

THE PERFECT STORM II

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Acts 27:27-38

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In January of 2012, Captain Francesco Schettino was at the helm of his cruise ship, the *Costa Concordia*, with his female dance companion at his side--something out of the ordinary for the bridge. By his own admission, Francesco made the fatal decision to try to impress the passengers of the ship with how closely he could sail to the Tuscan island of Giglio, and he subsequently ran the ship aground. Crashed upon the rocks, the ship immediately took on water and listed to the side. The captain then abandoned ship leaving more than 4,200 people on board. He jumped into one of the first life boats in order to get himself to safety. Meanwhile, thirty-two passengers died in the wreck.

On February 11, 2015, he was found guilty of manslaughter and other charges related to this fatal collision. He was sentenced to sixteen years in prison and ordered to pay all court costs. Many considered this a light sentence.

Historically, it has been an unwritten seaman's law that the captain is always the last man to leave the ship and, if necessary, to go down with the ship. But in recent years, there have been several instances when ships' captains have proven to be less than honorable and have secretly abandoned ship.

How do you emotionally respond to stories of abandonment? I want you to hold these feelings on the back burner of your heart as we return to our study of **Acts 27** and the Apostle Paul's journey aboard a ship to Rome. We will see here a first century case of a ship's crew attempting to abandon ship and leave all the passengers aboard to fend for themselves.

Last week began our study of what I have called The Perfect Storm. This title is a modern day meteorologist's expression describing a situation in which there is a convergence of four powerful weather fronts causing typhonic conditions and towering waves at sea. To be caught in such a dire situation is indeed fearful.

As we worked our way through the passage, we noted that when we as human

beings find ourselves overwhelmed by life-threatening circumstances, our faith is really tested. Sometimes, even the greatest men and women of faith during such situations can be so overcome by their fears that they lose sight of the Lord and His promises. Such was the case for even the Apostle Paul. Hence, as we looked at last week's section of scripture, we saw lessons necessary to build up faith so that when storms strike us, although fear may knock us down momentarily, we won't be knocked out.

The storm that Paul and others on board ship were faced to endure lasted two weeks. Likewise, the type of storms we endure may last for days, weeks, months, or even years. Perfect storms in life are largely unpredictable. They rage on with seemingly no end in sight.

We learned last time that where you find yourself is not the result of an accident, and you are not alone. God is neither absent nor indifferent. You are precisely where He plans for you to be at this very moment, even if you are the cause of the storm you are in! No matter the precipitating factors, God could have calmed your storm at any point, but he hasn't. As a result, questions emerge as fears grow within. Panic thoughts make you uneasy.

How can you keep it together when such storms attack your soul? For example, what do you do when you're in the hospital, the lights are off, your family has left for the night and you are alone, and you are trying to process the news you were given? All is quiet except for your thoughts. How do you face tomorrow's fierce blast? Right then, it's just you and God and the unexpected waves of doubt slamming relentlessly against your soul. At that moment, how do you replace sheer panic for simple trust?

Or, what do you do when your mate walks out, you're left alone, and you're living in the backwash of months, even years, of consequences that maybe you caused by unfaithful decisions?

Perhaps angry, threatening storm clouds have begun to roll in at the office. Or maybe your future college education is in jeopardy due to poor grades or lack of funding? What do you do when life grows that bleak?

In managing the storms of life, we are called to trust in God. What does this look like? Let me remind you of just two points we ended with last time.

First, we said that trusting in God does not mean that you stop using common sense. As we will see again in our passage this morning, there are wise and proper things to do when the storms of life hit. One does not just sit down and wait for God to do everything. In fact, this morning we will see a nice blending between the sovereignty of God at work alongside the responsibility of men. Hence, when tough times come, we go to work, using common sense.

