

Representing Jesus in Difficulties

Acts 27:1–28:10

Next week we will finish up our series in the book of Acts (which we started in January). We will see that Paul finally gets to Rome and that he has great freedom to preach the gospel. The Holy Spirit had prompted Paul to go to Rome (19:21). Jesus had appeared to him assuring him that he would get to Rome to testify about Jesus (23:11). And that's exactly what happened.

But as we've seen over the past several weeks, Paul's journey had been anything but easy. He suffered greatly because he preached that Jesus was the Christ who had been crucified and raised from the dead. He endured angry crowds, false accusations, imprisonment, trials, and interrogations. Paul suffered specifically because he was a disciple of Jesus.

But today's passage tells us that Paul also experienced the types of suffering common to humanity. Specifically, he experienced a violent storm at sea as well as being bitten by a snake. In both cases Paul represented Jesus very, very well. A few years later Paul wrote this in Philippians 4 (while imprisoned in Rome):

12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have **learned** the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Paul had **learned** through experience how to be a disciple in every circumstance. Here's the principle at play in today's passage:

Disciples learn to represent Jesus in the midst of life's varied difficulties.

Disciples are learners, students, interns, apprentices. Our entire lives we learn from Jesus how to live like he did in every circumstance. That learning, of course, sometimes takes place in the midst of life's difficulties and sufferings. It's been rightly said that "If you live long enough, you will suffer." You will experience suffering that is common to humanity:

- * sickness, disease, and death
- * seemingly random accidents that leave you impaired either temporarily or permanently
- * relational stress (or even trauma) that can be debilitating

The list could go on and on.

Chances are that you are facing difficulties in your life right now. Your difficulties may be minor distractions or they may be dominating your life. Whatever the case, I'd invite you to consider how your difficulties present an opportunity to learn to represent Jesus to the people God has put into your life.

As we'll see in the text, the two events we'll consider - the storm at sea and the snake bite - were similar in that they were both "difficult circumstances." But the two events were different in that God **didn't intervene** and calm the raging sea, but he **did**

intervene when Paul was bitten by the snake. This difference reminds us that God is faithful, but he is not predictable. We don't look at our circumstances and draw conclusions about his character; we draw conclusions from Scripture and look for confirmation in our circumstances. Today's passage is very helpful in that regard.

Representing Jesus when we're at the mercy of life's difficulties. (Acts 27)

In Acts 27 Luke recounts the storm that Paul endured on his way to Rome. Luke recounted another famous storm in Luke 8. Jesus and his disciples were sailing across the Sea of Galilee. On that occasion Jesus "rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased." But on this occasion Jesus left Paul and Luke and the others at the mercy of the raging storm.

That is the norm in this world. Miracles, by definition, are the exception. More often than not, disciples of Jesus find themselves in the same boat as everyone else. Christians experience the same types of suffering as everyone else. At times we may wonder why that's the case. One reason is that our suffering gives us opportunities to represent Jesus in ways that we otherwise wouldn't. That was certainly the case for Paul in Acts 27.

This is a long and fascinating account. I hope you read the whole chapter sometime (if you haven't already). But let me mention three things that Luke emphasizes in this account.

First, Luke emphasizes that the voyage from Caesarea to Rome was **difficult**. Here's a sample of what Luke records:

- * Verse 4: ". . . the winds were against us."
- * Verse 7: "We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty . . . as the wind did not allow us to go farther. . ."
- * Verse 8: "Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens. . ."
- * Verse 9: ". . . the voyage was now dangerous. . ."
- * Verse 18: ". . . we were violently storm-tossed. . ."

Luke is describing how Paul and the other 275 people on this ship were completely at the mercy of nature, the wind and the waves.

Second, Luke emphasizes that Paul **found favor** with Julius who was the centurion in charge of delivering him and the other prisoners to Rome. We read in verse three that Julius treated Paul kindly, and let him visit with friends when they stopped over at the port city of Sidon. We will see at the end of this chapter that Julius once again showed Paul great kindness, keeping him from being killed.

Third, Luke emphasizes how Paul gives **practical advice** as well as **spiritual insight** along the way. Here we learn something significant about the sovereignty of God. We learn that even though Paul had repeated assurances that he would make it to Rome, he didn't take that to mean that he could ignore common sense. For example, when he heard that owner of the ship wanted to sail to the island of Crete and spend the winter there, Paul thought that was an unnecessary risk. Look at verses 9 through 11.

9 Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, 10 saying, “Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.”

One historian sums up Paul’s sea travels, saying he’s been on 11 voyages totaling over 3,500 miles (Bing Nieh, Holy Trinity Church Chicago). He had gained some wisdom over the years about sailing the Mediterranean.

11 But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said.

We can understand how the centurion was more persuaded by the captain of the ship than by Paul; after all, what did a tentmaker know about sailing? So they forged ahead against Paul’s counsel. They made it to the island of Crete (to a place called Fair Havens - v. 8). But they decided to go to the port city of Phoenix to spend the winter there.



It turns out that “a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land” (v. 14) and blew them past Crete into the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. The storm was so violent that they began throwing cargo and tackle overboard. After 14 days “all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned” (v. 20). Beginning in verse 21 we read that Paul give them some spiritual perspective:

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.”

