what would happen because **an angel of the God** whom he served had appeared to him the night before. The Greek word rendered *angel* means "messenger" and occasionally was used for a human messenger. In this context, Paul clearly meant a heavenly messenger. Earlier Paul had received an encouraging message from the Lord (23:11), but this time God sent an *angel*.

The *angel* had assured Paul that the apostle would appear **before Caesar** in Rome. Paul was not to **be afraid**. God would not spare Paul only; He would deliver everyone on the ship.

Paul urged all on the ship to **take courage**. His hope was based on his relationship with God. His faith in God assured him that God would keep His word.

Christians today face natural disasters. We wisely take precautions, but ultimately we trust God. He does not always protect us from these disasters, but He always is present to support and encourage. As limited human beings, we cannot understand completely why natural disasters occur, but we can share Paul's confidence that God guides the course of history and nature. Sometimes, as in this account, God will intervene to spare people.

Discussion Questions (Acts 27:22-25)

- *What was Paul's response to the disaster?*
- *Do you think God sometimes intervenes to save people or property during a natural disaster? Explain your answer.*
- *If God does not choose to spare us from misfortune in this life, does that mean He loves us any less?*
- *Even in the midst of a natural disaster, where can we find hope and encouragement?*

Physical Needs Attended (Acts 27:33-36)

³³ When it was about daylight, Paul urged them all to take food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been waiting and going without food, having eaten nothing." ³⁴ Therefore I urge you to take some food. For this has to do with your survival, since none of you will lose a hair from your head." ³⁵ After he said these things and had taken some bread, he gave thanks to God in the presence of all of them, and when he broke it, he began to eat. ³⁶ They all became encouraged and took food themselves.

Verses 33-34. Paul told everyone the ship would "run aground on some island" (27:26). The storm raged for 14 days, with the ship driven farther and farther west. "The Adriatic Sea" (v. 27) is called the Ionian Sea today. By taking soundings in the sea, the sailors realized they were getting closer to land. Knowing that they would crash soon, they dropped the ship's anchors and waited for daylight (vv. 28-29). Some sailors were so desperate they tried to abandon ship. They started to lower the lifeboat, but Paul alerted the centurion and soldiers to the plot. Paul warned that if these sailors left the ship, the people on board would not be saved. The soldiers cut the ropes to the lifeboat and it fell into the sea empty (vv. 30-32).

Paul knew that everyone had been so preoccupied with the ship's fate that they had not eaten for fourteen days, the period the storm had driven the ship off-course. Some Bible students suggest that the phrase **having eaten nothing** refers to not having had a regular meal, not the total absence of food. Today people who are anxious or distraught sometimes go for days without eating. Two weeks is a lengthy time to skip food completely!

Paul wisely urged the people to eat to have strength to face the shipwreck. Again, he combined good news and bad news. The ship still would crash, but no one would die in the shipwreck. None would even **lose a hair from his head**. Typically in a shipwreck many people are injured and some die. Paul knew that in this case God would protect them all.

Verses 35-36. To show the others that he could be trusted, Paul **began to eat**. Luke's description of Paul's meal has prompted discussion among some Bible scholars. Some think Paul's thanksgiving to God implies he observed the Lord's Supper. Others suggest that Paul followed a common Jewish and Christian custom of giving thanks before a meal.

By thanking God before he ate his **bread**, Paul reminded everyone that his God would protect them when they crashed. They needed to attend to their physical needs by taking nourishment, but they also needed to know that God was their ultimate Savior.

Everyone was **encouraged** by Paul's words and actions, and they also **took food themselves**. They probably still felt a little anxious. Paul's confidence in his God was contagious, however, and they prepared for the wreck by eating after 14 days without nourishment.

Today we trust God for protection in natural disasters, but we also wisely take precautions. After a series of tornadoes devastated central Oklahoma in May 1999, several people built saferooms in their houses. These rooms had extra reinforcement in the ceilings and walls, making them less vulnerable to tornadoes. Other people bought special radios that would give them advance warnings from weather experts about the approach of storms.

People who take wise precautions are not distrusting God. These Christians believe that God has given humans the creativity and knowledge to develop technology such as radar. Trusting God does not mean standing in the path of a tornado, presuming that He will protect us!

Discussion Questions (Acts 27:33-36)

- *How did Paul minister to his shipmates?*
- *In the midst of their disaster at sea, Paul stopped to pray.*
- *When you face disasters today, do your actions point others to God or away from Him? Explain.*
- *Should we take precautions to protect ourselves when faced with a natural disaster? Do such precautions mean we do not trust God to protect us?*

Kindness Shown (Acts 28:2,7-10)

² The local people showed us extraordinary kindness, for they lit a fire and took us all in, since it was raining and cold. ... ⁷ Now in the area around that place was an estate belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us hospitably for three days. ⁸ Publius's father was in bed suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went to him, and praying and laying his hands on him, he healed him. ⁹ After this, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. ¹⁰ So they heaped many honors on us, and when we sailed, they gave us what we needed.

