

EMPOWERED THROUGH THE STORM Acts 27:13–44

INTRODUCTION

Last week we stood with Paul on the shore at Miletus, watching him say goodbye to a church he loved, commending them fully into God's hands and walking to the ship without knowing exactly what waited for either of them next. This week, Luke puts us on a different ship entirely, years later — and this time it very nearly doesn't make it to shore at all.

By this point in the story, Paul has already been given a promise. Back in Acts 23, after his arrest in Jerusalem, the Lord stood near him at night and said plainly, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the truth about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." That promise is not vague. It is not a feeling. It is a direct word from God about where this journey ends. And yet almost immediately after that promise is given, everything about the journey toward it nearly falls apart.

I want you to notice that carefully, because it matters. The storm in Acts 27 does not happen because Paul stepped outside God's will. In fact, Paul had already warned the ship's officers not to sail — he could see the danger coming — and he was overruled by men who trusted their own judgment about the weather more than his. The storm happens inside obedience. Paul is exactly where God intends him to be, on exactly the journey God has promised will end in Rome, and the ship still very nearly breaks apart underneath him.

That should catch our attention, because so many of us carry a quiet assumption that being in God's will is supposed to mean smooth water. Acts 27 will not let us keep that assumption. Being on the right road, even a road God Himself has named, is no guarantee the road stays calm.

Luke gives us one line partway through this storm that I think captures what real uncertainty feels like better than almost anything else in Scripture: "When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm continued to rage, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned." No navigation. No landmarks. No way to even tell where they were, let alone how far from safety. That's not just a detail about ancient seafaring. That is what it feels like to be in a season where you cannot see the way forward, even though you trust the God who can.

I know something of what it feels like to lose every landmark at once, because that's almost exactly what happened to me during that same year I was wrestling with God about leaving Gateway of Hope.

It started with my job — a job I had held for thirty-two years, work I loved, work I fully expected to carry me to retirement. Then, without warning, I was laid off. No severance. I told myself I'd find something quickly; with the resume I had, how could I not? Eighteen months later, I still hadn't. Our savings ran out. I drove for Uber just to keep the lights on — a humbling turn for someone who had spent decades in a director's role. Even that wasn't enough. We came within reach of foreclosure. We had a car repossessed because we simply couldn't pay for it.

And then, just weeks after I finally said yes to releasing Gateway of Hope, my mother was diagnosed with late-stage esophageal cancer. She was gone two weeks later.

I had no sun. I had no stars. Every single landmark I had used my whole adult life to know that things were basically all right — a steady job, a stable income, my mother's voice on the other end of the phone — was gone within the same twelve months. I had nowhere left to turn but God, and in that season, one particular worship song became something close to an anthem for me — a song built around a simple, repeated confession When I don't know what to do I'll lift my hands. When I don't know what to say I'll speak Your praise. When I don't know where to go I'll run to Your throne. When I don't know what to think I'll stand on Your truth

So let's walk through this storm together, and let it teach us three things the Holy Spirit empowers us to do when the water gets rough: to face storms we did not choose and cannot navigate by sight, to take faithful action while trusting a promise we did not manufacture, and to trust that the vessel may be lost while the people and the purpose are not.

I. EMPOWERED TO FACE STORMS WE DID NOT CHOOSE (vv. 13–20)

The storm comes on fast. Luke tells us a gentle south wind convinces the sailors they've caught a break, and then, without warning, "a violent wind, called the northeaster, rushed down from Crete." Within moments the crew is fighting just to keep the ship pointed in a survivable direction. They lose control of it almost immediately — Luke says they simply "gave way to it and were driven." No navigation. No control. Just being carried by something far more powerful than anyone on board.

Then comes that haunting detail about the sun and the stars disappearing for many days. In the ancient world, sailors navigated almost entirely by sight — the position of the sun during the day, the stars at night. Take those away, and you don't just lose your comfort. You lose your ability to know anything at all about where you are or which direction leads to safety. That's why Luke says hope was finally abandoned. It wasn't just that the storm was severe. It was that every normal means of finding their way had disappeared.