Paul represent God by telling them to trust the promise the angel had given him. And he shared the common sense perspective that they would need to run aground soon.

On day fourteen of the storm, this was Paul’s message to them:

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, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.”

Again, even though Paul was confident they would all make it, he wasn’t expecting God to give their bodies supernatural strength; no, they would have strength through the normal means of eating food. It turns out that they would need strength to swim ashore.

And Paul took the occasion to give thanks. This wasn’t a witnessing technique; this was Paul being himself because disciples of Jesus are legitimately thankful to God for food.

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 persons in the ship.) 38 And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Luke tells us that the next day they spotted land. They saw a bay and tried to run the ship ashore there. But the storm was still too strong.

41 But striking a reef, 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.

Since they would be held accountable if any of the prisoners escaped, they decided just to kill them all. Once again we notice that God didn’t do something supernatural to spare Paul’s life. Rather, God used the compassion of Julius the centurion to save the lives of Paul and the other prisoners.

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.

We learn in 28:11 that they stayed on that island (Malta) for three months.

Paul’s shipwreck experience exemplifies how a disciple can represent Jesus when they’re at the mercy of life’s difficulties. That’s where we find ourselves so often. We get

sick and die like everybody else. We face challenges financially and career-wise like everybody else. We have car accidents like everybody else. We experience tornados and hurricanes and droughts and floods like everybody else.

The difference is that, like Paul, through it all **God is with us**, taking care of us, teaching us deep lessons that we might not otherwise learn. These are the lessons that often become the things we can share with believers and others. In this way we represent Jesus and what he's done in our lives. Like someone told me not too long ago, "Your test is your testimony."

Nothing we've said implies that God never spares people through miracles. In Acts 28:1-10 we see that God miraculously rescued Paul.

Representing Jesus when we're rescued from life's difficulties. (Acts 28:1-10)

In contrast to the previous incident in which Paul was at the mercy of the storm, in this passage we read that God intervened when he was bitten by a poisonous snake. Since God is a person he's not predictable. [God isn't human, but he is a person.] God never acts contrary to his character. But that doesn't mean that we can predict what God will do in any given circumstance.

1 After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. 2 The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. 3 When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand.

I wish I knew what Paul was thinking when he felt the fangs and saw the viper "fastened on his hand." Instead of telling us what Paul was thinking, Luke tells us what the Maltese were thinking:

4 When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live."

They illustrate what we should never do when someone experiences something unexpectedly tragic. They assumed that Paul was getting what he deserved. For some reason, they jumped to the conclusion that the goddess Justice was now taking Paul's life because he had taken someone else's life.

Tremper Longman, an Old Testament scholar, calls this mindset "retribution theology" which can be summarized as: *If you sin, then you suffer; therefore, if you are suffering, it's because you have sinned.* The book of Proverbs and other Scriptures tell us that that's **sometimes** true (see Proverbs 11:5-8); we do reap what we've sown. But retribution theology says that that's **always** true. That was the mindset Paul encountered: A snake had bit him, therefore he must have murdered somebody.

5 He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

At least they were being consistent. If you can survive the poisonous bite of a viper, then you must be divine. In actuality Paul was very much a human. It's just that his God had miraculously rescued him from the normal consequences of being bitten by a viper. Whereas God didn't intervene by calming the raging sea (Paul had to ride it out), he did intervene this time. Again, God can be unpredictable that way. [See also Acts 12 where God allowed James to die by the sword but he rescued Peter from prison.]

Notice how this miraculous rescue set Paul up to represent the healing power of Jesus to many. Beginning in verse 7 we read:

7 Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. 8 It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. 9 And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. 10 They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

Having been rescued by God, Paul represented Jesus well.

This fall around 15 or 20 of us have been taking a course on Tuesday nights taught by Steve Peterson and John Schwartz. We're learning how to share our faith the way that people all over the world share their faith - as a natural overflow of their walk with God. A few weeks ago we studied the Shema in Deuteronomy 6 in which Moses tells the people to love God with all their heart, soul, and might. Then he says:

6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

I've read this Scripture hundreds of times, but I'd never locked in on "when you walk by the way." The idea is that the things you've been talking about at home are the things you keep talking about when you're out and about. You don't have to make up things to share; you learn deeply from God and home and you're transparent when you're out in the community.

In the context of today's topic, here's how this might work out. When you're at the mercy of life's difficulties or when you've been rescued from life's difficulties, there are deep, deep things God wants to teach you through his Word: his compassion and faithfulness even when you're suffering, how to "wait upon the Lord," how to pray, how to experience joy in the midst of trials, etc. All this comes from the Word. If these things are on your

heart and you're talking about them at home, you also have something to talk about when you're out and about.

Your friend or coworker or classmate might ask, "How are you doing?" "Well, in some ways my life is out of control. But I'm learning to experience joy anyway." Some people may shrug and walk off; but others may say, "I'd like to hear more. . ." Many times such "*shema* statements" open up the opportunity to share more deeply and to share the gospel. In this way you can represent Jesus even when you're facing life's difficulties.

I've seen this play out over the years in the lives of many of you. When you've experienced the fallout of life's difficulties, you've represented Jesus so very well in your neighborhood, in the workplace, in dorms and classrooms, in hospitals, and in Hospice. Be encouraged. If you suffer well as a disciple, you will learn to represent Jesus in the midst of difficulties.