

Caught in the Storm

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder if you have ever been in a storm at sea, or maybe even have you ever been in a shipwreck? Thankfully, I've never been in a shipwreck or even a storm at sea.

I was once on a Kalamak ferry from Ardrossan to Arran, and it was a bit choppy, and it did put us off for our breakfast, but that was the worst I've had. Now, whether or not we've been in a shipwreck or a storm, I'm sure we have all been caught in what we sometimes call storms in life.

We may be going through a storm in life right now, or we can have experience of being in a storm in the past. In other words, something that isn't pleasant, it isn't nice, a difficulty, a danger, some kind of suffering in one way, shape or form.

Storms in life, it might be problems in our family, it might be the breakdown of a relationship, it might be bad news about our health, it may be the loss of a job or just trying to make ends meet, or really any other different or difficult circumstance that we find ourselves in that isn't normal, and it feels like we're caught in some kind of storm.

And so you may be struggling, you may be suffering right now, and you just can't see a way through it or a way out of it. And I guess the problem of suffering is one of the biggest barriers that people have when it comes to belief in God.

[1 : 31] And so questions come like, well, why does God allow so much pain and suffering in our world? Or more personally, why is God allowing this suffering to happen to me?

And we can struggle with understanding what is going on and when will it end? Well, as we've been reading Acts and as we get to Acts chapter 27 today, what we see is a dangerous and a difficult situation that the Apostle Paul finds himself in.

Because it's interesting, he wasn't immune to suffering. And we've seen that in these last few chapters in Acts. He was faithfully following Jesus, and here he is caught in a dangerous storm and a shipwreck on the way to Rome.

And Luke records for us his journey at great length and in great nautical detail. So many names are mentioned, so many ship details, weather conditions, timings, measurements and people.

Apparently, this is one of the most detailed accounts of a sea voyage in ancient literature. And I did wonder why that was and probably because all the other accounts of shipwrecks means that nobody has survived to take a long time.

[2 : 46] We survived to tell a tale of what exactly happened. But this is one that has been recorded for us because everybody on the shipwreck survives. But it's interesting.

Why does Luke, as he records this for us, not just say something like, well, we set sail and after a difficult journey, we eventually made it to Rome? That's essentially what happens in Acts chapter 27.

So why the lengthy narrative? Why all the detail? Well, it's not simply just to tell us about Paul's difficult journey by sea. It is here to teach us about God, to show God's control, God's care as he safely leads Paul through the storm, through the shipwreck to get him to Rome, which is where God wants him to be.

And so the message for us is that God's will doesn't mean we will be exempt from suffering. Or in other words, following God, following Jesus doesn't mean that you will have a problem free life. And so you can't just expect to sail through life without getting caught in storms, even if you are a Christian. And so Acts 27 comes at us as a reality check, alerting us not simply to the fact that suffering is real, but it shows us what God is like.

[4 : 14] And how knowing what God is like and how he relates to us can help us in our suffering. And so whether we're caught in a storm right now or whether we are just sailing as if it's clear sunshine, this chapter will help us when the storms of life are upon us.

Because there are three basic truths that we need to remember when it comes to suffering. So firstly, we see here the problem of the storm, which is suffering is real.

Verse one to 20, the power outside the storm. God is in control. Verse 21 to 44. And then third, the presence in the storm. God is with us.

Verse 25. Sorry, verse 23 to 25. So the problem of the storm, the power outside the storm and the presence in the storm. First of all, the problem of the storm.

And the point is suffering is real. So here is Paul and he's on his way to Rome to stand trial before Caesar. And the constant use of the word we, W-E, tells us that Luke is with him.

[5 : 22] And that's why this is such a detailed eyewitness account. And yet the difficulty of the journey is emphasized all the way through. So if you just look down, look at verse four. The winds were against us.

Verse seven. We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty. See verse eight. We moved along the coast with difficulty. See verse nine. Sailing had already become dangerous.

And then verse nine. This mention of the day of atonement means it was in the autumn. And so with winter approaching, it was becoming more difficult to sail. And so Paul was well aware how dangerous this was.

Look at verse 10. 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.

Now here's a man, the apostle Paul, who knew about shipwrecks. He had been there. He'd done that. And he'd got the T-shirt. In fact, he managed to get three T-shirts for his shipwrecks. Because he says elsewhere in 2 Corinthians, Three times I was shipwrecked.

