

*When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. <sup>14</sup> Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the “northeaster,” swept down from the island. <sup>15</sup> The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. <sup>16</sup> As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. <sup>17</sup> When the men had hoisted it aboard, they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. <sup>18</sup> We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. <sup>19</sup> On the third day, they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. <sup>20</sup> When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.*

*<sup>21</sup> After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: “Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. <sup>22</sup> But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. <sup>23</sup> Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me <sup>24</sup> and said, ‘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.’ <sup>25</sup> So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. <sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.” (Acts 27:13-26)*

### **Cheer up even in the Storms of Life!**

When I was little, we lived for several years just outside Indianapolis. The thing that I remember most about those years is the huge thunderstorms we would have there. I remember one night, the thunder was crashing and the lightning was flashing and I was terrified. My dad came into my room to calm me down. He told me that you can tell how far away the storm really is by how much time passes between seeing the flash of the lightning and hearing the rumble of the thunder. He told me to count and for every five seconds, the lightning was a mile away. Now, I don’t know if five seconds per mile is really true and when you’re in first or second grade, you probably don’t count seconds off all that accurately anyway. But counting that time off did help. Somehow, knowing that the lightning was really miles away made me feel safer.

Storms can be scary, and not just to small children. We Lutherans grew up hearing the story of Martin Luther coming home from college during a storm and almost getting hit by lightning and calling on St. Anne and vowing to become a monk. Because storms are so big and so scary, the Old Testament sometimes pictures God riding the storm clouds – and Jesus calmed the storm in our gospel lesson for today. Our Acts lesson is all about a huge storm. But the truth that is built into this reading applies to more than just acts of nature. There are other kinds of storms we have to face. But through them all, our God is with us. That is the message from God’s Word today. **Cheer up even in the storms of life!**

#### **I.**

Now, when you look at the way our Bible translates this passage, do you see the call to “cheer up”? Probably not. Twice our Bible says, “Keep up your courage!” The Greek expression certainly can be translated that way, but I like “Cheer up” better, maybe because it sounds a little more hopeful. Whichever translation you prefer God is calling us to trust him when life gets tough. **Cheer up even in the storms of life! God’s grace will not fail you.**

The storm in our lesson and even the shipwreck that followed show God’s grace. But this account contrasts with our gospel lesson. There, the disciples were caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. That’s a much smaller body of water – think maybe of Lake St. Clair – but they were also in a large open rowboat which was much easier to sink. They were terrified and they asked Jesus for help. And he stood up and calmed the storm. In our text for today, St. Paul and at least St. Luke, possibly other members of their mission team, were in a sea going vessel on the Mediterranean. Again, it was probably an open boat, but much larger with many more people on it. They got caught in a storm that raged for days. And God did not miraculously end the storm. Instead, God promised to rescue them and that happens in the verses that follow. But there was no

obvious miracle. The ship ran aground off the island of Malta and the 276 people on board had to swim for it. But they all did make it to shore.

What does this contrast teach us? First of all, God has more than one way to take care of us. In both lessons, the storm challenged the faith of the men on board. Luke, who wrote Acts, says that they gave up hope of being rescued. But the experience of Paul and Luke is probably closer to what we experience most of the time. God absolutely can do miracles and almost any pastor can tell you stories of God doing things that certainly look like miracles to us. But most of the time, when I visit people in the hospital, when I minister to members before and after funerals, when I counsel distressed Christians in my office, God doesn't do a miracle that we can easily see. Even when sick people get better, most of the time, they have to have the operation or the chemo or take the medicine and most of the time, it takes a while for their body to heal. Sometimes, God doesn't grant the rescue we're looking for, even by ordinary means. Even though we asked God to spare grandma, he determined that it was time for her to go home to heaven. Even though we asked God to make the interview go well and give us the job, he decided that this wasn't the right time and place for us to do that job.

But through it all, God calls us to trust his grace and love. There on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus showed his power as the Son of God to stop the wind and rain. And the fact that the Son of God would stand there as a real man shows God's love, because that God made man was on his way to the cross to die and pay for all our sins. He was on the way to rescue us from the greatest hurricane we'll ever face: God's wrath. Jesus won forgiveness and life for us. He rescued us from death and hell. And he will rescue us from every trial and pain that we face here. That will be true, even if the way he does that is to call us home to heaven.

If that happens, we're out of the storm forever. And if he takes care of our illness or our financial difficulty or whatever it is we're praying about and we see relief here – through an obvious miracle or through his gracious control of our world – again, we are rescued. It's easy for us to see his grace in both of those things. The hard situation is when he calls us to continue in pain or distress, when he allows challenges to test our faith, day in and day out. When the surgery has complications or the physical therapy isn't working, when we try and try to get a decent job, but nothing drops out of the air, when the sadness in our family goes on and on. The storm doesn't seem to end. And we might give up all hope of that situation getting better in this life. And we might even be right.

