

THE PERFECT STORM I

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Acts 27:13-26

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Writer Sebastien Junger, in his book *The Perfect Storm*, tells the tale of what modern day meteorologists consider a perfect storm. A perfect storm occurred in 1991 in the waters of the North Atlantic, when simultaneously volatile fronts from north, south, east, and west converged off the coast of Massachusetts. These storms produced such a threatening combination of hurricane force winds and towering waves that the entire east coast went scrambling for cover. Numerous fishing vessels retreated to safe waters, all except the ill-fated *Andrea Gale*, whose captain and crew vanished without a trace. A movie entitled *The Perfect Storm* was produced and released on June 26, 2000. Junger's dramatic retelling of that storm system resembles what we are about to read in **Acts 27**.

Storms are a part of life, and we all face or will face difficult times or major storms, just as any sailor who sails the open seas will inevitably face storms. And like sailors, some Christians will find themselves in more storms than others. In fact from my perspective, some of you in this room have been forced to become veterans of various storms, because, for whatever reason, your periods of smooth sailing in life appear to be short, few, and far between. Many times storms come upon us through no fault of our own, though sometimes when we ignore wisdom, ignore Christ, or simply make foolish choices, storms follow.

In these next two messages, we will not only study how Paul and his shipmates faced a perfect storm, but we will learn some key lessons on how to successfully and courageously manage life in the midst of the storm.

For those of you who may not have been with us last time, let me bring you up to speed with the context of our passage. The Apostle Paul is a prisoner of Rome, headed to Rome to face a trial before Caesar to confirm either his guilt or innocence of a crime deserving death. He has been awaiting this opportunity for more than two years. Unfortunately, he is sailing to Rome during the most dangerous and unadvisable period of the year. In addition, the one in charge of the trip is a novice when it comes to sailing. The ship, its

passengers, crew, and cargo find themselves in a precarious spot.

The island of Crete is positioned such that every year it gets hit with storms from all directions, north, south, east and west. The most protected and thus the safest harbor on the island is the port of Phoenix. Presently, they are anchored in a small cove called Fair Havens. Fair Havens is an unguarded port from typical southern storms that hit Crete. If they chose to sit out the five winter months there, they would be assured of damage to the ship. Those repairs would delay their sailing when the winter months passed. However, if the ship were severely damaged or became a lost cause due to a serious southerly storm, which were not uncommon, that wouldn't have been good. But at least all on board would be safe, having left the anchored ship to live ashore.

Their only other option was to risk sailing west forty miles to Phoenix. If they made it, all would be well. If they didn't, they could lose both the ship and their lives. The first option assured that their lives would be safe, but the ship would most likely be damaged and the transport of goods delayed. The second option risked their lives. The risk of the loss of life was a very real possibility, because during this time of year, powerful storms could hit without warning. The forty mile trip would only take a few hours, but within those hours, things could change quickly. So, should they stay or go?

In **Acts 27:10**, we learned that the Apostle Paul, a seasoned sailor of three previous shipwrecks and not wanting to be part of a fourth, warned the pilot, the captain/owner of the ship, and the Roman official on board named Julius that it would be dangerous to leave Fair Havens. If they did, he feared they would lose everything: the ship, the cargo, and all of their lives. Not knowing what to do, the Roman official on board chose to get a second and third opinion from the professionals; the pilot and captain believed they could make it safely to Phoenix. So the majority voices won out, and they decided that at the first opportunity they would weigh anchor and set sail for Phoenix.

We pick up the story at the point when they were waiting to sail. Our passage of scripture for this morning covers the first three days of their voyage from Fair Havens. I will be breaking it down into two parts. The first part covers **verses 13-20**, which I'm entitling, "The Waves of Hopelessness Pound the Hull." **Verses 13-17** cover the first day of sailing. Let's begin reading this

first section, breaking it down one day at a time.

¹³When a moderate south wind came up, supposing that they had attained their purpose, they weighed anchor and began sailing along Crete, close inshore. ¹⁴But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo; ¹⁵and when the ship was caught in it and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and let ourselves be driven along.

The sailors waited until they detected a change in the direction of the wind. Instead of a northwest breeze, a gentle wind from the south or southwest began to blow. The crew seized this opportunity to weigh anchor and set sail for the forty-mile trip to Phoenix. If the wind should stay in force from the south, they would reach the safety of Phoenix in a few hours.

