**Calm in the Storm**
**Acts 27:13-44**

So we started Acts by asking, how come the gospel, the message of the good news of Jesus Christ had the impact it did, how come it spread as far as it did? And now, we've hit the last two chapters. And Paul has been put on trial, and appealed to Caesar, and is now heading to Rome. But as he does so, it's not just the everyday guy in the streets of Rome who's going to hear the gospel, it's going to go to the very centre, to the very top, to Caesar himself.

But Paul has got to get there first. And the context of what we're going to look at this morning is that Paul and his two travelling companions – Luke and Aristarchus, are out on board a boat, with their Roman guards, and they sail up round the coast of the Mediterranean. And arriving in what is now southern Turkey, they swap ships for one heading to Rome. The problem is that by now it's early October, and the weather is beginning to turn, and sailing is beginning to get dangerous. And they only just make it to the island of Crete. The problem is the harbour they find there is not the best one to winter in. So against Paul's advice the captain of the boat, and the centurion in charge of Paul and the other prisoners on board the ship decide to set sail again in the hope of finding a better harbour. Which is when everything goes wrong and where we pick up the story.

**Acts 27:13-44**

**Facing Storms:**
Look at v13, 'When the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor.' To start with, everything seemed to be coming together, everything seemed to be looking good. And the place they were trying to get to was not exactly a great distance away, just 40 miles or so along the coast of Crete. But then things turn nasty, v14, 'But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land.'

Now, I want you to put yourself in Paul's sandals here. He knows, because God has told him, that he is going to preach the gospel in Rome, before the Emperor, and that is where he is heading. So it's not as if Paul is being disobedient and running away from God. Paul is not a Jonah the prophet mark II – running away from God, refusing to proclaim his message. Paul is not outside the will of God here, he is slap-bang in the middle of God's will. And yet he still faces a terrifying storm.

Worse still, this was not Paul's doing was it? It was not Paul's decision to set sail, in fact it was precisely against Paul's advice, and yet still the centurion and the captain went ahead, and set sail. So, despite Paul's best efforts to avoid disaster, he finds himself in the midst of disaster, and it's been brought on by others' refusal to listen to him. But he still has to face it.

Just think about the implications of that. That tells you that you can go through severe trails – the storms of life, and still be right in the middle of God's will for your life. The fact that you face storms and trials does not mean that you have missed it, or are being disobedient, or are somehow less full of faith than anyone else.

In Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish builders the rain falls, and the flood waters rise, and the winds batter against the houses of both the wise and the foolish builder. The storm hits both of them. It's not as if the wise man doesn't face the storm, and it's just the foolish guy who does. They both do. It's just that one of their houses can withstand the storm and the other can't. And the storm that Paul faces here comes despite his warning. He was wise enough to see what was going to happen. So being wise, and building your life on Christ, is no guarantee that everything will work out. In fact, life can seem to go horribly wrong, but that doesn't mean you're a foolish builder. You might just happen to be the wise person who has built his life on Christ, and you are living right in the centre of God's will for you.

So, the Christian who experiences the ravages of cancer, or financial meltdown, or the loss of position or career, may be no less wise, and no more out of the will of God, than the person whose life is gilded with success.

And in this storm that Paul and his two-hundred and seventy-five fellow travellers face, things just go from bad to worse, don't they? The ship gets more and more battered, and in an effort to survive, the crew throw overboard more and more stuff: rigging and tackle and cargo. I think that is a powerful picture of how the storms of life can strip us, they get and closer to consuming the things that are dear to us.

Then Luke tells us in v20 that 'neither sun nor stars appeared for many days.' And by that he doesn't mean things were just a bit gloomy and the view was not so great. This was a time before compasses and sextants. The sailors depended on the sun and the stars to navigate by. So now they have no way of telling where they're going, or where they are. And when you go through these painful periods in your life, and it feels like darkness is enveloping you, or the light at the end of the tunnel has been switched off, it can feel as if you are totally disorientated, and you don't know which way you should turn, or what decision to make, and you've lost all sense of direction.

And then Luke says in v20, 'all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.' And maybe you know what that feels like. You've hung on for so long, but then your last hope is snatched from you and now your situation feels totally hopeless. And when that happens, it's not just your inner sense of well-being that's affected, it's also your health. Verse 21, 'They had been without food for a long time.' Why? Why hadn't they eaten… because this was an Alexandrian grain ship that sailed between Egypt and Rome, bringing grain to the capital of the empire, so there's plenty of food on board. Well, probably because this storm is so bad everyone is sea-sick, they can't face the thought of eating. And sometimes things can get so bad that you feel sick to the pit of your stomach, or the stress affects your health, and you don't just feel down, you become depressed.

And of course for Paul and all these travellers, it finally ends in shipwreck.

Now if you've gone through, or are going through times like that, how do you feel towards God? There's a fascinating account of when the disciples and Jesus face

just such a situation. Jesus has told them they are heading to the other side of the lake, so they know they are in God's will, but a storm comes down on the lake, their boat is filling with water, and shipwreck is imminent. But Jesus is asleep in the stern. So the disciples wake him, and what they say to him is fascinating. Mark 4:38: 'But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, *do you not care* that we are perishing?"' Do you not care? And there can be times when you are in the middle of the storm and it seems as if God does not care.

And yet the remarkable thing is that through what must have been a terrifying experience, Paul managed to stay calm. And when others had given up hope, Paul was able to encourage, v22, 'Yet now I urge you to take heart.' And when others seemed to be on the verge of panic – like the sailors trying to escape, Paul is able to stand up and take a lead. And when everyone else had lost their appetite, Paul could say, v34, 'I urge you to take some food' and v36, 'Then they were all encouraged and ate some food themselves.' So how does he do that? How can he stay calm and be an encourager in the midst of the storm?