But God's love still continues. The God who sent his Son to die and rise and save us, will never leave us to face those things alone. Jesus will walk beside us. The Holy Spirit will comfort and strengthen us, so that we cling to Jesus no matter how long the storm lasts or how close it actually gets to us. And in the end, God will bring us home to heaven, where no pain or sorrow will ever touch us again. That promise gives us hope no matter how dark the sky gets or how loud the wind howls.

## II.

But even when we know all that, there's still a question that leaps to our minds: why? Why does God do all this? Why do I have to suffer these things? I'll be honest with you: that's the one question we really aren't allowed to ask. But in spite of that, we can look in the scriptures and see several answers that are generally true. Even when we can't answer the question in our particular suffering, we can always be sure that God's will is being done. **Cheer up even in the storms of life! God's purpose will be accomplished.**

What is God's purpose? On one level, it's impossible for us to know, because every one of our lives is different. We can't see the future. So we don't know why God is letting me suffer this or that today. St. Paul did not know what God's purpose was when they were tossed around on the sea for days on end. But God did have a purpose. The long term one, God told him. Paul had to testify before Caesar and God would use that testimony to bring people to faith in Rome. But Paul could've done that without going through the storm. God's plan for him to testify in Rome was the reason God preserved him and his shipmates. But God sent the storm to begin with. Why?

The only answer we can see in the book of Acts is what happened next. The passengers and crew were shipwrecked on Malta and God used Paul to proclaim the gospel there and bring many people to faith. That shows us a very important lesson: sometimes what I am suffering isn't really about me. There are bigger things going on than my little life. Paul and his companions went through days of hardship and terror so that strangers could hear the gospel and live forever. So sometimes, we may have to suffer things because a much bigger plan is going on and we're like those crew members – and those members of Paul's mission team – who were just along for the ride. That can happen in our lives.

Now sometimes, God lets us see what he's doing, just like he did on Malta. Certainly, for the Christians on board that ship, seeing the people of Malta embrace the gospel was a joy. I bet all of them thought it was worth it to be shipwrecked to save those souls. Even the unbelievers on board that ship heard dramatic testimony before and after the wreck of how God worked to protect his people and accomplish his purpose. If they still rejected the gospel, they had no excuse. In the same way, sometimes, we can look back at pain and sorrow and see the good God did through it.

But God doesn't always let us see that. Why didn't God give grandma another year of life? Why didn't God spare me from the car accident that put me in the hospital? What plan would be messed up by me getting the job I so desperately wanted? In heaven, we'll know the answer to those questions. But here, we don't always. But always we do know what God says: all our hardships and difficulties work for our good. And our greatest good is reaching eternal life. God is willing to let us suffer here, if it keeps the devil from some greater attack or if it keeps us from some temptation that we would not have been able to withstand.

God even says more than that. He tells us that he uses hardship to burn the impurities out of our faith. What does that mean? Everything that we love more than him hurts our faith. Sometimes, God allows pain to come into our lives to teach us how unimportant those things really are. Sometimes, God takes away things that are becoming idols that we love more than him. Sometimes, God is just teaching us to accept that we are powerless in the face of sin and pain and we need to cling to our Savior who loves us and never leaves us. Sometimes, God is just trying to get our attention, to remind us that we need him.

Sometimes, God shows us an extra measure of grace – he does more than he would have to just to fulfill his purpose. The angel who stood next to St. Paul said that God had graciously given him the lives of his shipmates. If some of them had died, would that have changed the message Paul preached on Malta? No. But God gave Paul a gift – he rescued all those men who had ridden out the storm with him. You can imagine that a shared experience like that gave those people a kind of “band of brothers” mentality. They did not have to mourn a single loss. God loves us. He does what is necessary to get us to heaven. But just like we can't help but be generous to our children and give them far more than just food and clothing, God gives us gifts every day. Sometimes, in the storm, he lets us have a gracious gift just so we see his love.

Of course, the one who is doing all this is the Father who loved us so much that he sent his Son to die and rise to save us. It's the Son of God who took on human flesh knowing what it would feel like to be nailed to a cross and die for us. But he loved us enough to let it happen. It's the Holy Spirit who loves us and comes to us in that message to renew and strengthen our faith day by day. That love of God is ours in every storm of life. That Father had the power to call his Son out of the grave. Jesus had the power to raise himself and break free of death's hold. The Holy Spirit had the power to give life to Jesus' mortal body. Our Triune God has all power over life and death. He rides the storm clouds and rules all things on this earth and in heaven. He has all power to rescue you, all power to end the storms you face, all power to carry you through them and bring you home to him. Trust that love and that power. And rejoice even when life hurts and tears flow. Don't paint smiles on your face and be fake. Sadness is real. Pain is real. But Jesus is always there. Rejoice in his love even in the darkest, fiercest, scariest storm you ever face. Because he will carry you through and you will live with him forever. Amen.