But a “**Euraquilo**” suddenly struck. Euraquilo is a hybrid word made up of Greek and Latin, meaning a northeastern wind. These winds are classified as typhonic. Winds do battle from different directions. It is the equivalent of one of our northeastern storms hitting the north Atlantic seaboard. The winds and waves violently rage from all directions. It was like a violent washing machine. The combination of gale force winds and rough seas that dump heavy rain, snow, and ice along the way makes for grave sailing conditions. It was a perfect storm. It swept in without notice, forcing the ship, with typhoon-like power, to drift away from the land and into the open sea. The men could do no more than yield to the wind and let the ship drift in a southwesterly direction.

We continue reading at **verse 16**.

Running under the shelter of a small island called Claudia, we were scarcely able to get the ship’s boat [the lifeboat] under control.

¹⁷After they had hoisted it up, they used supporting cables in undergirding the ship; and fearing that they might run aground on the shallows of Syrtis, they let down the sea anchor and in this way let themselves be driven along.

The northeast wind blew the ship on a west-southwesterly course toward a small island named Clauda (modern Gaudos or Gozzo). The ship covered the distance between Clauda and Crete, which is about twenty-three miles, within a few frantic hours. The men managed to steer the vessel into the shelter of the island. With the protection of the land, they had an opportunity to prepare the ship for worse things to come. They would do three things: The first task was to secure the lifeboat that normally drifted along behind the ship. The howling wind was about to knock the lifeboat against the vessel. By now it undoubtedly was filled with water, which accounts for the difficulty in hauling it aboard. If they ever did find a safe place to land, they would need that tender to get people from the ship to shore.

Next, they wanted to put ropes underneath and around the ship to undergird and strengthen it. How they did this in the middle of a storm and not lose a sailor in the process is beyond me. The purpose of girding the boat with ropes was to hold the planks against the timbers, the inner trusses that held the boat together. Doing this would help to seal the ship, preventing or at least slowing down leakage of storm water seeping through the hull. This was not an uncommon practice in the day.

Third, they lowered the sea anchor in an attempt to steady the ship and to slow its drifting. The sailors knew that if the northeaster were allowed to have its way, the ship would eventually strike the dreaded sandbars of Syrtis (the Gulf of Sidra) on the coast of Libya. Why were the sailors afraid of the Syrtis Sands? The Syrtis is two bodies of water in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of North Africa. These shallow sand bars are in the middle of nowhere, many miles from any shoreline! In addition, near and around them were very thick seaweed or kelp beds. Both would be disasters for a ship to be caught in. The grain ship, upon which Paul and the rest were traveling, was one of the largest ships sailing the Mediterranean Sea at that time. They had a deep

draft of forty-three feet. They would easily have gotten grounded on any of the shallow hidden sandbars in the area. If they did get grounded, even if the ship didn't break apart, the old sailor's axiom would hold true: Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink! They would have had plenty of grain to eat on the ship, but not a drop of water to go with it. They were afraid of a slow and painful death by dehydration. Few if any ships would sail those waters because of the sandbars. Nobody would ever find them. If they were to become planted on a sandbar, they would be, literally, lost at sea.

Having done these three things, which took them all day, they waited to see what the morrow would bring. Unfortunately, it would be more of the same. In fact, they were made captives of this storm for more than fourteen days! But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

In **verse 18**, we learn what took place the second day. **“The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo.”** The cargo did not refer to the grain at this point. The grain would be tossed overboard several days later (**verse 38**). For now, they needed the grain for ballast, to keep the ship from being turned over. The cargo was the freight that was standing on the top deck, making the ship not just heavy but unstably top heavy. That was a big job to unload that cargo in the middle of a violent storm, being tossed to and fro. Again, miraculously, no one fell overboard or was killed by shifting freight.

The third day's work is summarized in **verse 19**. We read, **“And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.”** The throwing overboard of the tackle meant the mainsail. They were not throwing the mainsail away. They were using it like a parachute in the water attached to the yardarm and tied to the ship's stern to further brake their drifting toward the sandbars. Any time this is done, it is a sign that the captain is desperate to save his ship and his crew.

But there was still no relief. Waves kept sweeping over the deck, and life on board was becoming more and more precarious. It was simply one continuous effort to stay alive in this battle with the elements. They had made all the major moves, and now it was pretty much wait and see.

