

## "GOD MOVES IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY."

– ACTS 27:33-44. – JUNE 7. –

**"Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses." – Psa. 107:6.**

NOT long after Paul's discourse before Festus and Agrippa, opportunity offered for sending him a prisoner to Rome, in accordance with his own appeal. He was not sent alone, but in company with other prisoners and under a strong guard. The journey from Caesarea to Rome was by water on merchant vessels, and was probably in the fall of the year, when the storms on the Mediterranean are frequently very severe, sometimes lasting for several days, as in the case mentioned in this lesson. The storm lasted for fourteen days, and was evidently unusually severe. The dangerous season for navigation was reckoned from September 14 to November 14, at which time all navigation in the open sea was suspended for the winter. It is presumed that this storm occurred about September 25.

Doubtless, were we able to look at affairs from God's standpoint, as we will be able to view them by and by, we should see more reason than we now are able to discern why the Apostle's journey to Rome should have been attended with such trying experiences, mental and physical, as were incidental to the shipwreck, wintering on the island of Malta, etc. Possibly the Apostle's faith was being tried; possibly it was being rooted and grounded by these experiences. The Lord had distinctly informed him in a vision that he should go to Rome as his ambassador. He was now on the way, and on several occasions matters looked serious; it seemed as though he would never see the capital of the world; never have the privilege of presenting the truth to the brethren residing there, to whom he had already sent the Epistle to the Romans; never have the opportunity of laboring in their midst, as he had hoped and promised to do.

When in port at Crete a conference was held respecting the wisdom of wintering there or of going on, and the Apostle gave his opinion that it would be unsafe to go on. This may have been the result of some inspiration, but quite possibly was merely the result of his own judgment of the weather, etc. He had already had large experience in seeing disasters, as we are informed in one of his epistles written previous to this time: "Thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep." (2 Cor. 11:25.) Besides, his trade as a sail-maker would naturally bring him in contact with sailors, and interest him in all matters pertaining to the craft. Those in command, however, decided to proceed on the journey, and encountered the disastrous storm of our lesson. During those fourteen days the Apostle had [R3204 : page 174] abundant opportunity to fear and doubt and question the Lord's providences, and apparently it was not until the night of the thirteenth day of the storm that the Lord sent an angel to the Apostle, with the consoling message that he should not fear – "Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar; and lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee." (Vs. 24.) We may safely assume that the Apostle, during these testing days, remained heartily loyal in faith toward God, and that this message at the close was in the nature of an encouragement and an expression of approval.

We may draw a good lesson from this incident, not only in respect to our own affairs in life, – that the Lord may lead in mysterious ways regarding our temporal matters and our service for him and his cause; – but we may additionally apply the lesson in a general way to all spiritual testings and trials. The Lord gives us, for instance, assurances of his love and care, and of the ultimate outcome of the narrow way to all who faithfully follow in the steps of Jesus; but meantime he may permit trials and difficulties of various kinds to come as storms upon us, threatening our very destruction, threatening the overwhelming of our spiritual life, darkening the sky of our hopes with the thunderclouds of our enemies' threats and Satan's roarings. Our duty is to let the eye of faith be undimmed by these various terrible

conditions, – to let our hearts be firmly fixed upon him who has promised, and who is able also to perform. Thus,

"When the storms of life are raging,  
Tempests wild on sea and land,  
I will seek a place of refuge  
In the shadow of God's hand.

"Enemies may strive to injure,  
Satan all his arts employ;  
God will turn what seems to harm me  
Into everlasting joy."

The expression, "God hath given thee all them that sail with thee," is very meaningful. It reminds us of Abraham's prayer for Sodom – peradventure there were even five righteous persons, God agreed to save the city. There is no suggestion in these words of the "fatherhood of God, and brotherhood of men," as that false teaching is now advocated by many who have a noble impulse. The thought, on the contrary, is that there was only one man on that ship who was in personal relationship to God. The others, whatever their natural traits of character, had never come into personal relationship with the Father. Another thought from the words is that the divine care going with the saints may prove a great blessing to their companions, even though, as in this case, they be worldly and unregenerate. This thought is particularly applicable in the earthly families of God's people. The believing consecrated father or mother is the direct subject of divine care; for of the angels it is written, "They are ministering spirits, sent forth to minister unto those who shall be heirs of salvation," and, in ministering to these, very frequently (indeed, we may suppose generally) those of their families who have not come into full relationship with the Lord are to some extent included under the protecting care. Elsewhere the Apostle points out that in some respects the believing wife has a blessed influence over her husband; or the believing husband a favorable influence over the wife in regard to the

children, else the children would be accounted unholy. (1 Cor. 7:14.) This is another illustration of the same general lesson that divine care, though specially for the saints, includes all of their interests of every kind. This does not necessarily imply earthly prosperity, wealth, preservation from accident, shipwreck, etc., as in Paul's case, and yet it does always mean, in some sense and in some degree, an advantage. Let us take from this thought all the comfort we can. All things shall work together for good to the Lord's saints, and those who are nearest and dearest to them will surely be participants to some extent in their interest and in the divine care.