[6 : 28] I spent a night and a day in the open sea. And so here is Paul from his experience warning these men that they're going to be caught in a storm and it's going to be dangerous.

Verse 14 says, Before very long, a wind of hurricane force called the Northeaster swept down from the island.

And the ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind. So this is dangerous.

Again, verse 20. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

That essentially sums up the plight that these people are in. They all thought that they were going to die. And here is Paul right in the middle of it all, caught in the storm.

And he was only on the ship because God wanted to get him to Rome. And so by faithfully serving God, what we see in this final third of the Book of Acts is how Paul has been wanted dead.

[7 : 31] He's been beaten up. He's been arrested. He's been thrown in prison. He's been put on trial. And now here he is on his way to Rome to see Caesar. And he's caught in this deadly storm.

I'm sure it would have been nice for Paul to just get a wee break from suffering. A cruise perhaps in the Mediterranean is much preferable to a nasty shipwreck.

But it's the shipwreck that he has to go through. And so what is the lesson for us? Well, clearly the lesson is suffering is real. It's not something that you are immune to, even if you profess to be a follower of Jesus.

You will suffer. You perhaps are suffering. Or you will suffer in the future. But suffering doesn't mean, of course, that we are somehow outside of God's purposes.

And it doesn't mean that God doesn't love us. And it doesn't mean that God has somehow left us on our own. Because it's clear here from Paul's life, from Paul's circumstances, that suffering is part of God's plan.

[8 : 43] I wonder if you've ever heard of Jim Elliott, the missionary. He was an American missionary who was sent to Ecuador in the 1950s. And so he trained at Bible college. He followed God's call to go to Ecuador with his wife and some other missionaries.

They made plans to reach a tribe deep in the jungle. The tribe were hostile. So the missionaries tried to befriend them. What they did was they dropped gifts of food from a plane.

But when they landed, Jim Elliott and his four companions were speared and they were hacked to death by the warriors of the tribe. And Jim Elliott was just 28 years old when he was killed.

But then his wife went back to Ecuador to continue the mission work. And today, many people in that tribe are Christians. It's good, but it involved suffering for one man and his family and other men and their families.

And so we should never think that life with Jesus ought to be comfortable. That it should always be plain sailing in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in.

[9 : 56] Or even that God owes us a good, a long, a prosperous and comfortable life. Because life will often be like a raging sea in one way or another.

Even if we seek to live for God and even if we are faithful to God every single day. And so don't be surprised if you do suffer in some way as one of God's people.

The reality here is that suffering is real. But thankfully, there is more to it. That's the bad news in a sense. And so we shouldn't be saying, Que sera sera, whatever will be will be.

Which is just a fatalistic view of life. What we need instead is a true and a real and a better and in fact a biblical view of life.

We need that kind of perspective to see how the truth of God and the truth about God will actually help us when we suffer. And so that's our first point.

[11 : 00] The problem of the storm. Suffering is real. Secondly, in addition, the power outside the storm. Suffering is real, but God is in control.

Verse 21 to 24. Because the power outside the storm here is God. It's clear when you read the whole chapter together that God is in control of this whole situation.

And God even gives Paul a message to reassure him. So verse 21. After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said, Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete.

Then you would have spared yourself this damage and loss. He's not wanting to give some kind of shipping forecast here. What he wants to give is God's forecast. So look at verse 22.

But now I urge you to keep up your courage because not one of you will be lost. Only the ship will be destroyed. And then he goes on. Because God is promising Paul here that he will get to Rome and everybody will be saved.

[12 : 07] I wonder if you remember an earlier promise to Paul in Acts chapter 23 verse 11. Where the Lord stood near Paul and said, Take courage as you have testified about me in Jerusalem.

So you must also testify in Rome. So get that. God wanted Paul in Rome. And then now again verse 24.

What does it say? Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar. And God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.

So eventually Paul would meet. He would get to Rome. I don't know whether he met Caesar or not, but he would get to Rome. And all on board would survive the storm.

And so God's will was done. But notice how God's will was done. It was done and it included suffering and included difficulty and it included danger.

[13 : 07] In fact, you could say that God achieved his purposes through the storm. And so let's never forget the truth that God is in control. But some might be thinking about hang on.

