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Acts 27:13–44, Edited, ESV

¹³ Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. ¹⁴ But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. ¹⁸ Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. ¹⁹ And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. All hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

²¹ Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. ²² Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' ²⁵ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ But we must run aground on some island."

²⁷ When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. Fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. ³⁰ And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, ³¹ Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." ³² Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go.

³³ As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, "I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you." ³⁵ And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. ³⁶ Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. ³⁷ (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) ³⁸ And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. ⁴² The soldiers' plan was

to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. ⁴³ But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, ⁴⁴ and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

Remaining onboard.

Our Bible passage today is long. I did my best to trim it down. It is part of one of the longest contained stories in the entire Bible, and it is one of the most exciting stories in Scripture. Paul is being sent to Rome as a prisoner to face trial before the emperor. Here is the context. Paul is an educated Roman citizen, formerly the Jewish official Saul. Saul had at one point hunted Christians down, but now Paul is seen as a spiritual competitor because he is preaching that Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Paul had been falsely accused of starting riots in Jerusalem and defiling the Temple. He had appeared in open court before various local officials, and Paul used these situations to speak freely and quite courageously about his faith. The goal was for the Roman officials to figure out why the Jewish leaders wanted him killed. Paul was kept there for two years. Eventually, Paul made use of his status as a Roman citizen to be sent to Rome for trial, in hopes of saving his life and of course to preach to powerful citizens in Rome. As our story picks up, Paul is on a ship. He is one of some number of

prisoners being guarded by a centurion. It turns out to be an extremely perilous journey, with Paul eventually being shipwrecked on the island of Malta.

Their final destination is the city of Rome, which is just a bit inland from the Mediterranean Sea. For a while, things seem fine, with the ship sailing west across the Mediterranean. But the wind shifts, and the ship goes off course. They find themselves in a treacherous area filled with sandbars that often sink the commercial ships that crisscross the Mediterranean. A storm threatens to sink the ship. To lighten the ship, the crew tosses everything that isn't absolutely essential overboard. This is where Paul's faith, his trust in God, and his ability to remain calm when facing danger comes through. Because the crew is seasick from the storm, nobody eats. Eventually, Paul, who is supposed to simply be one of the prisoners on the ship, proves to be a leader: he encourages them to eat because they will need their strength for what they are about to face. Paul's leadership is illustrated by the speech he gives the crew: *"I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship."*²³ *For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship,*²⁴ *and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.'*²⁵ *So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.*²⁶ *But we must run*

aground on some island.” Interestingly, the number of people on the ship varies in the various original Greek manuscripts. Ours translation says 276, but it isn’t known if this is accurate. Either way, this was a lot of people to have on a ship in the Mediterranean at the time. Human life is at risk – and it is Paul who is assuring them that they will be safe. At this point, they jettison even the wheat that is in the hold. The ship hits the shoals and breaks apart. Then they crawl onto the shore of the island of Malta.

But here is the critical part. Just before they are shipwrecked, we are told this: ³⁰*As the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship’s boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow,* ³¹*Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.”* ³²*Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship’s boat and let it go.* The sailors try to sneak away and get into what is apparently a lifeboat. Paul, still the leader, goes to the centurion and tells him that he must keep the sailors on the ship. Otherwise, everyone will die. It is important that they all stay together. They must all remain on the ship. Although they are going to crash on the shore, and the ship will be destroyed, they will all live – if they stay together. Paul knows that the armed centurion, along with his soldiers, are in a better position than the captain to keep the sailors onboard. Paul’s point is this. God has decided to save

everyone on the ship. No one will be lost. But this is only if they keep their trust in God's promise that they will survive, and only if they all stay on the ship together. Everyone must have enough faith to remain onboard.

This story is an allegory, not just some exciting tale wedged into the Book of Acts. Paul is telling us that Christianity is a group thing. It is about the shared faith in God and the shared trust in God's protection that holds the church together. Each of us draws strength from the rest. We all stay on the ship together all the time, not just when the sky is clear and when the wind is favorable for sailing. Consider this. Our society is corrupt. I don't mean to be negative here. It's simply a fact. There are two powerful forces in our society. One is rooted in the entertainment industry. When you turn on the TV and find a reality show, you see people degrading and humiliating themselves, and abandoning their moral roots simply to be on television. We are told that so-called celebrities are to be envied, emulated, and worshipped. People who don't in any way contribute to the world and only live for their own self-gratification and to build their own wealth – these people are lifted to the status of pagan gods. The other powerful force in our society is based on politics. We are like two armies charging toward each other on the battlefield. We thrive on conflict which is reinforced by our highly biased news media. The media eggs us on, encouraging us to hate each other. We are taught