In **verse 20**, Luke characteristically expresses himself with a negative

summary understatement: **“Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.”**

The tempest raged about them day and night, hour after hour. Not surprisingly, the men despaired of their lives. All hope was abandoned. But Luke puts it in a special way. He doesn't simply say that they had no hope, he says **“all,”** including him, Paul, and Aristarchus, had given up hope of making it out alive.

Let me stop to make a point we sometimes forget. Do you remember the time right after Jesus fed the 5,000 in **Matthew 14**? Following that miracle, **verse 22** says that Jesus **“made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away.”** The word **“made”** means **“to compel by force or persuasion.”** What that tells the reader is the disciples didn't have much to say about what they were experiencing. The rest of the passage reveals that Jesus deliberately sent them into a storm at sea! He knew that that storm was coming, but He wanted to teach them His power over storms by walking to them on the water.

So even though they were in a fierce storm, they were precisely in the will of God for them at that moment. Bad things were happening all around them, but not because somebody on board the ship had sinned. God was using those elements to prepare for the performance of a miraculous work that would lead to others' salvation.

So, here's the point we need to keep in mind. If you get caught in a storm, you are not necessarily out of God's will. Sometimes we create our own storms because of foolish, uninformed, or sinful choices. But that is not always the case. I was stunned to discover that following a tragic accident in a local family, someone who once attended here, someone who I thought should know better, went to the family's home to deliver them a meal and said, **“You know why this happened, don't you? You were ignoring sin in your family member's life, and God is punishing you!”** That person was not a prophet or even the child of a prophet. Shame on them for playing God's spokesperson without a license. Not every storm in life is the result of someone being outside of God's will. Sometimes storms happen because God has a plan.

Beginning with **verse 21** and moving down through **verse 26**, as I read the text, we move into some part of the night of the third day, or the early morning hours of the next day. I'm not really sure. But according to **verse 23**, Paul has been visited by an angel in the night and given a message. With this message comes a change in the tenor of Luke's writing. It shifts from the storm's waves hammering upon the hull of the ship, which produced hopelessness in all the hearts of those aboard, to words of hope that lift up the hearts of those in despair. We read:

When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, "Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and loss. ²²Yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.

According to **verse 37**, there were 276 persons on board this ship. At night (when one's heart is most easily discouraged), Paul, sensing the despair of these people, broken in spirit because of the hopelessness of their situation, the very same sense of hopelessness he had felt moments before, stood up in the midst of the 276 sailors, prisoners, soldiers, and leaders and spoke. In short, he said, "I told you so!" He did not say this to gloat, but to give a word of caution and to remind his hearers that he had been right the previous time he had spoken to them and their leaders. He wanted them to take him seriously this time. For now he had good news--though the ship would be destroyed, all hands would be saved. He then explained how he knew this:

²³For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, ²⁴saying, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you. ²⁵Therefore, keep up your courage,

men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told.²⁶ But we must run aground on a certain island.”

Paul took every opportunity to encourage and acquaint people with his God and the message of truth. He told them that God neither appeared to Paul in a vision nor in a dream. Instead, God sent his angel with a special communication to corroborate Jesus’ assurance that He personally gave to Paul, according to **Acts 23:11**, when He visited him in prison in Jerusalem. Back then, Jesus promised that he would arrive in Rome to preach the gospel. Recently, in the face of the terrifying storm, Paul had forgotten Jesus’ promise, so Jesus sent a messenger to remind him that nothing had changed. Furthermore, the angel added that the ship would be destroyed, but all on board would be saved.

Twice, once in **verse 22** and now again in **verse 25**, Paul urged his listeners to be courageous. Implicitly Paul invited the men to follow his example and trust God, who controls not only the weather but also everything else. Paul affirmed that he fully trusted God to save both himself and everyone else aboard.

Let’s stop there and consider some “take a-ways” for facing the storms of life. We know that during times of distress, we are called upon to trust God. But what does that look like? Does that mean we simply sit back and do nothing?

The Apostle Paul was a man of great faith, and he specifically testified in **verse 25** that he believed God in the midst of the ship’s darkest hour. So, when we reflect back on Paul’s earlier warning to the pilot, the captain, and the Roman official in **verse 10**, we can assume that he trusted God then, when he advised the men in charge not to continue with the trip due to the lateness in the year. Being a man of God did not prohibit Paul from using common sense. After all, he had already been in three shipwrecks, including a night and a day spent drifting in the deep, according to **2 Corinthians 11:25**. So as it concerns what trusting God looks like, I think we can safely say that trusting in God does not mean that you stop using common sense.