Secondly, we discussed last time that the best way to manage sailing through storms is to learn how to sail when the seas are calm. In other words, the best time to learn how to trust God and to become acquainted with His promises is when times are good. Now is the day for us to practice the discipline of getting alone with God on a daily basis to read His Word and to record what He has for us to learn. Now is the time for us to grasp those verses in the Bible that speak of promises to hold on to and directions to guide us to safe harbors.

To change the analogy, the only parachute we have to get us safely to the ground when we are in free fall is the Word of God. Our tendency is often to turn to another source for strength rather than the Word. Don't go there! The only source of stability that will guide us to a safe place, no matter how intense the guilt force winds blow, is God's written Word.

This morning, we will add a few more lessons as to what is necessary to trust God and how to manage life storms that unexpectedly threaten our journey. As we return to **Acts 27:27**, eleven days have passed between **verse 26** and **verse 27**. Until this point, nothing had really changed. It was eleven days and nights of fierce winds and towering waves driving the ship to who knows where. Because of the powerful northeastern winds, the ship was being blown on a southwesterly course. Without the ability to view the stars, they had no idea where they were. In fact, we aren't told that they were about to land on Malta until **28:1**. But with **verse 27**, a change takes place. We read:

²⁷But when the fourteenth night came, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors began to surmise that they were approaching some land. ²⁸They took

soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms [120 feet]; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found it to be fifteen fathoms [90 feet].²⁹ Fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak.³⁰ But as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship and had let down the ship's boat into the sea on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors from the bow,³¹ Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved."³² Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it fall away.

The distance between the islands of Clauda and Malta is about 476.6 nautical miles. It has been calculated that a first-century ship drifting at a rate of a one and a half miles per hour could cover this distance in thirteen days.¹ It is surmised that the sailors could hear the noise of the breakers on the rocky promontory located along the northeast shore of Malta. Imagine the fear that those sounds drove home even to the seasoned sailors. They weren't sure where they were; they just recognized the noise. It has been stated that storm breakers crashing on these rocks can be heard at a distance of a quarter mile. Hence, unable to see anything, they began to test the depth of the waters.² They quickly discovered that within the amount of time they threw a measured weighted lanyard to test the depth, they would lose thirty feet of depth. The bottom was rising up very fast. They were headed quickly for the rocks, less than four hundred yards away!

¹ Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953–2001). *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Vol. 17, p. 933). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

² Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953–2001). *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Vol. 17, p. 934). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

The crew cast four anchors from the stern of the vessel, two off each side, thus preventing the ship from completely swinging around. This held the ship in place while the crew wished for daybreak.³

The temptation to find safety ashore proved too much for some or all of the crew. They decided to leave the ship under the pretense of letting down anchors from the bow. We surmise that the pilot and the captain of the ship were among the sailors because of Paul's explanation to Julius, the Roman official in charge, that if those key sailors abandoned ship, nobody left aboard would survive. All of the sailors had abdicated their responsibility and now tried to forsake the other passengers by abandoning ship.

This is the third time during the course of the voyage that Paul spoke. Julius and the soldiers knew by now that Paul's word was true and ought not to be taken lightly. Hence they listened to Paul's word and responded appropriately. They cut the ropes to the lifeboat/tender, so that no one could leave. ("Hammarabi!" This is an African term I recently learned, and it means, "All for one and one for all!")

It's in these verses that I see the Biblical viewpoint regarding divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God knew that all on the vessel would be preserved. At the same time God's sovereignty did not discourage the necessary human effort and teamwork, even with unbelievers, for them to arrive on shore safe and sound.

At this time, the skies were still dark, but it was just prior to the early morning dawn. We read:

³³Until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing. ³⁴Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is

³ Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953–2001). *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Vol. 17, p. 934). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

for your preservation, for not a hair from the head of any of you will perish.”

³⁵Having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all, and he broke it and began to eat. ³⁶All of them [both pagans and believers] were encouraged, and they themselves also took food. ³⁷All of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons. ³⁸When they had eaten enough, they began to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea.

