

The Perfect Storm Jonah 1; Acts 27

**25th Oct 2009
HPC Evening**

[Introduction]

This is the movie clip from George Clooney's "The Perfect Storm". The computer animation of the waves probably will help you visualize the terror of the storm and the shipwreck.

Australia is a big island with a very long coast line. In our nation's history, there are lots of terrible stories about storms and shipwrecks. Last year Christine and I visited the 12 Apostles in Victoria. During the trip we were surprised to learn that Victoria's south western coast is also called "Australia's Shipwreck Coast". When Captain Mathew Flinders, who sailed all the way around Australia, reflected on this coast, he said "I have seldom seen a more fearful section of coastline." More than 50 ships have been lost and wrecked along this coastline.

Being shipwrecked is a terrible thing. Car accidents are bad, airplane crashes are terrible, but I reckon being shipwrecked is the worst. It's a slow, painful, and hopeless process as the ship sinks into the heavy sea.

Acts 27 is probably one of the best told shipwreck stories in the Bible.

[Context & Setting]

Tonight's talk is the twin sermon of last week's one. Having faced the man-made obstacles of court charges, opposition and riots, Paul now faces natural catastrophe.

Nothing and nobody could stop Paul preaching the truth of Christ's resurrection. But what about the storm? The "perfect storm" brews as he heads to Rome to make his appeal before Caesar. Will this stop Paul?

It's such a vivid, and detailed story. Can you almost feel the waves crashing over the boat and smell and taste the salt in your mouth? Why did Luke devote so much attention in Acts to this journey? Because Luke himself was actually there. This is a true story. Notice the first person plural "we" used in this chapter - Luke himself was there with Paul. A two-week ordeal, a disastrous voyage, a terrible storm - Luke's emotions must have been severely affected. Here's our opportunity to get the insider story of Paul's fourth missionary journey to Rome.

Like all the movies about disastrous voyages, this one starts off well.

Julius, a centurion of the Imperial Regiment, was a good man. He was in charge of the whole trip. Paul was a prisoner on this voyage. Nothing dramatic happened along the Asian province coast. During the trip, Julius was kind to Paul, allowing his friends to look after him.

The ship was heading against the usual summer winds from the northwest wind. Sailing along the Syrian coast east of Cyprus, they were going very slowly. Then they arrived at Myra. And there the centurion found an Alexandrian ship. This was possibly Julius' mistake .

Just some background info here. During that time, the Mediterranean Sea was a busy place for Rome's grain fleet. Every year some 150,000 tons of Egyptian grain may have transported to Italy. Ships from Alexandria, Egypt, would travel north and then west with their cargoes to Rome. This journey usually took two months, although the reverse voyage from Rome to Alexandria could take

only 12 days. The Egyptian grain ships were about 180 feet long, 45 feet wide, and over 40 feet deep when fully loaded. They were very large ships for that time. Compared with the Titanic which was about 900 feet long and 90 feet wide, this Egyptian ship was a short but fat and heavy vessel.

I don't know much about sailing but from common sense, it seems to me that this isn't the type of ship you want to use to sail through a heavy storm.



Anyway, after moving slowly along the Asia Minor coast, they finally arrived at Fair Havens. By the time they got there, they'd already missed the best season to travel. The "Fast" (v.9) refers to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which occurs in September or October. Sea travel became more dangerous as winter approaches. It's going to be a risky trip.

Luke's repeated phrases emphasize the danger: "*the winds were against us*" (v.4), "*slow headway*", "*difficulty*", "*the wind did not allow us*" (v.7); "*moved ... with difficulty*"; "*much time had been lost*", "*sailing had ... become dangerous*" (v.9). So Paul warned the people, in v. 10, he said, "*Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.*"

Who would the centurion believe? A prisoner or an experienced seaman? Unfortunately Julius ignored Paul. He didn't realize the captain's decision to sail was probably motivated more by economic reasons rather than on nautical grounds. Grain ships sometimes traveled together but this one was alone and probably was one of the last vessels of the shipping season.

Now, "*a gentle south wind began to blow,*" (v.13) favouring a westerly voyage and confirming for the crew the decision to dismiss Paul's warning. "*They thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighted anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.*"

Inevitably, the "northeaster" (v.14) swept the ship along. The storm raged with hurricane force. Even though all precautions had been taken and everyone on board helped (v.16), they were in a desperate, life-threatening situation.

Being caught in a storm is not funny. Someone once shared about being sea sick: first you are so sick you wish could die; then you get scared that you won't ever die. This is a worse-than-death situation.

And they were in the dark for many days. Finally, in v.20, they "gave up all hope of being saved."

[Anchors in the Perfect Storm]

Storm in the heavy sea, shipwreck, ... why do all these bad things happen to Paul?

Remember the famous verse from ch. 23:11, where the Lord Jesus unconditionally promised Paul that he will preach the gospel in Rome? Even though God promises us the assurance of reaching our destiny, it doesn't mean it's going to be all smooth sailing.

From the very first day we decide to follow Jesus, we are destined to encounter storms.

The disciples followed Jesus. They obeyed Jesus' call and then on the Lake of Galilee what happened? They were caught in a storm.

Gospel ministry and suffering are like twin brothers. They are always together. The Christian journey is not always going to be smooth sailing.

This story in Acts 27 is a historical story but it also functions as a metaphor - a follower of Jesus in the perfect storm, encountering shipwreck, sickness, persecution, relationship breakdown, conflict ...

But is it all grim and desperate?

No! We are assured that God NEVER leaves us alone in the storm. He always allows us to anchor ourselves in Him who is the rock of our salvation.

