

SURVIVING THE STORMS OF LIFE

Written by admin

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by Dr. Henderson Ward



In my homeland of Barbados, West Indies, we are accustomed to weathering seasonal and unseasonal storms almost as a way of life. As these storms make their way from continental Africa on their relentless journey across the Atlantic Ocean to pound the shores of Florida or Mississippi in the USA they are drawn with metronomic consistency to these beautiful and vulnerable islands of the Caribbean. As we reflect on this topic, surviving the storms of life, we should remind ourselves of a gripping account of surviving a real storm by reading the report as chronicled in Acts 27:14-29.

We can therefore empathize with the Apostle Paul who, in the scripture we have just read, found himself in a ship on the Mediterranean Sea heading for Rome being assailed by a ferocious storm. All around him is utter pandemonium, the ship can sink at any time, the other 246 people on board are distraught, frightened and expect the worse and Paul, the 247th member is cool, calm, collected and composed and through him, under God's guidance, everyone on board is safely brought to a safe haven.

How did Paul manage to survive this natural disaster? Since it is a given that we will have storms throughout this earthly life, let us reflect on this episode and learn from Paul what it takes for us to be successful as Christians when encountering the storms of life. Make no mistake about it this life for most people are rough and for believers, who have taken up their cross and are following Jesus, it is rougher still. The world seems to be getting worse and wickedness seems to be exponentially increasing everywhere. The scene is therefore set for the inevitable storms of life to increase numerically as well as in their intensity and each believer has to do what it takes to ensure his survival.

In every case God must be central to all our efforts and our faith and hope pinned on him if we are to survive. There are a number of significant things the believer has to do and some are mentioned below.

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It is necessary to rely on God's presence

History has shown that the emblem representing the presence of God has been the most sought after throughout the domain of earth's warring people. Primitive people would carry the image of their god on poles as they fought their enemies, the nation of Israel carried the Ark as they fought their way through Palestine and towards the Promised land and the Christian armies fought throughout the crusades with banners unfurled and crosses lifted high and other symbols representing the presence of God. We know from Scripture when the Ark of the Covenant was lost as Israel fought against the Philistines then the Israelites were vanquished, their spirits broken for the very presence of God had deserted them.

It is for good reasons that one of Israel's favorite scriptures is Psalm 46 for it contains this gem of a verse, "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." (Psalm 46:1). The presence of God, symbolic or otherwise, has meant more to people of faith than the presence of multitudes either for or against them. When God chooses to announce his presence or be present in a tangible way then things take on an awesome magnitude. This was so in the case of Daniel in the lions' den, the three Hebrew boys in the fire and here in our text when Paul was in the middle of a ferocious storm. Why then, we may ask, is God's presence so important? There are many factors beneficial to believers based on God's presence and a few of them are as follows.

God's presence is comforting

In the middle of this ferocious storm anyone could be excused for losing his composure, getting worried and fearful but Paul was serenity personified because he was comforted, "For there stood by me this night the angel of God" (Acts 27:23a). Because of the visible presence of God in the person of the angel he was assured and went on to relay what the angel said, "Fear not, Paul" and then proceeded to comfort them, "be of good cheer" Paul was doing what he did elsewhere for when you are comforted by Almighty God you in turn can comfort others as this same Paul demonstrated to the church at Corinth. He wrote, "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

God knows our needs, whatever they are and in every situation, and will supply them all by Christ Jesus our Lord and when we are in distress he will always comfort our hearts.

God's presence is confiding

God demonstrates his presence and gives us confidence that he is very much an integral part of our existence. Many people believe, and among them are scholars, that God created the world and left it to carry on by itself without his involvement (these people are called deist) and this experience with Paul shows the folly of that thinking. God's presence was a fitting response to Paul's trust and confidence in the God of his salvation, the very one who came to give assurance to his servant. It also demonstrated God's satisfaction and care for his servant Paul, "whose I am and whom I serve" (Acts 27:23b).

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It was as if God was making a statement by saying "I honour your trust Paul and just for you here I am". Not many people on earth will have such a visible affirmation. That confidence was so irrepressible that Paul could not help but state it boldly in his letter to Timothy, "For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (2 Timothy 1: 12).

