

August 12, 2018

Church Planting  
*Facing Life's Storms*  
Acts 27:1, 13-20

**Opening words:** By now you should know my task. During the summer months, I am preaching through the Book of Acts. I began in 2013, and I will finish this year. I have called this entire series, *Church Planting*. The reason I have made this major time commitment to this New Testament book is, I am trying to reconnect with the Holy Spirit. Let me be blunt. We need a revival. Never forget it. Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. This is sermon number sixty-one in the series. I want to make a confession before I begin.

This message is about problems, but my life at this moment is problem-free. Let me be clear. This is a good period in my life. In comparison to so many, I really have no major problems. Personally, I feel loved and secure. I love my wife and I am proud of my children, who pay for themselves. Physically, I and everyone in my family is whole. Spiritually, I don't worry about their salvation. Economically, I am not rich, but I am also not lost in debt. Professionally, I am respected by my peers. I find my job to be rewarding and challenging. I have found my purpose. There are even moments I am self-actualized. I have traveled the world, yet I have found a home. I have a good life, which leads me to my next confession. I fear troubles will once again find me, stripping me of everything I value. Can I ask you a question? Are you in a good period in your life, problem-free? Or, are you surrounded by problems? Regardless, this message is for you. One of the good people in the history of this church was a good friend, Jim Petrella. Jimmy said it to me countless times, "Russ, if we all put our problems on the table face up, we would take our own problems back." I have called this message *Facing Life's Storms*. Our scripture reading is Acts 27:1, 13-20.

**Acts 27:1, 13-20** When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment.

<sup>13</sup> When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; 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> so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Because they were afraid 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.

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The ninetieth Psalm begins with these words: *"Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born and you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."* What is King David trying to say in this passage? He is reminding us that the only true constant in our lives is God. Everything else is temporary. If you can agree with that statement, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves today in the twenty-seventh chapter of Acts. After two years of waiting, the moment had finally come. Paul boards a ship and is heading to Rome. However, there is no crowd wishing him a fond farewell. The only emotion present is relief. Everyone was glad to see Paul go. It didn't have to be Rome. He could have been going anywhere. The people just wanted him to go away. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were glad to see him go because they were tired of him demoting the Old Testament law. The Jewish community of Jerusalem was glad to see him go because they were tired of him talking about the resurrection of Jesus. The Roman authorities were glad to see him go because he was causing them more work. Everyone was glad to see Paul go. The truth be told, even Paul was glad to go, because he wanted to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Capital City. Paul boards the ship, ready for a new adventure. If anyone deserved smooth sailing, it was Paul. The problem is, that is not how the world works. Paul's journey to Rome was filled with storms. Paul encountered one problem after another. That takes us to today's scripture lesson.

According to the text, the problems began right away. Prior to our reading, we are told the winds were against the ship, frustrating any progress. It didn't just happen for a single day, it happened for many days. Verse nine says, much time was lost, and the situation became dangerous. With winter approaching, the situation was truly dire. The story grows darker, when we are told hurricane strength winds arrived. In a desperate attempt to save their lives, they threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Paul was not on a Carnival Cruise ship filled with modern technology. He was on a wooden ship, which was dangerous even in good weather. The future of everyone on board is questionable and their emotions ran high. Verse 20 concludes our reading with these dark words, *"When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved."* If anyone deserved smooth sailing, it was the Apostle Paul. He had done nothing wrong. He had done so much for Jesus. He still had much to offer. He had done nothing wrong, but he was in the middle of a great storm. If the Apostle Paul had to endure the storm, why do so many believe they should be excluded? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** The entire chapter reminds us that life is hard and the world can be cruel.

This is one of the cruelest stories I have heard lately. It came from the state of New Mexico. You have heard the story. The various news outlets have covered it. A

makeshift compound was constructed in a rural area. There was no power. There was no water. There was next to no food. Eleven children between the ages of one and fifteen were rescued. They say those children were being trained for future violence. Five adults have been arrested and charged. It was a tragic story, but then it got worse. Earlier this week, the remains of a little boy were found. Many believe the remains are of a missing three-year-old. The story makes me sick to my stomach and it forces me to ask the question, what could a three-year-old have done to deserve such a fate? Stories like this one make me wonder about mankind. I hate to see innocent people suffer. However, it isn't just his story, it is your story too.

Every week, we gather as a church. Every week, we pray as a church. Sometimes, we share our prayer requests. We have the license to share our physical ailments. There is always a new hip or knee. There is always a heart attack. There is always someone battling cancer. Once we are done sharing our ailments, I ask if there are any unspoken prayer concerns. The hands go up and I look around. Sometimes, I know the stories. Sometimes, I don't. It is the unspoken prayer concerns that are the most cruel. Sometimes, the story revolves around a poor personal decision; you spent too much money, or you had sex with the wrong person. Sometimes, the stories revolve around bad luck. You did nothing wrong, but hardship found you. You never smoked a single cigarette, but you got lung cancer. You were driving home from work and were blindsided. The baby was born with a deformity. You did nothing wrong, but, like Paul, you find yourself in the middle of a great storm. Have you ever found yourself in the middle of a great storm? If you have ever had a problem in your life, say, "**Amen!**" Listen to what I am about to say.

