

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Providence

Acts 27:1

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Good morning, Redeemer! Please open your Bibles to Acts 27:1. We are continuing to work our way through the book of Acts and today we are tackling one of the most important questions in many people's lives. This morning, we are looking at a question that has been a major roadblock for many people coming to saving faith in Jesus. It is a question that has been a major stumbling block for professing Christians as well. Some have walked away from the Lord or have deconstructed their faith because they cannot seem to find a satisfactory answer to this question.

The question we are talking about it is this:

If God is all powerful and all loving, how can so much evil exist in the world?

There are numerous variations to this question. "How can a good God allow me to suffer?" "Why do bad things happen to good people?" So on and so forth. Sometimes this question is referred to as "the problem of evil".

What the question really is about, however, isn't so much the existence of evil. At the heart of the matter, whatever form this question takes, it is always dealing with the same idea: the providence of God.

Now I want to clarify what we mean when we are talking about the providence of God this morning. We often talk about the sovereignty of God which refers to God's almighty,

uncontested, infinite power and authority over all creation. Simply put God's sovereignty means that, as the creator of all things, God can do whatever he wants with his creation.

His providence, on the other hand refers to his sovereignty *applied* to the world. Listen to how the Heidelberg Catechism defines the providence of God.

Question and answer 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism read:

Question: What do you understand by the providence of God?

Answer: The almighty, everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were, by his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.¹

In other words, God's providence is the way he uses his sovereign power to govern all creation throughout all time to accomplish his good purposes.

I love the way John Piper puts it. He says ““Providence, as I use the word and as most Christians have used it, is sovereignty in the service of wise purposes. Or you could say providence is *wise and purposeful sovereignty*”²

That is what we are seeing demonstrated in Acts 27 this morning. We are seeing God's wise and purposeful sovereignty; we are seeing his providence on full display. It is important to note that the primary purpose of Acts 27 is to demonstrate that Paul is an Authoritative Representative of God. He is an Apostle; a man of God. Much like the prophets in the Old Testament demonstrated their place as official messengers of God through miracles and miraculous provision from the Lord, so to is the Apostle Paul demonstrating his Apostolic credentials as God's messenger.

¹ Heidelberg Catechism Question 27, <https://www.heidelberg-catechism.com/en/lords-days/10.html>

² John Piper, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/are-gods-providence-and-gods-sovereignty-the-same>

But this is a story. It is a narrative. Narratives don't have a linear argument or a single point that they work to develop. Rather they can point to multiple themes and concepts. They can teach us many things about God and about us. One of the things that this passage teaches and demonstrates about God is his providence. And that is what we are going to focus on this morning.

Last week we saw that Paul had appealed to Caesar and, by doing so, guaranteed that he would be brought to Rome. What we see in Acts 27 is Paul's journey to Rome. It is a long chapter, and we are not going to have time to read all of it. We are going to skim through the beginning of the chapter in order to focus our attention on the second half.

Paul has been held as a prisoner in Caesarea until the time that they are ready to send him to Rome. He is given into the custody of a Roman Centurion named Julius. By God's grace, Paul is able to gain Julius favour, which allows him some extra freedom and privileges on his journey. Paul and those who are with him set sail in order to make his way towards Rome.

Now, there is a ton of fascinating detail in this passage about the route that the ship took and why. There is a lot of interesting, well at least I find it interesting anyways, aspects of ancient naval practices and shipbuilding that factor into why Paul's journey unfolded as it did. For our purposes this morning it is simplest to say that Paul's journey took place during the end of the shipping season in the Mediterranean. They had sailed from Caesarea and made their way to a place called Fair Havens near the city of Lasea. It was about mid October as they were about to leave Fair Havens and try to brave the worsening seas to make it to Rome. Paul urged the Centurion and the captain of the ship to wait out the winter there, but the majority of people prevailed and they sailed on towards Rome.

This is where we pick up the story in verse 13.

Hear now the Word of the Lord.