God's presence is consoling

The world is characterized with all kinds of conflicts and there are terrors aplenty everywhere, steep mountains, stormy seas, desolate countryside and hostile enemy territories sometimes in your own neighbourhood but the presence of God consoles. People in high places go around with armed security guards and armour-plated vehicles but even then they are still worries of violence. With God's consoling presence things are very different as David pointed out, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." (Psalm 23: 4).

God's hallowed presence is something we can rely on absolutely and without fail and although we cannot always be blessed with tangible proof of that presence we know we have it and the words of Jesus say it all, "and, lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the world." (Matthew 28: 20b).

It is essential to rely on God's promises

We can say that God functions and relates to mankind on the basis of his divine promises which are embedded in his word. Throughout the Bible God has made promises; some covenantal and unconditional, like that given to Noah that seedtime and harvest, summer and winter shall not fail as long as the earth remains, others merely conditional pledges like Israel's requirement to worship God, live right and live long in the land. We now know that something quite remarkable has emerged. In every instance where man has been involved in conditional covenants the record shows that man has signally failed to deliver whereas on the contrary God has fulfilled every covenant or pledge he has undertaken that related to the past.

Based on God's perfect and compelling performance in thus far fulfilling every promise he has ever made gives powerful assurance that all his promises will be kept and we can rely on them absolutely. When the angel made the promises to the Apostle Paul that all would turn out well it was God himself doing to Paul what he had done time and again i.e. making promises, giving assurance and fulfilling the promises made.

Paul immediately took God at his word and forthwith assured all on board that all would be well thus showing his complete confidence and reliance on God's promises. God's promises are always timely and every believer in every situation of life, however daunting it may be, can rely on these divine promises without anxiety. Believers need not fear anything for God has not given us the spirit of fear says Paul in 2 Timothy 1:7 but more importantly because God is in touch with us and interacts as necessary at the personal level.

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His promises are personal

When the storms of life assail us it is easy to forget that God deals with us on a personal level as Paul found out as he weathered this perilous storm. Our text puts it like this, "For there stood by me this night the angel of God saying fear not Paul" (Acts 27: 24a). This is as personal as it can get.

Who can forget that momentous occasion when Jesus walked through Jerusalem and looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down" as Luke recorded in Luke 19: 5.

At the site of the most famous conversion on earth the personal call went out, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4) No wonder it was so very successful.

Even in Old Testament times God was personal when he said, "Moses, take off thy shoes for the ground where you are standing is holy ground" says Exodus 3: 4-5.

Believer need to know that God knows your name for you are not just a digit in his register and when the difficulties of life grab hold of you he calls you by name and lets you know that he is with you. While it is true that God can and does deal with us on the corporate level, there is something extraordinarily precious when God calls us by name.

His promises are precise

It would have been so easy in our text to generalize the promises but God knew that what Paul needed were specifics to hold on to and God responded, "thou must be brought before Caesar" (Acts 27: 24b). Precision like this focuses the mind and enables God-given objectives to be clarified and restated. Paul had set out to go to Rome because his mission to the Gentiles required that he as the "Apostle to the Gentiles" should appear before Caesar and take the gospel message to the heart of the Roman Empire. In like manner God has been very specific and crystal clear on his promises to every believer who through grace trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

God has promised victory over Satan and no power or circumstance on earth can deny it. Believers must believe it.

God has promised grace to see you through for he will never let you come up short; come to God's throne and accept it.

God has promised you eternal life unworthy though you are; relish it in Jesus' name.

His promises are perceptive

God's promises are yea and amen and attested to in his written word, the Bible, and therefore forever settled in heaven, "For ever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven." (Psalm 119: 89). God will never abrogate or renege on a divine principle and every promise given carries that assurance. As believers live their lives daily assaulted by storms they should have no doubt

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that as God responds to their prayers with promises, those promises are as reliable as yesterday's passing. If God says it will happen then believe it as though it has for not a single promise of God has ever failed and according to Dr. Everek R. Storms of Ontario, Canada there are 8,810 promises found in the Bible.

It is crucial to rely on God's plans

Paul's plans were not just his personal programme for they were an essential component in God's overall plan for the Gospel to reach the entire world. Paul was scheduled to take the Gospel to parts of Asia Minor and Europe, Thomas was to take it to the Far East, Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch and Africa, Apostle John to parts of Asia Minor and others had their specified tasks. Paul was aware of the immensity of God's plan for man's salvation and so he could without reservation rely on them.

