

God's People a Blessing to the World

Genesis 39:1–6, Acts 27:21–44

When I was a boy, my parents would take our family canoeing. We went on three-day trips down the Au Sable and Manistee rivers, taking along camping equipment and a cooler full of food. I remember paddling in the front of the canoe and turning around to see my father paddling in the back, expertly steering through the left- and right-hand turns that make up the river course, avoiding fallen trees and sand bars.

Nothing can interrupt a canoe trip like getting stuck on a sand bar. Sometimes it's necessary to take all the gear out of the canoe to lighten it, to get it unstuck. That usually involves wading barefoot in the mucky river bottom, pulling and tugging till the canoe gets moving again.

Our Acts text is the famous shipwreck chapter, 44 verses in all. It tells the story of Paul's trip to Rome under military guard, to stand trial before Caesar for preaching the gospel. The ship in our story today was a good deal bigger than a canoe; it likely carried wheat from the breadbasket of Egypt, to be sold in Rome, along with 276 passengers, so it was no small vessel. Luke the historian records that during a fierce storm, "striking a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves." The phrase "a place where two seas met" describes "an isthmus or tongue of land, the extremity of which is covered by the waves . . . a projecting reef or bar against which the waves dash on both sides."¹ There have been thousands of shipwrecks in the Mediterranean Sea since the dawn of time. In the particular wreck in our story today the wind blew the ship headlong against a projecting reef where the ship was broken up.

Modern freighters are jam-full of the latest computer equipment and fancy displays giving the pilot precise data on all sorts of conditions, but this past Wednesday a freighter longer than two football fields ran aground in the Detroit River near Belle Isle. The freighter was loaded with about 20,000 metric tons of rock salt—that's 44 million pounds of rock salt! Amazingly, with the assistance of a tugboat the vessel was able to back away from the bank and get underway. No one was injured.²

As we saw last week, the ship on which Paul was a passenger encountered strong headwinds and stopped at a place called Fair Havens. Winter was approaching, and Paul spoke to the crew: "Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives." But the Roman centurion and the crew were unpersuaded, so the vessel pressed on

¹ Enhanced Strong's Lexicon, διθάλασσοσ (Logos Bible Software)

² <https://www.msn.com/en-us/autos/research/freighter-runs-aground-in-detroit-river-near-belle-isle/ar-AA1bjgEL> accessed 5-18-23

in a vain attempt to reach a better harbor to winter in. It is not difficult to understand why the crew didn't listen to Paul. He was a prisoner, a preacher of the gospel and a tentmaker—*not* a mariner. Paul later writes, “three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep.”³ Clearly, Paul was an experienced traveler—perhaps more experienced than anyone else on board—and had survived shipwrecks before, but he had never been a ship's crewman, so his warning was not taken seriously.

Subsequently, the ship was caught in “a tempestuous head wind . . . called Euroclydon.” The mariners didn't see the sun or stars for many days. Humanly speaking, all hope was lost. Passengers and crew became depressed and nobody even felt like eating. Prompted by the Spirit, Paul stood up and said, “Men, you should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete. . . . Now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.”

How did this prophecy turn out? Not one of the 276 souls on board died—utterly remarkable, as the shipwreck happened in the midst of a violent storm with turbulent winds, giant waves, rocks and shoals, and pieces of wreckage churning in water, that by the force of the waves could have become lethal projectiles. Though a few—particularly crew members—were no doubt proficient swimmers and in good health, some among the prisoners, since they had been confined for some time in dank prison cells, may *not* have been in good health. Moreover, the ship was a total loss. So Paul's very specific prophecy was fulfilled to the letter. On a scale of 1–100 it was spot-on.

How did Paul know how things were going to turn out? The Bible says, “Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.”⁴ God alone knows the future. But in this instance the Holy Spirit revealed to Paul what was going to happen. All the passengers and crew on board this ship were going to make it safely through a devastating shipwreck. This was a special revelation given by God to Paul in order to validate his apostleship and ultimately build our confidence in the Word of God. Paul was called directly to the apostolic office by the resurrected Christ. Paul walked so closely with the Lord that he instantly knew it was God that had spoken, and that this special revelation was true. He conveyed that message immediately to his hearers. In a sense he was taking his life in his hands, for the Bible teaches that “when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously” (Deut. 18:22). Under Old Testament law a false prophet was to be put to death.