¹³ Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. ¹⁴ But soon a tempestuous wind, called

the northeaster, struck down from the land. ¹⁵ And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. ¹⁶ Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda,^[b] we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. ¹⁷ After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear,^[c] and thus they were driven along. ¹⁸ Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. ¹⁹ And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. ²⁰ When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

²¹ Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. ²² Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' ²⁵ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ But we must run aground on some island." ²⁷ When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. ²⁸ So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms.^[d] A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms.^[e] ²⁹ And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. ³⁰ And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the

bow, ³¹ Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.” ³² Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go.

³³ As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. ³⁴ Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength,^[1] for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.” ³⁵ And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. ³⁶ Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. ³⁷ (We were in all 276^[2] persons in the ship.) ³⁸ And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

³⁹ Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. ⁴⁰ So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. ⁴¹ But striking a reef,^[3] they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. ⁴² The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. ⁴³ But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, ⁴⁴ and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

There is a lot going on in this story. But, as I said earlier, God's providence plays a central role in this narrative. Polhill captures this concept well when he writes:

“Paul’s vision is the center of the narrative and provides the key for interpretation. The deliverance from the storm is due to the providence of God and his preservation of the apostle for the witness before Caesar.”³

Remember that God’s providence is his sovereign power being worked through all things to accomplish his good purposes. So, what we need to see here is that God’s good purpose is to bring the Apostle Paul to Rome so that he can witness to both the Jews and the Gentiles in Rome, so that he can witness before Caesar.

But that leaves us with an important question doesn’t it? Because if God wanted to, he could have given the Apostle Paul the smoothest sail in human history. He is sovereign over the winds and the waves after all. Remember Jesus calming the storm and the disciples asking one another “who is this that even the winds and waves obey him.” God is lord of all creation. This storm wasn’t by chance.

If God is sovereign. If he is working all things through his providence, through the wise and good use of his sovereign power and authority for his good purposes. Then we have to conclude that he ordained for the storms and the winds.

And that’s the kicker. That’s the stumbling block. That is the concept that so many people, believer and unbeliever struggle with.

We have to come to terms with the fact that God not only allows us to experience storms in our lives; he not only allows us to experience trials and tribulations, but he also ordains them. He plans for them. **THEY ARE NOT BY CHANCE.**

Your suffering is not an accident. Is not a product of bad luck or circumstance. It is 100 percent within, under, and through the providence of God.

So, the question I want to look at this morning is why.

³ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 524.

Why does a good, loving, all powerful God send storms and trials to his people?

Why Does God Send Storms?

Now this is a huge question, and we are not going to exhaust all the answers to it this morning but there are three reasons that I want to spend some time unpacking this morning.

The first reason that God sends storms is:

1. To Reveal Our Priorities

This is one of the primary things that storms and trials accomplish. They reveal what matter most to us. We more or less implicitly understand this idea. It's what lies behind the question "when your house burns down and you can only grab one thing what is it?" Sometimes God literally burns the house down. Sometimes God removes the question and makes us decide. He makes us show our hand. He reveals where our priorities lie.

Because when he sends the storms, we instinctively cling to what is most important to us. We run to what matters most. When everything feels like it is falling apart, we run to the things that we think will provide stability and protection through the storm. It's why we hide in the basement or under tables when the Tornado comes. We run to the things that we trust in.

I remember doing the disc personality test when I was on staff at Camp Shalom. And when we were done the test, we were given three graphs that represented different aspects of our personality. One graph was who we thought we were, the other was who we wanted other people to think we were, and the third one was who we are under stress, which is our true personality.

When we are under stress, when we are in the storms our true nature comes out. Our true priorities are revealed. We have seen this throughout the book of Acts. Time and time again as the Apostles are persecuted, as their lives are threatened, and as some of them die for their faith, throughout their trials and hardships they consistently demonstrate that their ultimate priority is Christ.

Listen friends, sometimes God, in his great love for you, will take away the things you are prioritizing above him. He will be at work in us to make sure we are prioritizing him above all other things. More often than not, he does that through hardship and suffering. Sometimes he causes a loved one to get sick to help us see that we love that person more than we love God. Sometimes he causes us to lose our job, through injury, mistreatment, whatever it may be to show us that we cared more about our career and our success than we did about him.