Secondly, trusting God takes continual practice. As mentioned earlier by Luke in **verse 20**, everybody on board the ship had lost all hope, including

Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus. Furthermore, the angel's first words to Paul in **verse 24** were, "**Do not be afraid,**" which implies that he was afraid. Those were the same opening words Jesus spoke to Paul in jail in Jerusalem in **Acts 23:11**, "**Don't be afraid.**" God made Paul a promise, and God would not go back on his word. Yet, after all is said and done, Paul was only human. Momentarily, his faith lapsed. It can and does happen to all of us. When we are overwhelmed by a catastrophe of this magnitude, even the strongest believers can momentarily falter in their faith.

But God, in His faithfulness, sought out the faithless Paul, when He sent the angel to remind him of His earlier promise that Paul would bear witness in Rome. In addition, the angel added a new promise to Jesus' promise. He said Paul that all on board would be saved.

When we commit to seeking after God, especially when times are fearful, God will meet us in our fears. When we lose sight of Him, He does not lose sight of us. In the midst of our struggle, God will come to us to remind the faithful believer of His promises, just as He reminded Paul. God will either do so while you're reading His Word, through His still small voice speaking to your inner man, or through another person or even angel. God will always reach down to the hearts of those who seek after Him.

On the other hand, if you ignore God, if you refuse to seek after God and choose to live a rebellious life before Him, you will have a different experience. Look at what God says to those who refuse to seek after Him and trust in Him when times are good. Before we read what He says, I want to caution you, these are pretty strong words, and they are not to be brushed off or winked at.

In **Proverbs 1:24-29** God says:

²⁴Because I called and you refused;

I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention;

²⁵And you neglected all my counsel

And did not want my reproof;

²⁶I will also laugh at your calamity;

I will mock when your dread comes,

²⁷When your dread comes like a storm

And your calamity comes like a whirlwind,

When distress and anguish come upon you.

²⁸Then they will call on me, but I will not answer;

They will seek me diligently but they will not find me,

²⁹Because they hated knowledge

And did not choose the fear of the LORD.

Ouch! Let's turn that around and restate those words in a more positive fashion for those believers who:

- don't want to experience God's mocking in the midst of calamity,
- want to experience the power of faith,
- want to stand out amongst others who don't know God,
- want to be a living testimony to others of Christ's faithfulness, and
- want to be an encouragement to others to seek after God.

If that is something I want to be, then I must be committed to seeking after the face of God before trials come. In my devotions this week, I came across this statement: "The ultimate protection against sinking during life's storms is devoting time to develop your friendship with Jesus." In **Lamentations 3:22-26**, the prophet Jeremiah put it this way:

**²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never
come to an end; ²³they are new every morning; great is your**

faithfulness. ²⁴“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” ²⁵The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. ²⁶It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

If we daily seek God and His wisdom during normal times, then when a storm hits, we will be different than those in the world. How come? When we falter, God will find us and set us straight, just as He did Paul, because Paul knew and trusted God.

Or, in principle form we can state: Trusting God begins when times are good.

I hope you find yourself in relatively good time this morning. Do you know that God is with you? Are you aware of his presence? If you do, then you probably already know that when storms come, He makes all the difference in the world. If you aren't sure of His presence, one way to begin, if you have never done so, is to put your trust in Jesus Christ as your deliverer and savior from your sin.

If you have already done this, another way to improve your faith is to set aside time, daily if possible, to meet with the Lord quietly, undistracted. Start with fifteen minutes. Maybe use a Biblical short devotional tool. As you read God's Word, journal your faith-walk with the Lord. What is He saying to you? What is He asking of you? What is He teaching you about Himself? Write down your prayers and answers to prayer.

Personally, my journaling is my track record of God's faithfulness to me. When I'm working through stormy seas, I often return to my journal to refresh my mind of what the Lord has taught me. In turn, it has bolstered my faith, given me confidence when I needed it, and strengthened my emotional stability when others are crumbling around me.

Faith is a work in progress. Trusting the Lord comes with intentionally spending time with Him so as to know Him.