Some Charismatic churches want to go back to the conditions in effect before the completion of the Bible. They profess to believe Holy Scripture, but they seek

³ 2 Cor. 11:25

⁴ Prov. 27:1

new revelations of the Spirit. Sometimes people are convinced they have the gift of prophecy; they stand up in a meeting and prophesy that something is going to happen. When the thing prophesied does not happen, people are disappointed, but nobody is ever put to death for presuming to speak in God's name. And the world laughs, thinking that Christianity is just a big joke.

But make no mistake: God is real, and when God prophesies the future, the prophecy is fulfilled exactly. Christ was born of a virgin, the seed of the woman, just as God prophesied to Adam in Genesis 3:15. He was a *son*—not a daughter—as God had prophesied through Isaiah (“unto us a son is given”). He was born, not in Nazareth or Jerusalem, but in the little town of Bethlehem, as God had revealed to the prophet Micah (“thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting,” Micah 5:6). Bethlehem was a small town, a sleepy little hamlet. King David grew up there, but during his reign the capital of Israel was moved to Jerusalem. It took a decree from Caesar Augustus that every soul must return to his or her birthplace to be registered to get Mary and Joseph to the right place at the right time.

Everything that God prophesies comes true exactly as revealed. Jesus taught that man is to live “by *every* word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). God's *Word* is truth, not supposed new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men. The church has a responsibility to teach everything that is in the Bible—and nothing that is *not* in the Bible. God promises to bless the preaching of his word. He says, “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.”⁵

Believer, your confidence is to be in the Word of God. When going through trials or uncertainty, the text of Holy Scripture is to be your stronghold. And it is God's will that believers in Jesus Christ gather weekly with his church to sing his praises and hear his word expounded and applied. We are told, “Be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.”⁶ The Word of God was intended to be read in community, under the oversight and supervision of the elders. The Bible is not filled with private, coded messages that individuals have to figure out on their own; rather, it is Christ's love-letter to his church. Its purpose is not to lift up any particular individual but to lift up Christ, to the glory of God. “Christ . . . loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

⁵ Isa. 55:11

⁶ Eph. 5:17

Hear Paul's words: "There stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.'" Note: the angel personally stood by Paul; this was not some cinematic special effect, it wasn't just a voice from heaven. The way it's phrased is very encouraging to the saints: our covenant Lord goes with us through trials. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." The angel of God stood beside Paul to comfort him.

"Angel" is a transliteration of the Greek ἄγγελος, messenger; it is related to εὐαγγέλιον, gospel, good news, beautiful message. But notice, the angel did not speak to the sailors directly; he gave the divine message to his messenger, Paul, who passed on the good news to his fellow-passengers. So it is in the church today: "How shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!" (Rom. 10:15). God's word is to be preached to his church.

Today in our prayer requests I asked prayer for the Lord to raise up pastors to serve in our Canadian churches. Our Lord's appeal is still appropriate: "The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth laborers into his harvest" (Luke 10:2).

The angel says, "Do not be afraid, Paul." The old King James has "Fear not." That little phrase occurs many times throughout the Bible: "Fear not, Abram," "Fear not, Hagar," "Fear not, Jacob," and on and on: Joshua, Daniel, Mary, Joseph, Zecharias, Simon—and now Paul: "Do not be afraid, Paul." So he speaks to every saint in particular: "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness" (Isa. 41:10). If you belong to Christ, this promise is for you: "Fear not."

Yes, even going through a violent storm of frightening proportions, that few of us have ever experienced, Paul was not to be afraid. This was not because he personally had all the needed resources within himself. The angel did not give Paul a high-five and say, "You can do it, bro! You've got it in you." The Bible does not tell us to trust in *ourselves*, but to trust in God: "That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments" (Ps. 78:7). This is the consistent message of Scripture. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast."⁷

So the angel stands by Paul and tells him: "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with

⁷ Eph. 2:8-9

you.” This is an amazing message. God was promising to save the life of every single one of Paul’s fellow passengers—first of all, his traveling companions. Who were they? Luke the beloved physician (the author of Acts, whose presence is implied in the words “when it was decided that *we* should sail to Italy . . . *we* put to sea . . . the next day *we* landed at Sidon. . . . *We* sailed . . . *we* came to Myra, a city of Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing to Italy, and he put *us* on board.” Moreover, “Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica” also traveled with Paul. It was important for Paul’s survival for him to have traveling companions. As a prisoner, Paul wouldn’t be allowed off the ship when it docked in a harbor; Luke and Aristarchus would no doubt go into town to get provisions. (There was no food service for prisoners.)

