



September 20, 2016

feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

Paul's journey to Rome begins with him being arrested at the Temple in Jerusalem, involves no less than 4 trials before Roman and Jewish authorities while in Roman custody, endures a storm and shipwreck, and finally ends in Rome after almost three years. In Acts 23:11 the Lord promises, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." I do not think Paul realized what that would entail and how much courage he would need to have. We covered various aspects on that account on Sunday, but I am going to focus on the storm for this pastoral letter.

Luke devotes an entire chapter to an account of the storm with a great deal of detail. This is such a powerful storm that on the first day they undergird the ship for fear that the waves would cause it to break apart. On the second day they are so violently storm tossed that they jettison the cargo and all hope for a profitable voyage. And on the third day they throw all the ship's extra rigging overboard, a further loss. And yet the storm continues so that all hope of being saved was abandoned. Luke includes such detail so that his readers will feel the weight of the suffering and despair of this experience.

Why is this storm happening? This is easily perceived as a Satanic attack. In the Jewish mind, the sea was a place of chaos and evil. Yet Yahweh is clearly more powerful than the sea. And we have seen in Luke 8 that Jesus is able to calm the sea when a storm threatens him and his disciples. But there is no calming of the storm here. Yes, Paul arrives safely in Rome, but this is not a deliverance story of remarkable protection like in Daniel with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. How we love to recount that story, especially the part where it says, "The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them." They are completely unaffected by the attempt to destroy them. This is not that kind of deliverance. This storm continues for 14 days. Can you imagine what that would be like? The unrelenting suffering involved. The sheer exhaustion, stretched completely beyond all sense of what you could endure. Thinking every day, every hour even that this has to end. And it ends with a shipwreck and people swimming or floating to shore on debris, while the storm continues to rage. Couldn't the angel who brought Paul the good news that all would survive have calmed the storm for a safe landing on Malta? Paul is delivered, but he is certainly battered and bruised. Why does this storm feature so prominently here at the end of Acts? I believe Luke is emphasizing what we saw earlier when Paul and Barnabas were on their return missionary journey Acts 14:21-22, "they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that *through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*"

These tribulations are not avoidable for us anymore than they were avoidable for Paul. We are to expect them. And they are not necessarily through any fault of ours. This is not like Jonah and his storm. Paul is not running away from God. He is on his way to where God wants him to be. So, why the storm? Why does God allow it? What is He accomplishing? Questions that puzzle us when we

are going through our own storms also puzzle us here. But rather than trying to speculate about those questions, I want to focus on the fact that this storm, with all its tribulation, happens to Paul and what that means for readers of Acts like us.

It means that our storms or tribulations do not mean that God has abandoned us or we are out of His will, or that He does not exist. If it can happen to Paul as part of God's plan in his life, then it can happen to us. If you are looking to avoid suffering in your life, then this is not good news for a disciple. But if you are in suffering and it feels like God has abandoned you and is nowhere to be seen, this is good news. Life in God's will is like that sometimes, but He is with and His purposes will be accomplished.

Life can be circumstances that are preventing you from heading toward what you are convinced God wants for you. I am not talking about health and wealth or your own dreams or desires here, but service for Him. We can be so weighed down by adversity that we feel adrift, driven away from fruitful life or accomplishing anything worthwhile. What is the point of being driven across the sea when you are supposed to be heading to Rome?

Life can have suffering that God appears to be absent from. 14 days of immanent peril, crying out to God from this battered place, with no help. No wonder all hope of being saved was at last abandoned. Life can be like that. It is a comfort that Scripture is not silent about these experiences. Paul lived through it. And there are poignant expressions of this type of experience in the psalms. Psalm 10:1 *Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?* Psalm 22 1-2 *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.*

We gravitate toward the stories of relatively quick deliverance that so easily lead to wonder and praise for God. And we are grateful for those stories. But there are also stories of storms that are endured far longer than anyone could imagine would be part of God's will. And there are expressions of how that feels and what it does to us. God knows and God cares. He is with us in the suffering. Does that help you endure? Help you when you are losing hope? We concluded our service by meditating on Psalm 13. May God bring us into verses 5 and 6 when life is like verses 1 through 4.

Pastorally Yours,
Bo