Everyone on board the ship followed Paul's advice to eat before the ship crashed. Luke noted that 276 people were on board (v. 37). The leftover grain was thrown overboard.

In the morning the people on the ship could see the island they were near, and they decided to try to reach a bay on the coast. They cut the ropes to the anchors so the ship would move again and hoisted a sail. The ship hit a sandbar and ran aground. The pounding of the waves started to destroy the ship (vv. 39-41).

The Roman soldiers were worried that Paul and the other prisoners would try to escape, so they planned to kill them. The centurion accompanying Paul intervened, however, and no one was executed (vv. 42-43). People who could swim jumped off the ship and swam to shore, while the others grabbed onto pieces of the ship and headed to shore. The result was that "everyone reached land in safety" (v. 44). Paul's prediction that everyone would survive had been fulfilled!

The ship had crashed on the island of Malta (28:1), an island south of Sicily and Italy. The ship had been blown several hundred miles west of Crete, where the people on board earlier had considered spending the winter.

Verse 2. The natives on Malta warmly received Paul and the other survivors of the shipwreck. Their building a bonfire illustrated their **extraordinary kindness**. The survivors were chilled from being in the sea, and **it was raining and cold**. **The local people** were not Christians, but they demonstrated hospitality to their unexpected visitors. These local people attended to the survivors' immediate needs by building **a fire** to warm them.

Paul helped by gathering wood and putting it on the fire. A “viper”—a poisonous snake—came out of the heat and bit Paul on the hand (v. 3). The natives assumed that, because Paul was a criminal, divine justice had caught up with him (v. 4). Even though Paul had survived the shipwreck, they believed he would die from the snakebite. Paul did not die, however, and shook off the snake. The local people were astounded at his surviving the snakebite and the shipwreck; they thought he must be a god (vv. 5-6).

Verses 7-10. The **leading man** on Malta was **Publius**. He graciously **welcomed** Paul and others into his home. Luke used **us**, so we know that at least Paul and some other Christians were invited to the official's home. They stayed for **three days**.

Publius's **father** was ill, and Paul **healed him**. Jesus had often healed people during His public ministry. His disciples also were empowered to heal the sick. Simon Peter had healed a crippled man in Jerusalem (3:1-10). Paul prayed and put his hands on Publius's father and he was well. The news of this miracle spread quickly, and others **on the island who had diseases also came and were cured**.

Paul and the others spent three months on Malta (v. 11). They could not sail during the winter, but in the spring a ship picked up all the survivors and took them to Italy. While on Malta, Luke noted that the local people attended to their long-term needs: **they gave us what we needed** (v. 10). The survivors were not destitute on the island. The local people had welcomed them and provided for their immediate needs—a fire and food. As they prepared for their journey to Italy, the local people gave them what they needed.

Some Christians might be surprised at Luke's careful record of the natives' hospitality. Sometimes we draw such a sharp contrast between Christian and non-Christian behavior we forget that some unbelievers do good deeds. As a Christian, Paul earlier had expressed concern for everyone on the ship. He encouraged them to eat and to prepare for the shipwreck. The islanders were not Christians, but they also demonstrated concern for the survivors' physical well-being. Hospitality, as Publius demonstrated, is a value shared by many groups of people. Some people avoid strangers so much that they fail to reach out to the victims of disasters. Or they are concerned only about disaster victims in their towns. From both Paul and the natives on Malta, Christians can learn that ministering to victims of natural disasters is crucial. Short-term and long-term needs must be met. We should be sensitive to disaster victims around the world.

If a tornado struck your neighborhood and your house was not harmed, what could you do to help others? You could act to meet short-term needs. If you have extra food, clothing, blankets, and other necessities, you could share these with your neighbors. You might transport people to shelters or medical care. A knowledge of basic first aid also would be invaluable.

Some large churches, associations, and state conventions have developed programs to assist in disaster relief. Retired people especially can take off quickly to travel to the site of a disaster.

If you cannot provide direct assistance to victims of a natural disaster, you can contribute money to disaster-relief teams to help them assemble the equipment and supplies they need and train their members. Of course, prayer is always appropriate in crises.

Discussion Questions (Acts 28:2, 7-10)

- *What have I done to help victims of a natural disaster? What has my church done?*
- *What can we, as Christians, offer that is different from the assistance provided by non-Christians?*

A prayer for this lesson: *Lord, help me to be Your agent in times of natural disaster through the use of my voice, my hands, my feet, my resources, and my presence in helping others in Your name. Amen.*

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