Just wait a minute. If the first truth is suffering is real, I can get that. I can understand that, accept that, take that, know that. And the second truth is God is in control.

Then isn't there a contradiction here? How can God be in control and allow suffering? Well, what this episode does is actually illustrate for us in a helpful way, the wider biblical teaching on suffering and the sovereignty of God.

Because despite this seeming contradiction or paradox, you might call it, these two truths, suffering is real, God is in control, aren't as opposed to each other as we sometimes might be tempted to think.

Because what stands out here in the narrative is how they're held in tension or how they're side by side with one another. Because we see through Paul's life how God uses suffering to accomplish his purposes.

[14 : 22] Our difficulty is that we can't always understand how or why God chooses to work in that way. And yet he does. And so we fail to see sometimes any good reason why God would allow suffering.

Because we fail to see that we think, well, we assume there can't be any good reason for this suffering. And yet isn't that to jump to the wrong conclusion?

Because God doesn't always tell us exactly what his plans are for our lives. So here, you notice he does give Paul a very specific travel plan.

Like when you go on holiday, you know your travel plans. You will arrive at the airport in Glasgow and you will fly to Spain or wherever. And that's your travel plan.

But there's a lot between getting from where you are to your destination. And so for Paul, he would get to Rome, but it didn't mean that it would all be plain.

[15 : 25] And so if or when we are caught in a storm in life, we should never forget there is power at work outside of the storm.

And that's what Luke makes clear here, because God saved everybody despite the storm and despite the shipwreck. And so when storms do come on our lives, and they do, we must remember that God is in control.

Which means there's nothing that could possibly happen to frustrate God's purposes. And God somehow incorporates everything into his sovereign plan. And so God has his reasons, even if we don't see what those reasons are at the time.

Let me try and illustrate. I'm a parent and most of you are parents as well. And as parents, we are in control when it comes to our children.

We know what is best for our children when they are young. Although our children often don't realize that we know what is best for them. But even though we get them to do what is best for them, they don't always see it that way, do they?

[16 : 41] So we say, OK, it's time for homework. It's time to study for exams. Because we've got a bigger picture in mind, a longer term goal and objective.

But for them, the thought of doing homework or studying for exams is pain and suffering. It's evil.

And yet we know you've got to go through that pain in order to produce a good result.

And so it doesn't always make sense to them at the time. They're not thinking about the long term impact. They're just thinking about the immediate playing outside, playing the PS5 or whatever it is. And so can you see how if there is a distance between our knowledge and understanding of what's best as parents compared to that of our children, then how much more is there going to be a difference between God's knowledge and understanding about what is best for our lives compared to ours?

And that's why we've got to accept that our knowledge is limited. And why we've got to accept that our perspective is narrow when it comes to any kind of suffering.

[17 : 53] Because just because we can't understand the point, it doesn't mean that there isn't a point. God is in control and his plans may involve suffering.

But we can't just state that suffering is real and that God is in control and say, Amen, let's stand up, sing our final song and all go home.

We just can't leave it there. Both are true, but there is more. And thankfully there is more. And we see it here because we need to know thirdly and finally that God is with us.

So there's the problem of the storm. There's the power outside the storm. And then thirdly, there's the presence in the storm. God is with us. So Christianity gives us more than just a knowledge that suffering is real.

Christianity gives us a God who is with us in our suffering. Which will help us more than anything else will. So let's read those verses again.

[18 : 57] 23 to 25. Last night, this is Paul, an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar.

And God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you. So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.

Now, do you hear what Paul is saying here? He's saying he knows that he belongs to God. So in the midst of the storm or the storms of life, that is the secret.

That's the secret. That's the secret to facing suffering. And so while some will question if there is a God or where is God when it comes to suffering, Paul knows that there is a God and that he belongs to him.

He belongs to that God. He is loved by that God, which means God was with him. God's promise to Paul gave him the strength for the storm.

[20 : 03] Because when the storms of life come, it's not just enough to know that suffering is real, though it is, and that God is in control, though he is. Christianity gives us so much more, much more than any other religion in this world can offer.

Because Christianity gives us a relationship with the creator of the universe. And so God is with us. It promises the presence of God with us because we are his.

We belong to him. We're his children. And that's why Paul didn't need to be afraid. And why he was incredibly calm in this storm. You notice his poise.