Promptly after receiving the assurances of the safety of all on board, the Apostle made the matter known to the ship's company, and manifested his own faith in the message by cheerfulness and breaking of his fast, and advising all the others to do likewise. His spirit was contagious; they were all cheered, and doubtless they were all impressed not only by the fact to which the Apostle called their attention – namely, that this disaster had come upon them by their failing **[R3205 : page 174]** to follow his advice – but also by the evidence of God's special favor toward him in connection with the knowledge of their ultimate rescue. So it should be with us: whatever we know that is good or comforting or refreshing to ourselves, we should dispense to others. Had the Apostle kept this good news to himself, it would have implied one of two things; either that he did not have faith in its fulfilment, or that he was selfish; but having the Lord's spirit of generosity, as well as large trust in the Lord, he did not hesitate to make known the coming deliverance; and he glorified God in that he did not claim to have this knowledge of himself, but credited it to a revelation. Evidently the prisoner had produced a deep impression upon many of the soldiers and sailors. Who can say that at some future time the Apostle's brave and noble conduct may not have influenced some of his two hundred and seventy-six companions – possibly eventually drawing some of them to the Lord? So it should be with each of us; we should be prompt to tell to others the best tidings we have; sympathy with the groaning creation in the **[R3205 : page**

**175]** various trials of life should lead us to point to the Lord's promises respecting the coming Kingdom and the blessings that should then be to all the families of the earth. Whoever does not thus proclaim daily, on every suitable opportunity, gives evidence either of lack of knowledge or of faith in the revelation or of selfishness, which the Lord can not approve, and which, persisted in, will ultimately debar him from a share in the Kingdom.

Another thought properly connected with this lesson is the absence of any suggestion of a revival service being held on board the boat. Neither Paul nor Luke nor Aristarchus are reported to have made the slightest effort, except as their lives were living epistles. It is barely possible that religious services may not have been permitted on the vessel; but, anyway, we know from the Apostle's general course of conduct, that he did his fishing for men amongst rather different classes. As we understand the matter, the seamen of that day were of a coarse and ignorant class. We cannot doubt that the Apostle would have been glad indeed to have served any of his companions had he found in them the hearing ear – according to the Master's words, "He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear." That the sailors were not in a condition to receive or appreciate the gospel is evident from the lesson; because they were selfishly intent upon using the only small boat available for their escape, and premeditated leaving the soldiers and the prisoners on the vessel. We mark the spirit of selfishness as totally unbecoming in anyone begotten of the spirit of God, and contrast it with the spirit of the Apostle, as generous, loving, considerate of others. A similar test shows us that the soldiers in general were not of a class likely to have a hearing ear, because, when perceiving that the vessel would go to pieces, and that thus some prisoners might escape, they counselled their destruction. "The liberal heart deviseth liberal things," and all of the Lord's consecrated people should not only have the noble impulses coming to them because they are the Lord's and because they have tasted of his grace, and been made partakers of his spirit, but, additionally, they should see to it that this spirit prevails in them; that it is manifest in all the affairs of life. They should see to it

that they do not crush out the noble impulses which would properly come to them; that, on the contrary, they foster them and encourage them and develop them more and more. Thus we grow in grace as we grow in knowledge, by obedience to the things which we learn.

The centurion alone seems to have profited by the experiences. He alone seems to have read the Apostle's living epistle to any advantage, and upon him it did make an impression, for while he would not have objected so much to the killing of the other prisoners, who probably were seditious characters and worthy of death, he saw no way to make an exception of Paul, and for Paul's sake, therefore, all the prisoners' lives were spared.

Notwithstanding the Apostle's assurance of the Lord that the lives of the entire ship's company were given him, that all would be saved, he realized the propriety of using all proper diligence in cooperation with the promise. Hence, when he discerned the evident intention of the sailors to escape in the small boat, leaving the passengers, unable to guide the vessel, at the mercy of the sea, he communicated the facts to the centurion, pointing out the necessity of compliance with reasonable precautions to insure the fulfilment of the divine promise. So we all should understand that we have something to do in realizing the gracious promises of God to us. In connection with the affairs of this present life he has promised that our bread and water shall be sure, but this does not imply that we shall neglect reasonable opportunities for securing these. He has promised us also a share in the Kingdom by and by; but it is for us to make our calling and our election sure. God is thoroughly capable and thoroughly willing to perform all of his part in connection with every matter, but it is to our advantage that he calls upon us to show our faith by our works – by our cooperation with him in all reasonable ways. He does not expect us to perform miracles; but he does expect us to do what we are able to do both in respect to present things and eternal matters. By and by the Apostle's predictions were fulfilled, and the entire ship's company, some by swimming and others by floating on wreckage, reached the land. We notice again that

the Apostle did not propose, on reaching land, to have a general revival service; he was not bent on exciting men's minds, but was practising the same gospel methods which the Master taught him; viz., "Let us reason together" – sit down first and count the cost of discipleship, and, if willing to pay the price, "Come, take up thy cross, and follow me." If this, the Lord's method for gathering his people from the world, were still pursued, there would be many fewer nominal Christians; but we believe there would be no smaller number of the genuine ones. The time for bringing in the world is not yet; hence the Master's words in prayer, "I pray not for the world, but for those whom thou hast given me out of the world, that they all may be one... that [ultimately, 'in due time'] the world may believe." The gathering of the elect class for the Kingdom is under disadvantageous conditions which will thoroughly test them, and make their way so narrow that few will find it, and still fewer make progress in it. When God's time for dealing with the world shall have come, the powers of heaven and of earth will cooperate with the glorified Church in making the gospel so plain that a wayfaring man, though a fool, need not err therein.

So far as the record shows, the Apostle and his companions did no mission work amongst the barbarians of the island on which they were wrecked, nor amongst the soldiers and sailors, their companions during that winter. They left no Church there; – we may safely presume that they found no hearing ears. The lesson to us from this should be that we are not to expect the conversion of the world nor anything akin to it. We are to expect that the Lord will find with the truth a sufficient number to complete the elect Church, and then, with the power and the authority of the Kingdom, establish righteousness and cause the knowledge of himself to fill the earth and bless the whole world through the Church. – Gal. 3:29.

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