I think that image describes a certain kind of season better than almost anything else could. There are storms we bring on ourselves, and Scripture doesn't shy away from naming those. But there are also storms that simply arrive — not because of anyone's sin or poor judgment, but because storms are simply what sometimes happens between a promise and its fulfillment. And in those storms, it isn't only the difficulty that unsettles us. It's the disorientation. It's not being able to see the familiar landmarks we normally use to know where we stand.

I think back on that same year now and realize the hardest part was never simply the difficulty itself, real as it was — harder than anything I would wish on anyone, anywhere. The hardest part was losing the ordinary things I had always used to orient myself, without ever realizing how much I depended on them until they were gone.

My job wasn't just a paycheck. Thirty-two years in one place becomes part of who you are, quietly, without you ever choosing it. Finances had simply never been something I worried about — if there was a need at church or at home, I could cover it, easily, without a second thought. And then, one by one, those instruments went dark. The inability to find another job after thirty-two years of steady work. The humbling experience of driving for Uber just to bring in something. The near foreclosure. The repossession. It was like flying a plane with every instrument on the panel failing at once — no altimeter, no compass, nothing telling me how high I was, how fast I was falling, or which direction led home. And underneath all of it, I had always

been able to count on my mother — her love, her support, her steady encouragement in every hard season before this one — until, suddenly, I couldn't.

I don't think it's an accident that this passage comes to us in this season of our own story. I suspect there will be days ahead, as St. John's continues discerning what the future holds, when the familiar landmarks feel harder to make out than we'd like — when it isn't entirely clear what the next several months will look like, or exactly how we'll know we're heading the right direction. Acts 27 doesn't promise us that won't happen. What it promises is this: the absence of sun and stars didn't mean the ship had lost its destination. It meant the destination currently had to be trusted rather than seen.

II. EMPOWERED TO TAKE FAITHFUL ACTION WHILE TRUSTING A PROMISE WE DIDN'T MANUFACTURE (vv. 21–38)

In the middle of all that disorientation, Paul stands up and does something remarkable. He reminds the ship of a promise he didn't create and can't control: an angel of God stood beside him in the night and said, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar, and behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you." Notice that the promise isn't only for Paul. It extends to everyone on that ship — soldiers, sailors, prisoners, none of whom had any particular faith in Paul's God. God's grace, once again, reaches further than the people receiving it would ever have expected.

But watch what Paul does immediately after sharing that promise. He doesn't sit back and wait passively for it to happen on its own. He gets practical. He urges everyone, exhausted and having gone nearly two weeks without a proper meal, to eat something. He takes bread, and in front of the entire ship — soldiers, pagan sailors, frightened prisoners — he gives thanks to God and begins to eat. It's a striking, almost startling echo of the table he had shared with believers so many times before, now offered in the middle of a storm, to people who had no idea what communion even was. And Luke tells us that after watching him do it, "they too were encouraged and ate some food themselves."

That is such an important picture of what trust actually looks like. Paul doesn't treat God's promise as a reason to stop working. He doesn't say, "God has already promised we'll be fine, so none of this effort matters." And he doesn't panic and try to seize total control either, the way the sailors do later in the chapter when they secretly try to lower a lifeboat and abandon the passengers to save themselves — a plan Paul immediately warns the centurion about, because it would have doomed everyone left behind. Paul walks a narrower, harder path than either of those extremes: complete trust in a promise he did not manufacture, paired with faithful, practical action for as long as the storm lasts.

I see this same lesson threaded through three different places in my own life, and I think it's worth naming all three together, because each one teaches a slightly different piece of it.

Gateway of Hope had to learn this the hard way when I finally, fully let go. It would have been so much easier for that board to keep me halfway involved — pastor in name, present once a month, still holding a hand on the wheel. That would have felt safer. It would have felt familiar. Instead, they were brave enough to choose faithfulness over familiarity, to trust that God's plan for that congregation's future didn't require my hand on it at all. That took real courage on their part, not just mine.

St. John's learned a version of this same lesson during our own Nehemiah season. If you remember the story, when Nehemiah organized the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall, he didn't hand one crew the whole project. Each family repaired the section directly in front of their own house — a small, specific, faithful piece of a much larger wall they couldn't fully see or control. That's a hard discipline for any of us, and it was hard for us too: learning to depend on God for the whole plan, and to simply be faithful with our own section of the wall, instead of anxiously trying to dictate exactly how the entire structure should come together.

