

175 and Counting: The Providence of God

Acts 27

By Dr. William K. Wymond

Some years ago, I was visiting a great aunt of mine and she told me that she had something special for me, something from family history that she wanted to give me. So she left the room and came back with this old fashioned, metal lockbox. And she told me that in the lockbox were some treasures from a great-great uncle of mine who had been an Episcopal minister somewhere in the years 1840 through 1890. And so I waited until I got home to open the box and when I looked in there, there were some really wonderful treasures. His prayer book was in there, his ordination certificate, and his passport. And then finally there was a stack of eight diaries in there, about this size — in fact this is one of them. And as I opened this diary and read through this and the others, I realized that there was an account in there of a journey that he had taken, a two-year long journey, that took him to Europe, took him to Egypt, and to the Middle East. It was really an adventuresome thing for somebody to do back long ago in those days. It seems that, early in his ministry, his wife died and he was about to change charges from one church to the next and in order to have some time to get through his grief and to improve his education he asked his bishop if he could take this trip for educational purposes.

And so it was, in October of 1857, that he began the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. And it was on a ship called the Vanderbilt. And I have seen pictures of this ship online. It was in service for a long time and so there are numerous pictures of it. And it is a wooden boat that had sails, had masts, because the technology for the paddlewheel steam engine that was on it was new and they needed to make sure that if that failed them they could have some other way of getting on their way. And so they took this voyage lasting thirteen days and it was evidently, from his diary, a rough trip. The boat was not that big and the seas were tumultuous, he thought. And so he recorded in his diary this great prayer of thanksgiving when they landed in South Hampton. He was so grateful for God's providence. And in those days, journeys by ocean were still very dangerous. For one thing, they didn't have ship to shore communications, and so when a ship took off there was no way of knowing where it was or whether it was safe until it landed in a port. And then later in the century when they developed these large ships, such as the Titanic, they were grateful for the safety that they would have because the vessels were so much larger and they had the Marconi radio sets

and so on.

So as I was reading this account just earlier in the month, again, reading so that I could transcribe it on my computer for family members because his handwriting is very small and difficult to read, I was concurrently reading in the book of Acts. And I was reading there in the twenty-seventh chapter about Paul's very dangerous journey by ship on the way to Rome. And the providence of God was clear in Paul's journey and just really coalesced with the account that I had been reading from my uncle and I was so struck by that providence that I thought, "This is something that I would like to share tonight with the congregation."

We have been talking all this month, this 175th celebration of the life of the church, about foundation doctrines and so I thought that the providence of God would be a good one for us to focus on tonight because it's one of those foundations on which we build our faith. If I can mix the metaphor, we hook our anchor into this foundation stone. We rest on this especially during the difficult, dim days of our lives that we experience really quite often.

Having said that, let me share with you now, if you will turn in your Bibles to Acts 27. It's a rather long account. Please do not go to sleep during this period of time (laughter) and I assure you that the sermon won't be too long for this is almost a sermon in and of itself. Acts 27 and before I read this, let us pray.

Heavenly Father, as we open the Scripture tonight, we thank You for that wonderful assurance that this really is Your Word, and that it is reliable, it's trustworthy, that Your Spirit can take it to speak to our hearts what You have for us. And so I pray that You would not only make the meaning here clear, but that You would lead us even into deep thought about Your providence and may that be assuring for our faith as we experience the wonderful ministry of the Spirit. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Acts 27. Actually, let me start in the twenty-sixth chapter at the last verse, the "b" section of it:

"This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

That's what Agrippa said to Festus. Now 27:

And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. The next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. And when we had

sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board. We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, 'Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.' But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. And because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

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. But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

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. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before 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 behold, 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. But we must run aground on some island.'

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. So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. And fearing that we

might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. 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, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, 'Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.' Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go.

As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, 'Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. Therefore 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.' 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. Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. 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, and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land."

Thus far, the Word of the Lord.