But not only was God promising to save the lives of Paul’s traveling companions, the language is broader than that: “Indeed God has granted you *all those who sail with you*.” Here is an aspect of what Reformed theologians call *common grace*. Indeed, the word for “granted” is *χαρίζομαι*, the verbal form of *χάρις*, grace. The literal translation is “God has *graced* to thee all those who sail with thee.” God is assuring Paul that he has graciously given to him all his traveling companions. If God had said, “Paul you are going to experience a violent shipwreck; there are 275 souls on board with you, and I promise that I am going to preserve your life alone,” that would have been good news. If he had said, “Paul I assure you that I am going to spare the lives of you, Luke and Aristarchus,” that would have been good news. But what God says is even more comprehensive than that. God was promising that for the sake of Paul he was going to deliver all 276 souls on board the ship traveling from Alexandria to Rome. All 276 persons would have a first-hand glimpse of God’s mighty miracle.

In our Old Testament text we read how God blessed the house of Potiphar in Egypt for the sake of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. We read that “Joseph found favor in [Potiphar’s] sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority. So it was, from the time that he had made him overseer of his house and all that he had, that the LORD *blessed* the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake; and the *blessing of the LORD* was on all that he had in the house and in the field.”

Note well: just as God blessed the house of Potiphar for Joseph’s sake, so he blessed Paul’s fellow travelers for Paul’s sake. It was good for Potiphar and his house to have Joseph living with them, and it was good for all the passengers and crew traveling with Paul to have Paul as a fellow-traveler. God had determined to bless Joseph—he was cruelly sold into slavery but rose to the position of chief steward of Potiphar’s house, and eventually to second-in-command to Pharaoh. And because God blessed Joseph, those around him were blessed too. Same with

Paul: God had determined to bless Paul, fulfilling his desire to preach in Rome. And because God was blessing Paul, those around him would be blessed too.

What kind of a blessing? Life itself is a blessing. It is a blessing to live, it is a blessing to have neighbors who care for you and pray for you. Christians are the salt of the earth—salt has a preservative effect. It is a blessing to hear the gospel, to hear God’s wonderful plan of salvation. But ultimately, just *hearing* the gospel won’t save you; you must *receive* the gospel. “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (John 1:12).

It was a blessing to Paul’s 275 traveling companions to survive a terrifying shipwreck—to be back on land, safe and sound, to be able eventually to get back to their homes and families, to have their lives and way of life restored. But to be granted an extension of physical life *without* receiving Christ is ultimately no blessing at all, unless you submit and bow the knee to Christ as Lord. The ultimate blessing is to hear his “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of thy Lord”—the blessing of eternal life in heaven.

How many of the 275 traveling companions came to Christ as a result of hearing the gospel at Paul’s mouth and personally witnessing God’s power to save them in a disastrous accident? Only eternity will tell.

Ultimately, all of history ends in either blessing or cursing, heaven or hell. God says, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.”⁸

As we saw last week, life is a journey that sometimes takes us to unexpected places, but the Christian can have assurance that those who are “*led* by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.” Our Good Shepherd leads us all the way.

But let’s not miss the important lesson that God’s people are a blessing to the world. We are *in* the world, but not *of* the world.⁹ For the duration of our earthly life we live “in” the world—that is our address—but we are not “of” the world, we do not hold to the philosophy and values of the world. We march to the beat of a different drummer—Christ the Lord! Kind of like a video I saw this week of a black preacher addressing a school board. He said, “I don’t get my talking points from the DNC, I don’t get my talking points from the RNC, I get my talking points from the B-I-B-L-E!” Amen, brother!

As long as the saints are in this present world, we are a blessing to the world. We bless the world as we tell the good news of Christ. We bless the world as we live Christ. We bless the world as we remind them that there is a God in heaven who sent his Son to take on our humanity and to go to the cross to die for our sin.

⁸ Deut. 30:19

⁹ Cf. John 17:14, 16

Some will hear and receive, some will close their ears and reject, to their eternal damnation.

As God told Ezekiel at the beginning of his ministry, “As for them, whether they hear or whether they refuse—for they are a rebellious house—yet they will know that a prophet has been among them” (Ezek. 2:5).

The world we live in has a lot of natural beauty but also suffers from the ugliness and degradation of sin. Lawlessness and cruelty abound. Our large cities are unsafe. Crime is unpunished. Criminals are released and back out on the street. Pornography and drugs are readily available. Christians are silenced when they speak up. “The mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way” (2 Thess. 2:7). That one who now restrains is the Holy Spirit who dwells in the hearts of his people. As long as God’s people are in the world, they are a blessing to the world. May God help us all to dedicate ourselves to be a blessing to the world. Whether we live through a shipwreck or sail through fair seas, let us be a blessing. Amen.