

“STAY IN THE BOAT”

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ACTS 27:20-44

No one likes to hear the words, *"I told you so"* - especially my wife. Kathy is a wonderful person, but she has one bad habit. She let's the fuel in her car get perilously close to empty - and I've warned her... Some time ago it finally happened! She ran out of gas... her car pattered to a stop... *but guess what?* She ran out of petro right next door to a gas station. In His grace the Lord bailed out my wife!

At first, she didn't tell me what had happened. Later her conscience began to bother her so she fessed up. Kathy said she ran out of gas, but then she added, *"If I'd really needed help I'd already decided not to call you. I was going to call James at church and get him to pick me up."* And why would she do such a thing? Because she didn't want to hear those dreaded four words - nobody likes to hear - *"I told you so!"*

In Acts 27 the Apostle Paul has an opportunity to say *"I told you so"* to the crew of a Roman merchant ship. He's on his way to Rome, enjoying a Mediterranean cruise courtesy of the Roman Empire. He's been placed in the custody of a centurion named Julius. They boarded a Roman boat in Sidon, and sailed past Cyprus to the port of Myra on the southern coast of Asia Minor. Then from Myra they sailed westward to the island of Crete and to the port city of Fair Havens.

Realize, after mid-September sailing on the Mediterranean was dangerous. After mid-November it was prohibited. We know the events of Acts 27 occur after the Jewish feast of Yom Kippur, in mid-October. The sailing conditions were definitely not favorable.

The crew knew they would have to spend the winter on the island of Crete, but the harbor of Fair Havens was open to western winds and offered little protection. Besides it was a tiny town, with not much to do. It would make for a boring layover. The sailors wanted some entertainment, so they decided to sail 45 miles to the Cretan port of Phoenix. There was stuff to do there. They could check out a Sun's basketball game.

But before they make their decision, Paul warns them, *"Sail and you'll bail, you'll fail, and you'll wail."* Those weren't his exact words, but that was the point. Paul was a seasoned traveler and he knew they were about to make a terrible mistake... But no one listened to Paul. The navigator, the captain, even the centurion - all refused to take heed to Paul's warnings and the ship set sail for the 45 mile trip to Phoenix.

And sure enough, just as Paul had warned - the voyage was a disaster. A tempestuous headwind arose. *Hurricane-force gales - enormous swells* pounded the ship. The winds drove the boat out to sea. And what was suppose to be a 45-mile hop ended up a 645-mile detour. They planned on less than a day to reach Phoenix. It was two weeks later before they saw land again. Their decision was a colossal mistake. The 276 passengers and crew were all placed in harms way. And to make matters even worse - about half-way through the ordeal - Paul pops up on deck and guess what he says? You got it... *"I told you so!"*

We pick up the account of the voyage in Acts 27:20, "Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up. But after long abstinence from food, then Paul stood in the midst of them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss." In other words... **"I told you so!"** He continues in verse 22, "And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For 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.' "Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me. However, we must run aground on a certain island."

Here's the summation of his speech, **"Men, I've got some good news and some bad news."** The bad news is the *ship will sink* - the good news is the *sailors will swim. Land will be found*, but the *boat will run aground*. The boat will *break up*, but we should *cheer-up*, because no lives will be lost. We'll all make it to safety.

It was a thick night. Through the *rain, wind, waves, fog, dark* no one could see the approaching shoreline. The crew heard the breakers slapping the shore, so they started measuring the ocean depth. They were getting closer. They were worried about crashing into the rocks and busting up the boat. They were still too far out to swim. They didn't want to drown in the surf. Verse 29 records their thoughts, **"fearing lest we should run aground on the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern, and prayed for day to come."** It was a desperate moment. All the experienced crew could do was drop anchor and pray for daylight!

Actually, it was at this point, that a few of the sailors tried to launch a skiff - the little row boat that the bigger ship carried on its side. These sailors were scared. They no longer trusted the captain and helmsmen. It was time to abandon ship - *every man for himself!* But when Paul saw what these seamen were doing, he shouts out in verse 31, **"Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."** This time the sailors believe Paul. They cut the cords that were holding the lifeboat to the ship, and ditch it in the ocean.