That wasn't just something that he was able to muster up from within. It came from God. God's promise, God's presence gave Paul calm on the inside, which meant he could handle all the storms on the outside.

He was able to keep his head while everybody else was losing theirs. And do you see that in the centurion in the story? At the beginning, the centurion is the main character. He's in charge.

[21 : 12] He's bossing everybody about. He's telling people what to do. But then Paul becomes the main character who takes on the lead. So in the middle of this storm, God uses Paul to minister to everybody else.

So amidst the suffering, God strengthens Paul so he can support others. And isn't that how we should view our suffering? We shouldn't just view our suffering purely in terms of its impact on me. But we should consider the impact our suffering can have on others. Because others will look at us and see how we cope or how we don't cope. And that's why a believer who knows they belong to God with others who look on and also know the believer belongs to God.

Well, how they handle their suffering can be such a powerful witness to others of the reality of God. So people will look on at us as Christians when we suffer and see whether believing in God actually makes a difference to our lives.

And so Christianity doesn't just help us make sense of suffering. Christianity gives us a God who is with us in our suffering. And so while suffering is never easy, no other religion offers any kind of help to make any sense of suffering the way that Christianity does.

[22 : 41] Because Christianity gives us God himself. And so we need to know that. One of our children, in fact, Matthew, and I did ask his permission to share this story with you.

Matthew, when he was really young, would often have nightmares. And he wake up in the middle of the night screaming his head off. And so what did he need most in the dark of night?

Does he lay there? Did he need a logical explanation of nightmares? It's just like a mini kind of lecture. OK, here is how nightmares work.

And here is why you don't need to be worried about them. And here is why they happen. No, he didn't need that, did he? He needed a hug from his mum or from his dad.

Because the presence of one of his parents with him was the best comfort. He might still have been distressed. But a cuddle reassuring him there's no need to be afraid meant everything was going to be OK.

[23 : 47] okay and so when it comes to god rather than try and figure out well why is this happening i need to know exactly rather than trying to figure out in those dark moments when we are suffering why what we need most is the reassurance that we belong to god that he loves us and that he is with us and so whatever is happening even if it is in suffering it isn't happening because god doesn't love us or that god has left us well how do we know well we know because god himself suffered and it was for us it was for you and it was for me only the christian faith tells us that god lost a son jesus christ was tortured on the cross he suffered an act of violent injustice why did he go through that suffering willingly well it was so he could save us from the ultimate suffering which is an eternity separated from god in hell because of our sins and so if jesus came to save us from that then we know for sure that he will never abandon us whatever happens in this life jesus as part of god's plan went through the ultimate storm on the cross and he went through it for you and for me so when he cried out my god my god why have you forsaken me jesus experienced god forsaken this so we would never have to god's wrath fell on jesus as he bore the punishment for our sins so why did he endure this for us was it just to give us a nice plain easy smooth sail through life no of course not he did it so that we can enjoy god's presence forever in this life right now whatever we face but also forever more in the perfect new creation where there will be no more suffering and so it's only when this amazing truth sinks into our minds and deep into our hearts that we can be calm on the inside while there are storms around us on the outside not because the suffering isn't real we're not seeing the suffering isn't real the suffering clearly is real but because god so loved us that he gave his one and only son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life do you know that and have you experienced that a man called john newton a hymn writer had it's interesting john newton began his career as a sailor and he was actually on board his father's

merchant ship in these same mediterranean waters that paul sailed in and on the 10th of may 1748 newton captain captain a slave ship and it was struck by a great storm off the coast of africa and this 22 year old sailor as he was at the time cried out to god for mercy and he was delivered and he wrote of his experience in the hymn amazing grace which we'll sing in a moment because he learned just how vital it was to know that jesus was with him in the storms of life and so he wrote another hymn be gone unbelief it's called be gone unbelief my savior is near and for my relief will surely appear by prayer let me wrestle and he

will perform with christ in the vessel i smile at the storm and so life won't always be a pleasant sail in the sunshine will it it will sometimes be more like a shipwreck in a storm and right now you might even feel as if you have just been completely blown off course maybe you've even given up all hope of being saved the experience is real but so is god's control and god's presence with you remember the message to paul do not be afraid a message is no different for you or for me is it when we belong to god nothing can separate us from his love and even if that's all we've got in the storms of life that is all we need let's pray