by television and the Internet to do our absolute best to silence anyone with a voice that isn't completely in line with whatever our side believes. When people decide that they are angry about something, they don't simply demonstrate and carry signs. No, they burn and loot. They are filled with hatred. They want to cancel anyone who doesn't say exactly what the dominant group in society says you should say. There is tremendous pressure in society today to climb aboard the ship of politics, to choose a side in a country where the two sides want to slash each other's throats. I want to be clear. Both sides are equally brutal and hateful.

What we don't see are Christian values, values that quite frankly, any human person should want to live by. Love, empathy, non-violence, humility, and generosity for all people, not just those who agree with you - these values have nothing to do with what is driving our nation. Forgiveness, a cornerstone of Christianity, has become a sign of weakness. Forgiveness runs counter to the rabid desire for vengeance on those who do not completely agree with whatever you believe is the truth. It is so desperately important now for us to remain aboard the ship of faith, not the ship of celebrity status and political power.

When I was in college we had a series of speakers, people from the left, the right, the middle. There were controversial voices. We heard from people who were from a broad spectrum of political and social positions. We respectfully

listened to everyone. One evening, someone I didn't know, another student, happened to be sitting next to me during a speech being given by someone. In truth, I do not remember who the person was, what their position was, or how my beliefs lined up with that person's beliefs. I remember getting into a discussion with this other student sitting next to me. It turned out that we disagreed with each other. With respect to whatever the speaker was talking about, this other student and I saw things in completely opposing ways. We were talking during much of the speech. To be honest, the turnout at this event was poor, so there were few people near us; this allowed us to talk without disturbing anyone. As it happened, I wasn't feeling well. I would find out later that day, later in the evening, that I had mononucleosis. This other student was a young woman. I don't remember her name. Let's call her Susan. At one point, Susan said to me that I didn't look so good. I said yeah, I felt feverish and rubbery. I told her that I hoped I didn't make her sick. Susan shrugged that off. We continued to debate whatever the speaker was talking about. It might have been the Vietnam war, which had recently ended, I honestly don't know. But we had a very intense conversation. We never came to any sort of agreement. We remained completely at odds with each other. But at the end of the event, when we stood up to leave, Susan suggested that I go to the student health center and see a doctor. She volunteered

to walk me there. I started to feel faint. We had to walk up a small hill to get there, and halfway up, she put an arm under my arm and struggled to support me. When we got there, she waited until I was done, which took a few hours. That night, after I was told I had mono, she helped me back to my dorm.

This is how we should live. This is how the people on our ship should live. It's not how we are being told to live on the ships of our society. After shipwrecking on the island of Malta, Paul stayed for three months. This is what happened in a world where things moved slowly. It took that long to arrange transportation the rest of the way to Rome. Today, we would be greatly distressed if we had to wait overnight for the next leg of our journey. He spent the time connecting with the people on the island; he cured the father of the chieftain. Luke, the author of Acts, does not tell us how the trial ends. We are told that Paul remains in Rome for at least two years, under arrest. We assume, but do not know for sure, that he dies there. Perhaps this was so widely known that Luke concluded it wasn't necessary for him to write about it. This is how the Book of Acts ends. First, Isaiah is quoted; it is used to explain why so many people still will not listen to the teachings of Jesus Christ and live by the values that the humble Jesus lived by:

²⁶ *“Go to this people, and say,
“You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”*

*27 For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed;
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.'*

Then, Luke, the author, tells us the good news of what eventually comes of the teachings of the great evangelist Paul: *28 Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."* *30 He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him,* *31 proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.* Paul stayed onboard the ship. He did everything he could to bring others aboard the ship. He used his two years worth of imprisonment, which might have been the last years of his life, to make sure that as many people as possible could climb aboard. Please pray with me.

God, help us remain on your ship. Do not let us abandon it. We know that we must stay together in order to maintain our faith. We know that we cannot do it alone. Let us stay on this ship of faith. Let us bring others aboard. And God, thank you for the blessing of faith, which gives us a hope, a joy, and a way of life that so far more rewarding than the life of those who do not climb aboard and remain on your ship. Amen.