God's plan was reassuring

God, like the master builder he is, works by plans long established by Divine counsel and God reassured Paul that this storm was all part of his plans for Paul's life of ministry. We must think of this storm in the same terms as Paul thought of it not as an occasion for complaining and misery but for reassurance and the opportunity for Christian service.

It gave Paul the opportunity to minister to the whole ship as he dutifully did in verse 21. This captive audience paid him rapt attention.

It gave Paul opportunity to win souls in Malta and legend has it that the first Maltese convert was the governor Publius. The country of Malta went on to be converted to Christianity.

It reassured Paul of his safe arrival in Rome and his audience with the emperor Caesar as stated in verse 24.

God's plan gave responsibility

Throughout the entire Bible God has shown his desire for individuals to step forward and voluntarily take responsibility and on several occasions he has foisted that responsibility on the shoulders of others. In our text God could have declared his plan and left things to resolve themselves but he assigned Paul specific responsibility for in so doing he was trusting to Paul's maturity and judgment, "God hath given thee all them that sail with thee." (Acts 27: 24b) This is a timely reminder if any was needed that God is not the author of confusion as 1 Corinthians 14: 33 tell us. Paul shouldered that awesome responsibility with humility, dignity, calmness and respect and even the captain of the ship as well as the centurion supported him; a profound lesson for us all.

God's plan generated reaction

Amazingly after hearing the great news of their assured preservation and upcoming safety the men on board still tried to use their own failed, discredited efforts. Our text puts it like this, "And

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as the shipmen were about to flee out of the ship when they had let down the boat into the sea" (Acts 27: 30a)

Like then, as now, it is hard to convince the faithless. People always think that their way is superior to God's way and the results are always the same; disastrous.

The Great White Throne Judgment will show the folly in man's attempt to do it his way rather than God's way for their "works" could not stand in that judgment.

We can rely on God's plan not just because it is his plan but for the best reason in the world; it works!

It is imperative to rely on God's performance

In the final analysis when all hope is lost, all dreams shattered and the final bell is about to be tolled the only thing that really matters is what God will do. Every problem we encounter is not dealt with by God in the manner we expect. God can heal us of deadly diseases but he may not and allow us to die because in our dying his will prevail. God is looking on as we sail through life, and his will may not be in your favour to bring you much needed assistance in the manner expected at times, but God is determined to support you and you can rely totally on his performance.

God's performance proved vital

What kept these desperate men together up to this moment; working with one accord for one purpose was God working through the Apostle Paul. It could so easily have gone wrong for on board were very dangerous prisoners that found themselves, through no fault of their own, in difficult circumstances and manning this doomed ship were desperate sailors. To compound matters the prisoners were overseen by distraught soldiers who would rather kill the prisoners than have them escape for the code at the time among Roman soldiers were that if you lost a prisoner you would forfeit your own life.

It is well said, "God works in a mysterious way his wonders to perform." for these were a motley collection of disparate people who together enabled Paul to reach his intended destination in Rome. Imagine the scene if God had abandoned these men to their fate and Paul was just a bystander in the wrong place at the wrong time as total warfare erupted on board. Like the three Hebrew boys or Daniel in the lions den God's performance makes the difference.

God's performance proved reliable

Life can throw us some huge disappointments when we rely on people and things that turn out not to be reliable at all. When the situation involves matters of life and death then failure can be lethal. The old maxim that the proof of the pudding is in the eating applies here because in the face of this mighty storm lasting many days here in Barbados it would be called a hurricane in keeping with God's assurances not one single soul was lost. Our text puts it like this, "And so it

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came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land." (Acts 27:44b) Rely on God's performance always!

Not many people will ever experience a severe storm at sea and be thrown around for many days on end like Paul did. However much we may try to avoid them the storms of life are plentiful, severe and can do as much damage as a raging storm can do to a fragile ship. We must remember that God can do it for us. He is well able to bring us through life's storms as long as we truly trust him and allow him to have his way for he has brought countless others safely through to heavens shores. Storms there will be on the turbulent sea of life but it all depends on who is the captain. On the treacherous sea of life with the devil plotting for your destruction then we commend Jesus as your pilot and the words of this Sailor's Hymn by Edward Hopper, 1882-1967, comes to mind.

Jesus, Savior, pilot me
Over life's tempestuous sea;
Unknown waves before me roll,
Hiding rock and treacherous shoal.
Chart and compass come from Thee;
Jesus, Savior, pilot me.

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