We live in Satan's playground. Everyday, we play the part of Job. Satan does horrible things to us because he wants us to denounce our faith, but we aren't going to do it. You have nothing if you walk away from Jesus. It is true. God does not cause our problems, but God uses our problems to teach us valuable lessons. There is nothing uniquely Christian about these lessons; they are universal. There are four things we can learn from hardships. I bet you will agree with each one.

- 1. You learn who your real friends are.** That is one of the great shortcomings of the internet. You can distill the church down to relationships. There is the relationship you have with Jesus. However, there are also the relationships you have with one another. You can make friends anywhere, but the best friends you will ever make, the ones who will stand by you during life's greatest storms, are church friends. During hardships, we learn who our real friends are. If you can agree with that statement, say, "**Amen!**"
- 2. You learn the depth of your strength.** Have you ever uttered these words, "I don't know how I survived?" I talk to all kinds of people, so I am qualified to make this statement: We are very critical of ourselves. We are blind to our own goodness. However, I also believe, we are blind to our own

strength. You are a better person, you are a stronger person than you think. In hardship, the depth of your strength is exposed. If you can agree with that statement, say, **"Amen!"**

- 3. You learn what really matters in life.** I have seen it countless times. Death is drawing close to an individual. Their time is limited and they begin to review their regrets. No one has ever said, "I wish I had worked more." No one has ever said, "I wish I had cleaned the garage," or "I wish I would have gone to the grocery store." They do say, "I wish I would have spent more time with my children when they were young" or, "I wish I would have told my brother, 'I am sorry'" or, "I wish I had been a better spouse." During hardships, we learn what really matters in life. Our priorities are exposed. If you can agree with that statement, say, **"Amen!"**
- 4. You learn how to be grateful.** I am thankful for the good life today, because my life has not always been easy. I don't know how I endured, but I did. It isn't just me, it is you too. Have you ever held a loved one closer, after the death of another loved one? Because of hardships, we learn to be grateful. If you can agree with that statement, say, **"Amen!"** But, this is the good news for today:

Everyone in today's story was wrong! In the emotion of the moment, they thought they were going to die, but they didn't. Beyond our reading, Paul tells them they are going to survive, and only the ship will be lost. Paul is confident, because an angel came to him and told him he would stand before the great Caesar. This is the truth: The storm was hard to endure, but Paul's story continued. As always, in the end, God prevails. It isn't just true of Paul. It is our story too. The storms in our lives are temporary; God is eternal. Some have compared our problems to fog. They may have a point.

According to the Bureau of Standards in Washington, a dense fog covering seven city blocks to a depth of 100 feet is composed of less than one glass of water. That amount of water is divided into about 60 billion tiny droplets. Yet, when those minute particles settle over a city or the countryside, they can blot out almost everything from your sight. So it is with our problems. It is seen in the text. They were emotionally overwhelmed by their storm and couldn't see the big picture. Have you ever been emotionally overwhelmed by your problems? In the end, you are not just blind to the big picture, you are blind to God Himself. Never forget it, God is eternal. Our problems are temporary. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Back in May, Kathryn and I celebrated our thirtieth wedding anniversary. The past thirty years have gone by fast, and I will admit freely, God has been good to us. We have been to many amazing places in the world, but there are places within the United States we have never been to together. She had never been to the Grand Canyon, so we decided to travel to Arizona to celebrate. It was a great trip. I don't know how you

can see the Grand Canyon and question the existence of God. It is just amazing. It was hard for my limited mind to take all in. However, it was her first trip to the Grand Canyon, not mine.

I was at the Grand Canyon in 1973. I was part of a church mission trip. We helped built a trail for the blind. I have wonderful memories of that trip, because I was surrounded by friends. Someone asked me if the Grand Canyon had changed in the last 45 years. I said, "It was a few inches deeper." This is the truth: The Grand Canyon hadn't changed, but I have changed a great deal in the last 45 years. In 1973, I was sixteen years old. In 1973, I had a 29-inch waste. In 1973, we laughed at people with gray hair. In 1973, the most exciting thing in my life was my new driver's license. In 1973, the most important people in my life were my high school friends. In 1973, I didn't have a clue what to do with my life. A great deal has happened to me since 1973. Since 1973, I graduated from high school and college. Since 1973, I discovered God's purpose for my life and graduated from seminary. Since 1973, I jumped through all the hoops to be an Elder within the United Methodist Church. Since 1973, I got married, raised a family and became a grandfather. Since 1973, I have seen the world and have found a true home. Since 1973, I have experienced several storms and shed a few tears. Since 1973, I have completely changed, but the Grand Canyon, to my untrained eye, has remained the same.

It is also true of God. As a believer, it is important for you to remember that God doesn't change. Don't let your emotions fool you. The storms in your life are temporary, but God is eternal. Do you remember the words from King David? He once said, "*Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born and you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*" Like Paul, the storms in our lives will pass, but God is unchanging, because God is eternal. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"