So this is a very dramatic sea tale, isn't it? It's worthy of Homer's *Odyssey* or *Moby Dick*. In all of this drama though, what is thrilling to see is God's providence worked out to save Paul and the others. And it's interesting to see how He used the centurion and even the forces of nature to bring them safely through. This working of God in Paul's life we call God's providence. And the *Confession of Faith* defines providence this way: "God's works of providence are His most holy and wise and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions." Maybe a little bit more succinctly, *The Child's Catechism* talks about this in two of its questions. One of them is, "Why should I glorify God? Because He made me and takes care of me." And the other question is, "How is God a King?" The answer: "By ruling over the world and defending His people."

Tonight as we look at this experience of Paul in Acts 27 I want to affirm this great Biblical doctrine of the providence of God in our lives. And the first thing that I want us to see is that God is active in our lives in a providential way, all the time,

every day, year in and year out. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he says that God is working for us all things to the counsel of His will. The counsel of His will, we can simply say His plan — His plans for the universe, His plans for our lives — He's working out His plans all the time in our lives, plans that He established before He ever laid the foundations of the earth, Paul tells us.

When I was in junior high school, a couple of my schoolmates went on a hunting trip. And as they were crossing over a fence, the gun of one of them went off and shot the other classmate and he died there on the spot. And I went to the funeral. It was in another church here in Jackson of another denomination and the message that the preacher preached made a tremendous impression upon me and stayed with me for a long time and actually shaped my theology for some time. The preacher said that God had nothing to do with this accident. He said, "God created the world, He created a set of natural laws by which it would operate, He set the world and those laws into motion, and then He stepped back and just let it run on its own." So he said, "Naturally, what happened here was that the natural laws of the world took hold and this accident happened and God was just as surprised as the rest of us and He had nothing to do with that."

And as I said, this really shaped my thinking about God's providence. It's kind of a form of deism, I know now and you would too, but I thought, "Well, that sounds reasonable enough to me. A preacher's saying it so it must be the way things work." And so I just thought that God had no interest in the day to day affairs of our lives and that He just didn't relate to us. But as we all know, and you could tell me better than I could probably tell you, the Bible says just the contrary to that. And what is the verse that we would go to? Of course, Romans 8:28 — "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him and who have been called according to His purpose." And then in Ephesians also, Paul says, with regard to our salvation, that "He who began a good work in you will see it through to completion." So implied in that verse from Ephesians is that God is working with us who believe in Him in our spiritual lives on a daily basis. He is seeing us through in our sanctification ultimately to our glorification. So He is intimately involved in our lives.

Now about Romans 8:28, it seems like the whole world knows this verse. I even hear on television sometimes that in secular situations somebody will make a passing reference to it — "Well, everything works together for good." But they leave out the part that talks about "to those who love God and to those who are called according to His purpose." But nevertheless it's clear that God is involved in our lives and as we see this clarity especially displayed in the adventures of Paul in this time of the shipwreck, we're given a special inside view as it were of how God works because God definitely wanted to deliver Paul to Rome and from the very beginning He did the unusual thing that He does not do for you or me, in that He came to Paul and laid out his life before him. Remember, when he was converted Paul was blind and he went into a city and Ananias, God's agent, came to him and delivered God's message. And that was, "Paul, you are going to

be a missionary to your people. You're going to be a missionary to the Gentiles. You will stand before kings and ultimately you will go to Rome."

And then later on when Paul was in prison the two years before he took this ship ride Jesus came to him one night in his cell and Paul says, stood beside him and said to him, "Don't fear. You have testified about Me in Jerusalem; you will also testify about Me in Rome." And so here it is that we have Paul clearly given information about his whole life laid out before him. We see God's providence laid out there in Acts 27 and in an especially assuring way we see how God was working in Paul's life, how He was keeping His promise to Paul that He was going to provide for him and take care of him and use him for His purposes. And so in saying that, we are assured ourselves that we can take God's Word and His promises that He is going to be active in our lives and guiding our lives and to be there day by day even though we may not see Him.