In contrast to the captain and his crew’s attempt to abandon ship, Paul’s crowning act of leadership occurred before dawn on this ship as it was anchored precariously in strange waters. The apostle stood on deck and addressed his fellow voyagers. Realizing that they had been on watch for the duration of the voyage, that they had lacked proper appetite for two weeks because of uncertainty and anxiety, and that they had not eaten a decent meal, he encouraged them to stop and take time to eat. He knew they had a lot of work to do shortly, and they needed the strength that would come from eating. Notice that Paul did not condemn the sailors for their cowardly attempts. Instead, the text states that “**all of them were encouraged and ate,**” including the crew who had just attempted to abandon them. In addition, as an act of grace, Paul publicly gave thanks to God for the food.

Do you feel embarrassed bowing your head to thank God for food in a public restaurant? I’m not suggesting that Christians need to put on a show every time they eat, or that one needs to give thanks out loud. You decide. But a simple humble bow and a silent prayer is appropriate. If you question that, just think about these verses, the audience of predominantly pagans, and the Apostle Paul off the coast of Malta. This is a great way to demonstrate trust in the Lord, to be salt and light in the midst of tough times, and to humble yourself before God and others in prayer.

Having eaten, all 276 were encouraged and went to work in a unified effort to save one another. Because of the storm, the ship may have taken on a great quantity of seawater; therefore, the men went to work lightening the vessel by dumping the cargo of wheat. Now riding higher on the waves, the ship would perhaps be able to cross sandbars or reefs and reach land.

³⁹When day came, they could not recognize the land; but they did observe a bay with a beach, and they resolved to drive the ship onto it if they could. ⁴⁰And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea while at the same time they were loosening the ropes of the rudders; and hoisting the foresail to the wind, they were heading for the beach.

You would think with 276 passengers and many who were sailors, that someone would have recognized this known island of Malta. But at least they could spot a bay and a beach. Hopefully, with the ship riding higher in the water, they could get themselves closer to the shore in case they had to swim.

At this point in the story, the mainsail of the ship was gone. They had been dragging behind them four anchors to slow down the drift. They now cut the ropes holding the anchors to the stern of the ship, untied the rudder that had been safely secured so as to not be ripped off in the violent waves of the storm, and raised a small foresail to power them slowly toward shore.

⁴¹But striking a reef where two seas met, they ran the vessel aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern began to be broken up by the force of the waves. ⁴²The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none of them would swim away and escape; ⁴³but the centurion, wanting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, ⁴⁴and the rest should follow, some on

planks and others on various things from the ship. And so it happened that they all were brought safely to land.

A large opening on the map of Malta is presently called St. Paul's Bay. The ship made it to the mouth of this bay where the Adriatic and Mediterranean seas meet. There is a beach to the north of the opening of the bay. The other areas of the larger bay are either rocky shores or inaccessible. An aerial view today of this bay and this cove shows that it is a perfect spot to head for safety in a storm. Somewhere between the opening of the bay and this cove the ship ran aground with its stern facing the incoming waves of the storm. This eventually broke the ship apart.

As soon as the ship was grounded, the soldiers intended to kill all prisoners on board, including Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus. The reason for this was that in ancient times, soldiers would forfeit their own lives should a prisoner in their guard escape. Roman law stipulated that the guard suffer the punishment of that prisoner. So, in the confusion of the shipwreck, the soldiers thought in terms of their personal safety and their eventual report to Rome.

However, the Roman official on board prevented the soldiers from killing the prisoners. Julius wished to express his thanks to Paul for giving leadership in the midst of the storm. Julius had seen the literal fulfillment of the divine prophecy that everyone aboard would find safety on an island even though the ship would be destroyed. He knew that God had granted Paul the lives of all the men on the ship. Sparing Paul's life meant sparing the lives of the other prisoners. Furthermore, during these wintry seasons, he also knew that no one would be able to escape from an island.

