

How do we weather seasons of life when friends are far away, fair havens fade from the horizon, we are storm-tossed at sea, and everything we need has been stripped away? We lose our job. We’re bombing several classes. Our home life feels like a battleground. We’ve just been diagnosed with a serious illness. Our nation is in dire straits. In seasons like this, many of us (myself included) feel like we need something new—a new word from God that applies directly to our situation.

In Acts 27, after more than two years of waiting, Paul was finally sailing for Rome. His whole life led up to this moment. All his training and experience prepared him to preach the gospel before the Roman emperor Caesar. But on the journey from Jerusalem to Rome, Paul faced one of the fiercest storms of his life. And the strength he needed did not come from a new promise, but an old one—a promise God gave to him years before.

The trip starts off well. At Sidon, Paul’s escort, a centurion who belonged to the Imperial Regiment, named Julius, *“in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs”* (v. 3). *“When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board”* (vv. 5-6). Verse 7 says they *“made slow headway for many days and had difficulty.”* At the next port, called Fair Havens on the isle of Crete, they considered spending the winter, but decided to sail on. It was then everything begins to unravel:

Paul warns them, *“Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.’ But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship”* (vv. 10-11). The wind carrying Paul to Rome suddenly shifted. As the ship left Fair Havens for the tempestuous sea, it was as if God himself was blowing against Paul. We can only imagine what Paul might have thought onboard the ship: *Jesus, I know you’ve called me to*

*Rome. You promised that I'll testify to you there. Why then are you making this journey so hard?*

Have you ever felt that way? *Jesus, you've called me to this place. You've called me to this job. You've called me to this marriage, to this family, to this town. God, I'm just trying to do something good for you—why are you making it so difficult?* When the winds are against us and no fair haven is in sight, we have to regroup. We get so wrapped up in doing something *for God*. But God is more concerned with doing something *in us*. He leads us into winds and storms to show us just how unbreakable his promises are.

Paul warned the crew that a storm was coming—and it did come. A violent wind rumbled over the island of Crete, blowing Paul and his shipmates into the murky, angry depths of the sea. They were violently storm-tossed and began to jettison the cargo. Beginning at verse 18 we read: *“We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved”* (vv. 18-20).

Into that moment of utter despair, God sends an angel to Paul, saying, *“Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you”* (v. 24). The promise that Paul would stand before Caesar is not anything new. Two years earlier, Jesus himself stood by Paul in prison and promised, *“Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome”* (23:11). In the midst of Paul's terrifying storm, he didn't need a *new* promise or a *new* revelation—he only needed to remember the promise God already gave him.

God stripped away everything from Paul and his companions so they couldn't put their hope in the cargo, the tackle, or even the ship itself. Paul's only hope was God's promise. That night, Paul strengthened the crew with the assurance of that promise by saying, *“But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed”* (v. 22).

But what happens when something more pragmatic than “trusting the Lord’s promise” comes along? That night, the sailors were tempted to take a more pragmatic approach. Pragmatism says, “Abandon ship and take your chances rowing for shore.” Faith says, “Stay aboard a sinking ship and trust God’s promises.” In our community life, how quickly we abandon God’s sure promises when something more functional appears on the horizon. In our personal lives, the Scriptures are great when we feel hopeless, but we quickly jump ship the moment a more pragmatic solution appears.

A soft southerly wind gave the sailors false confidence as they sailed out of Fair Havens bound for Phoenix, coasting along the shore of Crete. Then the fierce winds Paul had predicted hit them. It was a northeaster called the Euroclydon, well known and feared by sailors. The ship was driven off course as the winds tossed it to and fro in the high angry waves of the sea. In an effort to save the ship, cargo was thrown overboard. Cables were drawn under the hull of the ship and tightened to keep the vessel from breaking apart in the tempestuous winds and waves. The great fear was that they surely would be carried into the Syrtis Sands off the coast of North Africa. That was the fate of many ships caught by the Euroclydon. Terror gripped all on board. All hope was lost.

But it was not lost by Paul. He remained calm in the calamity. His trust was not in the ship or its crew but in the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle had been through every imaginable kind of danger and difficulty. And the Lord had come to him at just the right moment. This crisis at sea was no exception. After a long fast, A messenger of the Lord came to him and assured him: *“Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you”* (v. 24).

Are you wondering how this story ends? Striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. But the centurion ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, and the rest by holding onto planks or other pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

Those of us hearing the story today knew this was how the story would end. We had no doubt God would keep his promise. But isn't that a funny thing? When we read God's word, we never wonder how the story is going to end. It's a foregone conclusion—God will keep his promise because he always does.

But in our personal stories we ask, "*But how will God keep his promise?* That gets more to the heart of things, doesn't it? That's the question we find ourselves asking God over and over again in the storm: *How?* When Paul needed reassurance that God was going to deliver him, God didn't tell him *how*. In fact, God simply reminded him of a promise he had already made.

In the midst of a storm, we convince ourselves that *we need a new promise. We need to know HOW.* And God comes to us and says, "You don't need a new promise. You need to hear the promise I already gave you, again." God has promised you will be brought safely through—you will reach your journey's end in Jesus Christ. Listen to these sure and certain biblical promises:

- Philippians 1:6: "*Confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*"
- Isaiah 41:10: "*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*"
- John 10:27–28: "*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.*"
- Philippians 4:19: "*And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*"
- 1 Corinthians 1:8: "*He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

I can picture the seasick and panic-stricken faces of the passengers and crew on the ship in that storm with Paul. When Paul relayed the promise that God had given him Paul was in command of the ship not the owner, not the centurion, or

the sailors of the ship. Paul's must have spoken very loudly above the howling winds to communicate the hope that he had in God's promise. They would all be saved, even though they would have to run aground on an island. Awe and wonder must have filled the hearts of all on board. This was no ordinary traveling preacher who exuded such vibrant hope in the midst of a deadly storm. This prisoner in chains pointed away from himself to the source of his confidence and the eternal hope that was given to him. He said, "*So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me*" (v. 25).

New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce once observed, "The Old Testament tells of a ship caught in a storm on the Mediterranean, with a servant of God on board. But whereas Jonah's presence was a near disaster for his shipmates, Paul's presence was the salvation of his shipmates."

In all the crazy storms, the shipwrecks, starless nights and sunless days, we don't know *how* God will bring us through. But we do have God's promise. When we reach the end of our journey, we will be able to say, "I had no idea *how* God would bring me through the storm or *how* I would make it to the end. But never once did he fail to keep his promise."

Never once. Amen.