When everyone had lost all hope, Paul stood up and shouted. Imagine how loud he had to shout with the noise of the waves hitting the boat!! "*Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; (in other words: "I told you so!") then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed.*" (v. 21-22)

How could Paul be so sure in this seemingly hopeless situation? How can he be so confident?

Let's look at his speech. He presents 4 anchors to secure us in the perfect storm.

First, Paul tells us that we are anchored in God's presence.

"*Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me.*" (v.23)

Have you ever been aware of God's presence in the worst moment of your life?

Paul himself has such a strong conscience that God is with him. While he was in Corinth, (in Acts 18:9-10), Paul heard the Lord say to him, "*Do not be afraid; ... For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, ...*" Before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, the Lord again stood near Paul and promised his destination (23:11). When he was in Rome, he was aware that the Lord stood at his side and gave him strength (2 Tim 4:17).

The Lord is always with his faithful servants. In the midst of the perfect storm where Paul is, God is there as well. That is the safest place to be.

Do you believe that the angels of the Lord are with us right NOW as we worship Him? How can we wholeheartedly worship God without God in our midst? How can we encourage each other without the angels of the Lord attending us? How can we boldly proclaim the gospel without the Holy Spirit showing us the Truth?

Secondly, Paul is telling us that we are anchored in the reality that we are God's possession.

"*an angel of the God whose I am ...*", which can be also read as "an angel of the God to whom I belong."

How do we belong to God?

We are the bride. We belong to Jesus the groom. We are the sheep. We belong to Christ the shepherd, Our good shepherd. We are the children. We belong to our Heavenly Father. We are the servants. Our Master has paid a price for us. He redeemed us out of the slavery of sin.

We belong to God. We are His treasured possession.

The *third* anchor is that we are anchored in God's mission.

Paul tells the people of the God whom he serves, he worships, he witnesses. His task comes directly from the "Commander-in-chief".

At this point, I'm reminded of Jonah. Jonah and Paul both confess their devotion to God whom others don't acknowledge. But unlike Jonah, Paul doesn't try to escape from the mission God has given to him. Paul is the servant of the God. Paul's mission appears impossible but he's deeply aware that nothing is impossible for God.

What's God's mission for you and your family?

Do we have confidence that God can do the impossible to accomplish his mission at this church?

Lastly, we are anchored in our faith in God.

Paul believed God. "*So keep up your courage, men, for I have **faith** in God that it will happen just as he told me.*" (v.25) In the midst of the storm, God's Word sustains Paul. He stands out as the steadfast leader (although he is still a prisoner in chain). He is steadfast. He is confident: "I have faith in God!" He has no time to rationalize his actions. There's no time to explain his theology of God. He holds out his simple yet deep faith in God. I believe!

What does faith in God look like? Is your faith too abstract and just head-knowledge?

Paul expresses his faith in a vivid way, "*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*" (2 Cor. 4:18)

In Naomi Reed's book "No Ordinary View", she experienced this faith in a real way. When she and her family were stuck in their house during the monsoon season with 110 days of consecutive rain, when they were trapped in a place where curfews were applied, she struggled with not being able to do anything. We are here in Nepal to do mission work. We're not supposed to stay in the house doing nothing! During that time, she attended a local Christian lady's funeral. At the funeral, this verse from 2 Corinthians was read out. Naomi writes, "I realized once again that the demands of the visible monsoon were blinding me to the unseen. Most days, it seemed that I could hardly even catch a

glimpse of the unseen, let alone fix my eyes on it. But for Jalpa (the local Christian lady), she had learned through pain and darkness, to fix her eyes on heaven. ... [fix her eyes on the risen Jesus who present us with each other in his presence]. ... We know that. We rely on it. We cling to it. And it's only because of that knowledge that we can fix our eyes on the unseen. It's only because of that knowledge that we don't lose heart. It's only because of that knowledge that we are being renewed day by day."

This is the faith Paul is talking about.

Have you ever been in a situation where the stress of the visible storm has blinded you to the unseen? Will you fix your eyes on the unseen, and like Paul, can you say "I have faith in God"?

[The shipwreck]

This faith won't just save you, this faith is strong enough to save those around you. After Paul's speech, the situation only got worse. They were still in the dark. 14 nights. The waves were three times higher than the boat. (look up at the roof of the church) Everyone was ready to jump. There is NO HOPE! Why stay???

At this critical moment, Paul said to the centurion in v. 31, "*Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.*" Then he encouraged them to eat, because he knew there was a way to save themselves but they needed energy to do the work. Have something to eat then we'll have energy to throw the grain into the sea!! And so, all 276 men on board were saved.

[Conclusion]

After all this, because of our stubborn hearts, we might still ask, "why did God send the storm? Why didn't God smooth the way and control the waves so Paul could reach Rome?"

It was for Paul's benefit. It was "The Perfect Storm", exactly according to God's purpose. As Christians, all of us will experience these shipwreck moments. Trust that they are all part of God's plan.

We are results oriented. We all want to get to Rome - we all want outcomes and solutions to our problems. We all want something that we can see.

But God is process oriented - He says, "I want you to get there, but I am also interested in *how* you get there."

God wants us to have faith in Him, to be content in Him even in the midst of the storm. His plan is bigger than ours. When the storms come, at the same time, others come to Christ. Do we really trust God's ways? Are we willing to walk by FAITH not by sight?

Are you in a storm? Are you worried that your boat is going to sink?

Here are four anchors for you:

God is with you!

God treasures you!

God has a mission for you!

God asks you to believe Him!

"for I have faith in God..."

Do you have this faith?