In the end Paul's words proved to be prophetic. The next day at sunrise the crew hoisted the sails, and headed straight for the shore. They were hoping to run the ship onto the beach, instead they hit a sandbar. The bow stuck in the sand, while the surf ripped out the stern. Broken boards and floating timbers filled the water. Some of the sailors were able to swim safely to shore, but most of the men struggled in the current. As it turned out, the busted up planks from the ship served as life rafts. All 276 passengers onboard made it to shore – many of them on the buoyant timbers. Paul's words, **"Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."** – were literally fulfilled. Once again, Paul could've said, **"I told you so"** - but this time everyone was just glad they had heeded his advice.

Like so many biblical narratives this story teaches an underlying lesson. There was an actual *shipwreck*, but the account also illustrates our own *spiritual trek*. Life is like a voyage. We even use nautical terms to describe how we're doing... **"it's smooth sailing,"** or **"it's sink or swim."** When someone dies we say, **"they made it to the other shore."**

In many ways life is like a ship on the sea... There are days when all is well... the sky is clear... the breeze is gentle... the waters are calm... Then there're times when the sea gets rough. The night and the storm combine to create panic and strike fear in the hearts of the sailors. We try to reach land, but our life hits the *sandbar of suffering* - our plans crumble in the surf – hope breaks apart. And in those moments, our

tendency is the same as those *misguided mariners*. The impulse is to abandon ship - jump out of the boat - everyman for himself. We try to launch the lifeboat and row on our own. We lower the sails and start paddling in our own energy.

When you go whitewater rafting the guides have a golden rule. The guiding principle among river rafters is simple - no matter how much trouble you're in – no matter how precarious the situation - **99.9 percent of the time you stand a better chance of survival by staying in the raft than you do by getting out of the raft!** Whitewater is tricky. You can get twisted in the rapids and stuck on a rock. Your boat starts taking on water. You think its time to abandon ship - *but it's not!* It's definitely not! Despite what you might think – you are still better off **in the boat than out of the boat!** *In the boat* you're protected by some very durable rubber... Whereas, *in the water* you become prey to hydraulics, and rocks, and whirlpools. If you're in the water, even the boat itself - now weighed down with a ton of water - becomes your enemy. A heavy boat can sandwich you in between its tube and a stone wall.

And the golden rule for rafters is true in the Christian life. ***We're always safer inside the boat of God's will.*** When the winds kick up and the waves churn our tendency is to panic. We let *fear override our faith*. We jump out of God's will and take off in our own efforts. Realize you're still safer *in the boat* than *in the water!* When you step out of the will of God and jump into the swirling water - suddenly you've become prey to rocks of evil and whirlpools of sin. Even the boat is your enemy. Get in the way of God's purposes and plans, and you're the one who's going to get crushed. Notice, God didn't promise to calm Paul's storm – or even keep his ship intact – but God did promise that no one's life would be lost if everyone stayed in the ship! There was safety... there was life... in the boat!

Paul's words for these *panicky Popeyes* are God's word to us, ***"Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved"*** It's not enough to be *in Christ*, we must *remain in Christ*. We need to continue in our faith. When the night and storm combine to cause panic in your life – you'll make it, *only* if you stay in the boat! Paul's words in Colossians 1:21-23 are for you and me, ***"You, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now he has reconciled in the body of his death, to present you holy, and blameless, and irreproachable in his sight - if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel..."*** You've got to stay in the boat! God's blessing comes not just to people who come to Christ and have faith, but to those who abide in Christ, and continue in faith.

Faith needs to persevere. Life is like a postage stamp. ***"Consider the stamp; its usefulness consists in the ability to stick to one thing until it gets there."*** *Paul's words to the crew* are *God's word to us* regarding His will. The place God has you isn't always easy. Even the center of His will isn't guaranteed to be calm waters - storms of testing can pound our life...