**Truth to Plant your Feet On.**
Now, Paul is not Jesus, is he? There is no miraculous calming of the sea here, Paul ends up in the water along with everyone else. And yet his Christian faith and character shine through. And they shine through in a pretty hostile environment. And I don't just mean the weather, sure there's the storm but there are also 275 soldiers and sailors and prisoners on board, which by any imagining is going to be a fairly motley crew. And yet Paul somehow manages to rise above it and provide leadership.

And I think there are four truths that Paul takes his stand on that help him live the way he does here.

Firstly, he knows that ***God is Sovereign:*** You see, way back in chapter 23, at the beginning of Paul's trial, Luke tells us that 'the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome"' (23:11). And here, in the storm, Paul says to the men on board, v23, "This very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid Paul; you must stand before Caesar."

Paul could stay calm, and not give way to fear, because he knew that God was sovereign. That if God wanted him in Rome he would get to Rome. He knew that God was sovereign over the powers of nature, that the wind and the waves could not thwart God's purposes. He knew that God was sovereign over other people's wrong choices, that bad decisions by others could not stop God's plan for Paul, or for Rome to hear the gospel.

And when you know that God is sovereign over the storm, you can be a bringer of hope, even to people who have lost hope, as Paul does here. And Paul acts out that hope by eating, and encouraging the others to do the same, and they follow his example. And there are times when you need to do that, to make life choices

that reflect the hope and sovereignty of God, and not just in the midst of trail. It might mean giving away rather than holding on; it might mean taking or turning down a job offer; it might mean investing in the lives of others, when you'd rather retreat into yourself. But by doing it you are acting out: I know that God is in control and I will live and speak accordingly. And because Paul knew that, he could rise up, and lead and encourage in this challenging environment.

But before we go to the second truth Paul takes his stand on, did you notice that, despite having this assurance that all would be saved, Paul still intervenes to stop the sailors escaping? Verse 31, 'Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."' Why? Because they were needed to steer the ship. So just because God is in charge does not mean that you and I can sit on our backsides and take no action! Rather, it's precisely because we know that God is sovereign, however bad the storm, that God is present, however dark the night, that it's *worth* taking action.

But the second truth Paul takes his stand on is that he knows, and you can know, that ***you belong to God.***

Look what Paul says in v22. He urges them all to take heart, he reassures them that no-one is going to die. And then he says in v23, "For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God *to whom I belong* and whom I worship." Now doesn't that strike you as fascinating? You see, people tend to think of their God as belonging to them. We tend to think of God as this useful addition to our lives, who is there to bless us, and do our bidding, and make our lives work out well. We think of God as utilitarian – he is my agent for good in my life. In other words, he belongs to me.

But Paul sees it very differently. Paul knows that he belongs to God. Now, let me ask you, who or what upholds your life? What keeps you strong in the storms of life, when everything is being stripped away? Do you rely on yourself, on your own strength, 'I can do this!' Or on the support of others? The problem is that our strength is not limitless, is it? Whilst we all might have different capacities, we do all have a capacity, and if we are stretched too far, the strongest of us will snap. And friends fail. So we need a strength outside of ourselves, one that undergirds us, and sustains us, and lifts us up when we are weak.

And when you know that you belong to God, you know that God has got you in his hand. You know he's not going to let you go. You know that he's working everything out for your good and his glory. And that's what gave Paul the strength to stand.

But this truth of belonging to God leads to the third truth I think Paul takes his stand on when everything is falling apart, and that is that ***Christ died for you***.

You see, in that culture it would be impossible to hear someone say, 'I belong to God' without thinking of the slave market. Because the only people, especially, for a Roman citizen, who belonged to other people, who were other people's property, were slaves. And so when Paul says what he says, he's saying that God

owns him, that God is his master, that God has bought him, that God has purchased him, and redeemed him from the slave market of life. And God did that for Paul and for all of us, by Christ dying for us, by Jesus giving his life, for our life. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, 'In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.' As Peter wrote, we have been 'ransomed… not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:18-19).

And Christ does not give his life for you, and redeem you from slavery to further enslave you or abuse you or oppress you. But to take you out of the oppressive slavery of darkness and bring you home; not to work you to death, but to bless you, to buy your freedom, to see you flourish and prosper, to give you a hope and a future. To know the goodness of belonging to a master who loves you so much he gives his life for you.

And knowing that that was the master he belonged to, that Christ died for him, was what gave Paul hope in the midst of disaster. That's why in v35, Luke tells us that Paul 'took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat.' He could do that when chaos seems to be reigning, because he knew the son of God had taken bread and broken it and said, 'this is my body given for you'. Paul could stand strong, and stay calm and be an encourager in the storm, because he knew Christ had thrown himself into the storm of sin and judgement and wrath at the cross, that the sun had been darkened over the One who gave his life for us. And when you know that that is the measure of his love for you, it gives you hope and courage for whatever you face.

But finally, the fourth reason Paul could respond the way he did was because he knew that ***God is faithful.***

Verse 25, "So take heart, men for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told." Paul took God at his word, and he knew he would not let him down. But just look at something the angel says to Paul, because it gives us an insight into what Paul had been up to as the storm has raged: v24, as the angel said to Paul, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you." Now why does he say that: 'God has granted you all those who sail with you'? That only makes sense if Paul has been praying that God would save the lives of all those on board, and the angel comes and says, Paul, God has heard your prayer, and given you what you've asked for. And Paul could pray because he knew God is faithful to keep his word. That it's worth praying in the storm.

Ok, so how can you stay calm, and lead, and be an encourager for others in the storms of life: when you know God is sovereign; when you know that you belong to him; when you know that Christ died for you; and when you know that he is faithful. That as he did for these guys, v44, you will be 'brought safely to land.'