Look, if losing anything in your life would cause you to walk away from the Lord than you are prioritizing that thing more than God. Whether that be your popularity, your social standing, your career, your athletic ability, your spouse, your child, whatever it may be; If you cannot go on without it than you have misplaced your priorities.

This is one of the implications of the providence of God: God ordains seasons of suffering and hardship; God sends storms to show us where are priorities truly lie. That's one of the reasons God sends storms into our lives and it ties directly into the second reason, which is:

2. To Remove Our Idols

There is a lot of overlap between this point and the first, so we are not going to spend too much time here, but it is worth nothing that God uses hardship and suffering, he uses the storms in life, not only to reveal where priorities are lie but also to remove our idols.

God sends storms and seasons of hardship and suffering to shake our confidence in the things of this world. He uses these difficult times to show that these things that we have been looking to for stability, these things we have been putting our trust and confidence in, WILL NOT and CAN NOT provide any security or stability in life.

As Calvin famously reminded us, our hearts are idol factories. We are constantly looking to things other than God. We are constantly elevating other things to the place that belongs to God alone, whether that be money, success, fame, our families, entertainment, or anything else.

Listen, friends, to the way that Isaiah describes the foolishness of idolatry. He says this in Isaiah 44:

“He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. ¹⁵ Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god

and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. ¹⁶ Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, “Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!” ¹⁷ And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god!”

(Isaiah 44:14-17 ESV)

This is what we do. We take things that have been CREATED, and we put them in the place of the CREATOR.

So, God needs to shake us. He needs to uproot our false confidence, our false assurance, our false worship, and he needs to replace it with worship and trust in him alone.

God is sovereign over the storms. He is providentially sending them to ensure his good purposes are accomplished. But that doesn't make them easy. They are painful and difficult. The pain is real. The wounds are deep. But they are necessary. Because our hearts are deceitful and desperately sick and the only way to heal them is to root out and remove the idolatry by any means necessary.

Listen to these words from the Apostle Paul in Philippians 3:

“that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

(Philippians 3:10-11 ESV)

That I may know HIM, that I may SHARE IN HIS SUFFERINGS, that I may BECOME LIKE HIM IN DEATH, that BY ANY MEANS POSSIBLE I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Are you willing to pray that prayer? Are you willing to suffer so that you may become like Christ? Are you willing to PAY WHATEVER PRICE IS NECESSARY to ensure that you will be with Christ for eternity?

That's the question. And our answer to that will determine how we respond to the storms that God sends our way.

Now the third and final reason that God sends storms into our lives that I want to highlight this morning is:

3. To Refine Our Faith

As the storms in life reveal our priorities, as they remove our idols, they are also working to refine our faith. All of these things are good things, they are necessary things, and they are painful things.

Yet despite how hard these times are, the Bible consistently tells us to rejoice in these things.

James 1 says:

“²Count it all joy, my brothers,^[b] when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4 ESV)

Romans 5 tells us:

“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5 ESV)

1 Peter 1 says:

“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:6-7 ESV)

Just as gold is refined through fire, so the Lord uses storms, trials, and tribulations to refine our faith. The fire causes the impurities in the Gold to rise to the surface where they can be removed. That is what God is doing to us when he sends the storms.

Imagine that the refining process isn't pleasant for the Gold. It must endure extreme heat. It is melted down to liquid before it can be purified. So too, God breaks us down in order to build us

up. Through suffering and hardship, God tears down our walls, he destroys our illusion of self dependence in order to build us up again upon the firm foundation that is Jesus Christ.

What we are seeing here in Paul's perilous journey to Rome is God's sovereign power being exercised to accomplish his good purpose. We are seeing the providence of God.

These are heavy truths we are talking about this morning. It can be hard to wrap our heads around the fact that God not only allows us to suffer and endure hardship but that he is the one that actually ordains the storms in our life. As we think about this, we must remember that God doesn't just send storms into our life and leave us abandoned to figure it out. Rather, he promises that he is with us.