And in my own life, during that year of loss, God taught me something similar, even though I don't believe for a moment that He was the author of the evil or the distress itself. He used that season to show me, in a way I had never fully understood before, that every other foundation in this world — a job, a paycheck, even my own mother's steady presence — is, in the end, sinking sand. There is only one foundation solid enough to build a life on. As the old hymn puts it, "On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand." I didn't just sing that line during that season. I learned it, the hard way, one collapsing foundation at a time.

I think that's exactly the posture this congregation is being invited into right now. Trusting God's promises has never meant setting ministry aside and simply waiting to see what happens. It means continuing to do the practical, faithful work in front of us — worship, prayer, caring for our neighbors, showing up for one another — with the same confidence Paul had breaking that bread in the middle of a storm. Trust and action were never opposites. They were always meant to move together.

III. EMPOWERED TO TRUST THAT THE VESSEL MAY BE LOST WHILE THE PEOPLE AND THE PURPOSE ARE NOT (vv. 39–44)

As morning finally comes, the crew spots an unfamiliar shore and tries to run the ship aground, but it strikes a reef, and the stern begins breaking apart under the pounding of the surf. What had carried all two hundred and seventy-six of them safely this far is now coming apart beneath them in real time.

The soldiers, fearing the prisoners might use the chaos to escape, want to kill them outright. But the centurion, Luke tells us, "wanting to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan." So instead, everyone is simply ordered into the water — some swimming, others clinging to broken planks and pieces of the ship itself, using the wreckage of the very vessel that had carried them for so long as their last means of reaching shore.

And then Luke closes the account with one clean, remarkable sentence: "And so it was that all were brought safely to land."

I want you to sit with that for a moment, because I think it is the most important image in this entire passage. The ship does not survive. It is genuinely, completely lost — broken apart by the surf, gone. But every single person on board reaches land safely. Every one of them. God's promise was never, "the ship will make it to Rome." God's promise was, "you will stand before Caesar, and everyone sailing with you will be kept safe." The vessel and the promise were never the same thing, even though it must have felt, for two harrowing weeks, like losing one would mean losing the other.

I don't think it's a stretch to say that every congregation eventually has to learn the difference between the ship and the promise. The particular vessel that has carried us this far — its shape, its structure, the form ministry has taken for however many years — has never itself been God's promise to St. John's. God's promise has always been to the people, and to the purpose He has called them to. A vessel can be battered, changed, even broken apart by circumstances beyond anyone's control, and the promise can still hold completely, because the promise was never resting on the vessel in the first place.

CONCLUSION & INVITATION

I think about the crew earlier in this chapter, before the shipwreck itself, throwing cargo overboard, then tackle, then finally the ship's own gear — anything not essential to survival — in order to lighten the ship and keep it afloat through the worst of the storm. It's hard not to hear an echo of what we talked about last week: the painful pruning this congregation has already lived through once, letting go of what was no longer bearing fruit so that what mattered most could be carried safely through.

And I think about those eighteen women in 1915, keeping a ledger through a world war with no way of knowing what would come of it, trusting a future they could not see any more clearly than Paul could see the shore through fourteen days without sun or stars.

Every story in this series has really been the same story, told from a different angle: faithful people, in the middle of a storm they did not choose, doing the next right thing, trusting a promise they did not manufacture, and discovering — sometimes only in hindsight — that the vessel was never the point. The people were. The purpose was. And God kept both, even when the ship did not survive.

So let me leave you with this question this morning. Where has the storm taken away your sun and stars — the familiar landmarks you normally use to know that everything is all right?

Maybe it's a health concern. Maybe it's a relationship. Maybe it's simply the uncertainty of watching a church you love move through a season where the way forward isn't fully visible yet.

Whatever it is, Acts 27 doesn't promise you a calm sea. It promises you a God who keeps His word even when the ship does not survive the journey — a God who has never confused the vessel with the promise, and who is fully able to bring every one of us safely to shore, even if it means, for a season, swimming and holding onto broken pieces to get there.

The storm does not have the final word. It never has. Let us pray...