What a wonderful chapter to show a sovereign God still in control of the wind and the waves he had created millennia before. His divine sovereignty, his total providence, engineered the deliverance not only of Paul and his party, but more than 270 others.

Let's pause at this point to see what we can learn from this passage about managing the storms in our lives. What are some things we need to keep in mind as we move through tough times?

Over the years, I have noticed that a tendency of many people who are facing difficult times is to cut and run, like the sailors attempted to do. It's easier at the moment to abandon the ship of a troubled marriage than to face it and

work toward reconciliation. Furthermore, to try to do it alone without the unified help of others is risky. The passengers had to work together for all of them to arrive safely at their destination.

When we are in trouble, we need the counsel of others, the prayers of many prayer warriors, and words of encouragement from many friends who know the Lord and what His Word says in order to stay on course. I want to warn you against running away. Running away does not solve anything. Usually, it adds more pressure to a dire situation.

The first lesson in managing the storms of life so that you arrive safely on the other side of the storm is to work in unity with other believers, in accordance with the Word of God.

Secondly, when storms hit, our emotions can become so disturbed that we forget to eat or don't have the stomach for it. In addition, when we really need sleep, we don't sleep well. Paul realized that having gone through what they did for the previous fourteen days, everyone on board needed to be physically renewed. They needed to eat. Furthermore, he also knew they had a lot of work ahead of them in throwing the cargo of grain overboard. Before these folks ate, Paul prayed. The spiritual was first to begin renewal, and then the physical. There are times to fast, and there are times to stop fasting! In short, Paul models the point that to arrive safely on the other side of the storm, we need spiritual renewal as well and physical renewal.

There is a third lesson that can encourage us in the midst of facing a storm that probably won't have a really good outcome. Again, it is something we see the Apostle Paul modeling for us. When God encouraged Paul through the angel's promise not to be afraid and that all the people would survive, Paul didn't keep it to himself. Neither did he make everyone think that he was just a positive person, and that they all should keep a positive outlook as well. Instead, he used the situation to tell them about God, his trust in God, and the promise that God would spare all of their lives through this ordeal. In addition, when Paul encouraged them all to eat some bread, he could have thought, "These are pagan men. Why ask God's blessing on the food in front of such rough men?" Rather, he openly gave thanks to God in the presence of all.

In times of trial, people are especially open to spiritual things. When life is out of control and nothing seems to be working, people are open to hearing about a God who is in control. We should not hesitate to be bold to tell them about the true and living God and the eternal life that He offers them through His Son, Jesus Christ.

In short, the lesson that Paul models for us here is that if we will trust in God's sovereign care for us in life's storms, He will use us to bear witness to many.

God wants his people to be the salt of the earth and to let their influence pervade the society in which He in His providence has placed them. He didn't save us so as to give us a free ticket from the storms of life; but rather, He gives us a purpose and a ministry to others in the midst of the storm.

As we wrap up our teaching this morning, I'd like to offer as a prayer the words of this old hymn. I'm sure many of you will recognize it. As it is being played, pay close attention to the words on the screen. You will notice that there are four stanzas; three are dedicated to each person of the Trinity. The final stanza joins them together. As you listen to this hymn, think about the words and pray back the truth of those words to God as your personal praise for His sovereign salvation and protection over your life.

The Navy Hymn

Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

O Christ! Whose voice the waters heard
And hushed their raging at Thy word,
Who walkedst on the foaming deep,
And calm amidst its rage didst sleep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,

For those in peril on the sea!

Most Holy Spirit! Who didst brood
Upon the chaos dark and rude,
And bid its angry tumult cease,
And give, for wild confusion, peace;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

O Trinity of love and power!
Our brethren shield in danger's hour;
From rock and tempest, fire and foe,
Protect them wheresoe'er they go;
Thus evermore shall rise to Thee
Glad hymns of praise from land and sea.

William Whiting 1861