In John 16:33 he says "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33 ESV)

Listen to how our passage ends. "The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. 43 But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, 44 and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land." (Acts 27:42-244 ESV)

And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

Listen friends, sometimes the storms are brutal. Some of you have experienced trials and tribulations that are truly, truly awful. Sometimes the storm shatters the ship but, if you are in Christ, you will make it safely to shore.

If you are Christ, you will endure. God will bring you through.

"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39 ESV)

If you have turned from your sin and put your faith in Christ then this is God's promise to you. No matter how hard it gets, no matter what storms he sends your way, your destination, your

place with Christ is GUARANTEED IN HIS BLOOD. Nothing can take that away. You may lose your life, but you will never lose Christ. He will hold you fast.

And if you are here this morning and you have not put your faith in Christ, then this is the invitation that God offers you. He offers you life with him for eternity. He offers you peace, and hope, and joy in the midst of the fiercest storms. He offers you grace and mercy to help in your time of need. All you have to do is believe. Put your faith in Jesus, in his death on the cross for your sins and his resurrection from the dead. See him for who he is.

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39 ESV)

Now with the time we have left this morning, I want to turn our attention to one helpful question regarding the storms that God sends our way. Which is:

How To Survive The Storms?

The first thing we must not do in order to survive the storms of life is:

1. Work Hard

In verses 17-19 we read of how the crew tried to weather the storms they were travelling through.

“After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear,[c] and thus they were driven along. 18 Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. 19 And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.” (Acts 27:17-19 ESV)

Despite Paul's confidence that the Lord was going to see them safely to shore, the crew still did everything in their power to save the ship from destruction. I love the way Pastor Paul talks about this in the ITW episode on this chapter where he says:

“The promise of God’s action, in Paul’s mind does not equate with human inaction.”⁴

I love that. The promise of God’s action does not equate with human inaction.

Just because God is sovereign, just because we know that he is working all things for the good of those who love him, does not mean that we can become complacent or lazy. It does not mean that we can simply lay back, kick our feet up, and let him do all the work. The providence of God actually works through our efforts and abilities, not apart from them.

We see this play out well when we apply it to evangelism. The Bible teaches that God has called his people to him and that everyone whom he has set apart for salvation will be saved. Yet the Bible also tells us to go and make disciples. We are called to evangelize and that is because we are MEANS by which God accomplishes his good purposes. We are the tools he has chosen to use. We, each and every one of us are called to share the gospel with others.

So, as God is at work in us, we too must be working hard, working out our salvation with fear and trembling, working hard to abide in Christ that we might bear much fruit. If we take our foot of the gas, if we simply try to coast, we will quickly find ourselves lost at sea. We will find ourselves tossed to and fro by wind and waves. We cannot be complacent. We must work hard. And finally,

2. Hold Fast

We see in the story in verse 30 that some of the sailors, under the pretense of trying to lower the anchors at the front of the boat, tried to abandon the ship. They had given up hope and thought they could do better away from the boat.

When we look out at the world, we see this all over the place, don’t we? We see people left, right, and centre walking away from the faith. We see people deconstructing their faith, for all kinds of reasons. I think that a large part of it has to do with the fact that they do not have a good enough understanding of providence of God.

They do not understand how a good and loving God could allow them to suffer, so they decide that he is not good, or they decide that he is not in control. Or they have been fed a lie that God is

⁴ Paul Carter, <https://intotheword.ca/audio-bible-commentary-with-paul-carter/listen/life-1003-acts-27>

supposed to give them what they want, that God is supposed to give them success, blessing, and prosperity. So, they are devastated when they don't receive that. Their misguided faith cannot stand under the pressure of the storms, so they walk away.

That is not the answer.

We cannot abandon ship.

There is no answer out there! There is no hope out there! There is no stability out there!

If you want to endure, if you want to survive the storms of life, the answer isn't to abandon ship. The answer is Jesus.

As Charles Spurgeon said "I have learned to kiss the waves that throw me up against the Rock of Ages"

God sends the storms that we might learn to hold fast to Christ.

We must cling to Christ. We must draw near to him. We must hold fast.

As that old hymn goes:

On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand:

all other ground is sinking sand;

all other ground is sinking sand.

Let's Pray Together.