Perhaps you're in a marriage that seems to be breaking a part... Or you've got a job... or you're taking a class... or you're dealing with a rebellious kid... You're in over-your-head in troubled waters, and it's becoming clear that there's a shipwreck in your future. In fact, you're not sure you can remain in your situation one more second... You're ready to bail... You want to jump ship, and abandon your responsibilities... But wait! Listen again to Paul - he's speaking to you - ***"Unless (you) stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."*** God will bring you through the crisis! He is faithful! He will work a miracle in your situation and keep you safe from harm – but it's up to you to trust Him enough to stay put! There's life and safety in the boat! It's up to you to resist the temptation to jump ship!

I once worked a job that required some Friday night overtime. We were all young guys with things to do, and places to be, and people to see on Friday night. Everyone hated Friday OT – but especially Dave. Around noon on Fridays, Dave would take inventory of the situation. If it

looked like we weren't going to finish on time he'd start pushing. He'd crank it into high gear. He'd work like a trojan. And all afternoon he'd be chanting, "I'z gotz ta go! I'z gotz ta go! I'z gotz ta go!"

Some of us are plagued by the same impatience. We can't stand it when the will of God proves inconvenient. We get rankled by the thought that God might have us in an unpleasant situation for a purpose. And we sing the same refrain... "I'z gotz ta go!" It's easier to *bail out* on a set of circumstances than it is to *buck up* - it's easier to *jump ship* than *hang tough!*

Ellen Goodman, columnist for the Boston Globe, refers to America as "*a nation of leavers.*" She points out how we left the Old World to immigrate to America. Then later in our history, we left the eastern seaboard to move west. Goodman writes, "*Now, since there's no place else to go, we're leaving ourselves.*" What she means is we're bailing out on relationships and responsibilities... That's why in 2010, 43% of first marriages ended in divorce - up from just 16% in 1960. When things get tough at work - or when there's pressure at home - when school is no longer fun - or when I run into a problem with the church I attend - the tendency is to sing, "I'z gotz ta go! I'z gotz ta go!"

But no you don't! You can choose to stay put - to remain with the ship! You can choose to trust Christ and stay in the place where He's called you. This was Paul's advice to the Corinthians. The new believers figured it would be easier to live the Christian life by opting for less cumbersome circumstances. Those with debts tried to be free - married folks thought life would be easier if they were single - single folks thought the same about being married - Jews wanted to be Gentiles - Gentiles desired to be Jews... Why do we always think the grass is greener on the other side? Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:24, "*Let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called.*" In other words, *stay in the boat of God's will.*

It'll take courage. It'll take faith! You'll have to trust the Lord with all your heart - but ultimately it's worth it! Lord Wellington was the British General, who at the battle of Waterloo, led his troops to victory over Napoleon. After his triumph, he explained the key to his army's victory, "*Our men were not braver than the enemy. They were brave five minutes longer.*"

Realize, perseverance is a component of faith. True faith hangs on. It has an element of *stick-to-it-ness*. As Christians we're not scaling a rope to heaven - we're holding onto a rope that's being hoisted upwards by God. It's not up to us to climb the rope, but it is our responsibility to hang on as God pulls us upward! We should never loosen our grip on God's grace. We need to hold fast! Maintain a tight grip on His promises.

We need to grasp tightly God's love for us - squeeze His blessings - never let them go! No matter *how dark the night* or *how rough the sea* stand firm in your faith. Christian author Lyell Rader makes a profound statement, "*Faith grows only in the dark. You've got to trust God where you can't trace Him. That's faith. You just take Him at His Word, believe Him, and grip the nail-scarred hand a little tighter. And faith grows.*" This is the reason God allows the storm. You can't appreciate the anchor until you've felt the stress of the storm. Our love for God deepens when we stay in the boat and watch Him come through. *Grace gets amplified - faith is fortified - commitment is solidified - God gets glorified - only from the deck of the ship!*

This morning, if you're not ready to sing God's praise, and give personal testimony to God's faithfulness - if you lack examples from your own life of God's power to deliver - *then it says to me, that you've been too quick to jump ship!* You haven't stayed in the boat long enough for

God to work a miracle for you! I've heard it said, "Pray for a faith that won't shrink when washed in the waters of affliction." We need a *preshrunk faith* - a faith that keeps its shape even in turbulent waters – a faith that can float – that can be tested and not *draw up* or *shrink back*.

