

# Take Heart!

Acts 27:1–28:10

June 16, 2002

“I now bid you take heart; for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.” With these words, Paul comforted, challenged, and evangelized the sailors, the soldiers, the passengers, and his fellow prisoners. With these words, Paul continues to comfort, challenge, and evangelize even us today.

“I now bid you take heart; for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.” People who had not listened to him before listened to Paul when he spoke these words. Hardened Roman soldiers were glad to receive these words of comfort. Desperate sailors who realized how bad the storm was were glad to receive these words of comfort. Prisoners who feared for their lives were glad to receive these words of comfort. For just before these words were spoken, the author of our account recorded, “all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.” They had given up. From the human perspective, there was nothing else they could do. Maybe you have been there. And yet, Paul spoke a new word of hope. He spoke with conviction and authority. After all, he had been right before in telling them not to sail, when all the others were wrong, so this time they gladly listened to him. Maybe he was right again. Maybe he had something to say that no one else could say.

What Paul said was, “Take heart.” When the heart has failed and courage has been lost, when the day is dark and the night is long, these are good words of fresh courage. These are good words of fresh courage if there is a good reason for them, a good basis, a good authority, a good reason to believe them, to accept them, and to act upon them. Otherwise, they are only noise. These words can give the very courage they command, if they are based in truth and reality. What is the truth here? What is the reality? By what authority does Paul speak these words? How can he say, “Take heart”? How could he say it to them? How can he say it to us?

“This very night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’” At this point I begin to wonder whether the men might have preferred the storm to an angel of the Lord. But there is no indication of this in the reading. What form this alien messenger took we are not told. His first words, “Do not be afraid,” serve a dual purpose; in this immediate context, they mean for Paul not to be afraid of the storm, and yet, we recall that they are almost always the first words of an angel, suggesting a terrifying appearance. But the angel is only a messenger. The message comes from God. And the message here is that Paul must stand before Caesar. Paul is not going to die on this ship or on this trip because God has decided that Paul will bear witness before Caesar. God has decided that the gospel of Jesus Christ will be proclaimed in the capital of the empire and that the Apostle Paul is going to proclaim it. Therefore, Paul will live.

After all, this is the God to whom Paul belongs and whom he worships. God does not belong to Paul. This is not Paul’s God. It is the other way around Paul belongs to God. So do we. It is important to get that right. On the basis of this belonging, Paul also worships God. Paul

believes in, praises, prays to, serves, and obeys God. This is what the Christian faith and life are all about.

Interestingly, the message which Paul receives does not say that he was going to escape. It does not say that there would not be a shipwreck. In fact, Paul was clear that there would be a wreck. And yet, what it does say is, "God has granted you all those who sail with you." It is not simply that they will all live. Instead, they are being granted to Paul. What can this possibly mean, except that Paul had been faithfully praying, not simply for himself, but for all two-hundred-seventy-six people on board? Paul had been praying for them all to be saved, and Paul's prayer was granted. The ship was lost. The cargo was lost. But the lives were saved. And they were saved because Paul asked for them to be saved. In the midst of the storm, Paul was on his knees, not just for his own sake, but also for theirs. They were saved because God granted Paul's prayer. So are we given a model for the Christian life of prayer. We are to pray not only for our own and ourselves but also for all those about us, for their salvation and well being.

Here are where the words of challenge and evangelism come in. It was one thing to be encouraged to take heart. It is quite another to be told that God is in control of the world, that God communicates with human beings, that God answers prayer, and that God cares about human life. There is the challenge. That is not the way Roman soldiers looked at the world. That is not the way Greek or Egyptian sailors looked at the world. And it may not be the way people look at the world today. The challenge is not simply to take heart. The challenge is to see the world, truth, and reality in a whole new way. And the evangelism, the good news, is to realize that the God of the universe is the loving God and Father of Jesus Christ.

You see, God not only had a plan for Paul's life, but he also has a plan for your life and for mine. There is a reason we are in this place and time. There is a reason we are in this city and this country. There is a reason we are in this congregation and this denomination. The reason may not be clear to us in the moment. Going through the storm and the shipwreck had to be hard on Paul. But he knew that God had a purpose and a reason for everything that happened. This deep faith gave him courage, strength, dignity, and poise. Are these attractive to you? They are the results of faith in the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

It has been over a year since we started reading and preaching through Acts, so that we have arrived here at this reading today. It was on Monday of this past week that I thought about pairing this story of Paul being saved from ship wreck and carried safe to Rome with that of Jonah being saved from the storm at sea and sent to Nineveh, the capital of another empire. You will remember that for Jonah the whale was God's means of salvation, the vehicle that carried Jonah safe to where God wanted him to be. Then on Tuesday of this week, while all of this was on my mind, and as a result of an appointment made weeks earlier, I was taking a tour of the Henrico County Jail with the chaplains there. And there I met an inmate who spoke of being in jail, not with resentment but with appreciation, as being "in the belly of the whale."

This young man, reasonably smart, previously with a successful military career, has come to understand the Henrico County Jail, which is not a pleasant place to be, as "the belly of the whale," that is, as the means of God's grace, the vehicle of God's salvation, the instrument by which God will carry him from where he was to where God wants him to be, even though he had been running the other direction as hard as he could go. This young man was grateful that God had not let him go any farther down the wrong path. He was grateful for these strange and harsh means by which God was turning his life around.

One of the chaplains, who used to be an inmate there himself, understands all of that very well. The chaplain says that if God could turn his life around, he can turn around the life of anyone in that jail. What he did not have to say is that God can turn around the life of anyone not in that jail. The point is, God has a plan and a purpose for human life. God has a place where he wants us to be. God has a work he wants us to be doing. Paul was arrested so that he could preach to kings and the emperor. Jonah was thrown overboard so that he could be carried to Nineveh. Do we know God's plan for our lives? Do we want to go along with God's plan willingly, or do we want to be dragged through "the belly of the whale"?

"This very night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told."

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor  
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
1627 Monument Avenue  
Richmond, Virginia 23220