The greatest danger we face is not Satan entering in and snatching our blessings from us – it's us giving them up, and letting go, and turning loose of our grip.

Hebrews 10:23 instructs us along these lines, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." We've got to hold fast.

Ironically, those who stayed with the ship watched the vessel crumble out from under them - but as they were flailing in the surf, chunks of the damaged schooner became life-vests for the crew members. And this is how God works... the outcome of yesterday's trial: *the lesson learned, or the pain that was overcome, or the wound that was healed* - now becomes the flotation device God uses to keep my head above water in my current storm. My faith grows. Who would've thunk it! *Yesterday's wreckage becomes today's salvation!* It gives us a fresh hope. Stay in the ship - hold fast to God... if you remain in that relationship - or hold on to that responsibility God has given you - then you give God the opportunity to *redeem your sorrow, and reinvest your suffering*.

In Psalm 56:8 David tells the Lord, "You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle; are they not in Your book?" In other words, God bottles our tears. God is the great bottler! He collects every teardrop that rolls off your cheeks - then I believe He uses those tears to water your tomorrows. The fruit that sprouts up in the future is being watered by the sorrows of today. God redeems... *but only if we stay in the ship!* Board your own boat - start paddling in your own efforts - do it your own way - and you'll have nothing to hold onto. You'll drown! *You've got to stay in the boat!*

Isaiah 61:3 tells us that one day God will trade us "Beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." If we persevere in faith - maybe not today or tomorrow, but one day - God will swap us *sweetness* for *bitterness*. People will say you're wasting time in the boat. Friends will tell you to jump ship while you can. They'll tell you you're wasting your life waiting on God. It's time you branched out on your own and pursued your own path... *Don't listen to them*.

Instead, cut the lifeboats. Ditch your other options. Burn your bridges. Plot no other alternative. Make no other plan. Make up your mind that you won't abandon ship even if what looks like a better offer comes along. Real faith is banking it all on God's Word and will. Remember, *it's always safer in the ship, than it is in the water*. Continue in your faith, hold fast to your confession - even when the surf churns, and the boat breaks - God will see to it that you make it to shore.

No life is immune to brokenness. We're all humbled *by life and by God* at times. God works over and over in us through the tools of death and resurrection. We die to our selfish tendencies. We honor our commitments, and remain faithful to the people and purposes God has for us. We stay in the place He's put us, and resist the urge to abandon ship... then, even if the ship crumbles from under us God will provide us a way out – He'll open a new door – He'll do a new work. Even if the ship gets broken to pieces God will take what's left and birth something new. He redeems the shipwrecked pieces of a life for *our good and His glory*.

David cries in Psalm 19:14, "O LORD, my strength and my redeemer." God is a Redeemer - a restorer. He specializes in transforming crosses into crowns, and defeats into victories, and lumps of clay into pieces of pottery, and shipwrecks into lessons learned - *even floating timbers into lifejackets*. **Just stay in the boat!**

Around the turn of the 20th century the heavyweight boxing champion of the world was a man named, "Gentleman Jim Corbett." "Gentleman Jim" made a comment to boxers, but his words apply to Christians... He said, "Fight one more round. When your feet are so tired that you have to shuffle back to the center of the ring, fight one more round. When your arms are so tired that you can hardly lift your hands to guard your face, fight one more round. When your nose is bleeding and your eyes are black and you're so tired that you wish your opponent would crack you on the jaw and put you to sleep, fight one more round - remembering, that the man who fights one more round is the man who never gets whipped."

Hey, never give up on God, or on His will. Don't *bail out* on Christ - don't *launch out*, or *branch out* on your own. If you do, you're going to drown! Fight one more round. Keep clutching on to God's grace. He'll prove His faithfulness... *if you stay in the boat!*