You know, I was just thinking as I was writing this sermon about how interesting it would be if in this room we could actually see the active forces of God working in our behalf. You know God has myriads of angels, complete control over the forces of nature, and those angels are doing His bidding, doing His work for us as they did in the time of Paul. If our eyes could see that spiritual realm, we would be astounded - all kinds of activity; a beehive of activity going on in this room right now tonight. And then, not only in that extemporaneous way, but also within us, the Holy Spirit is at work. We are helped from the outside and helped from the inside because you remember it's the Holy Spirit, the person of the Trinity, who comes in us and takes up residence and enlightens us, helps us to understand the deep things of the Bible, helps us to understand preaching, helps us to pray when we don't know how to pray, and leads us in our sanctification by convicting us sometimes, encouraging us, and urging us on in our growth toward the Lord Jesus Christ. So all of these forces are at work on our behalf, and so we should be assured that God is definitely working in our lives. He keeps that promise and He's doing it.

There are two cautions that I would make though, where we could be presumptuous when we're thinking about this. We could think, "You know, God says that He has a plan for me, that He's working it out and He will bring that to completion, therefore, I don't really have to be very energetic about my prayers. He's going to do it anyway." That would be a terrible mistake. God tells us to pray. He tells us that He hears us and that He answers our prayers and we do not know exactly how He does it, but as part of His providence, God uses our prayers in working out His plans. He's not surprised and He doesn't say, "Oh, I didn't think about that. I didn't know Bill was going to ask Me this or that, and so I've got to change this plan." No, from the foundation of the earth He even knew about the prayers and all of these are a part of His providence and so we need to be zealous in prayer knowing that He was sincere when He said to pray and that He is moved by our prayers.

Then the second caution I would say that we do not want to be presumptuous as far as thinking that our decisions and that our actions don't have an effect on our lives. We are not robots. God works in our lives, yes, and He has a plan for us. He's always in charge but we definitely have wills and we can choose to go down paths that are not Biblical and we will bear the responsibility for that. Sometimes He graciously will intervene in some way or the other and maybe direct us back, but sometimes He lets us go down those paths and while He doesn't abandon us, our lives are forever effected by those decisions that we have made. We have responsibility for the decisions that we make in life that they should be in accord with what the Scriptures say.

I just have to mention the name of David to remind you that he was a man loved by God to the end but David made some terrible decisions in his life and forever affected his future and his family's future and as well affected the whole nation because of the decisions that he made. So we are not robots and we have to bear responsibility for our own actions and our own decisions.

Well, I had said first that God is definitely active and in charge in our lives and working and the second thing that I wanted to say is that in this era, in this time, God works as it were behind the scenes. So often we do not see what He is doing. He is active; He is involved. He is working beyond our imaginations and yet sometimes we don't see it. Most often times we don't, in fact, see it. And as we experience this, sometimes we can think that God is not working in our lives because we don't see what He is doing here. But it's sort of as Corrie ten Boom would say, in our day to day lives, sometimes things are not clear. We have no idea what the hand of God is doing. And she says, and it's such a wonderful illustration, she says, "It's sort of like looking at the back of a piece of embroidery." Now guys, I hope you all know what that is. Embroidery, handwork, stitching. You look at the back of it and it's just a tangle of threads. There's no order there; it just looks like it is chaos. But then you flip it over and you see all of that order that comes in the design out of chaos. In the front, there's the picture. And so it is in our lives as we look at them from day to day basis, sometimes there just seems to be no clear picture at all of what God is doing but nevertheless He is at work, unseen.

There's a story in the Bible that I just love that comes from the Old Testament. I think it inspired a movie; certainly a movie title. And it is when the King of Syria is coming against the King of Israel and Elisha is the prophet of the day. And Elisha, through divine means, knows the plans of the King of Syria and so he goes and tells the King of Israel what the man is about to do so that he can avoid the trap. And finally somebody tells the King of Syria about this prophet who is revealing all of his plans to the enemy and so he gets so furious that he sends a whole army of troops and chariots to Elisha's city and surrounds it in the night time. So in the morning, Elisha's young servant comes to him and says, "Master, there is a whole army out there that has come after you! What are we going to do?" And Elisha very calmly says, "Let me tell you that they who are with us are

more than they who are against us.” And then as you know, he prays, “God, open this young man's eyes.” And the young man looks up at the mountains all around and here are all these chariots of fire, all of those who have come to defend Elisha and Israel. Sometimes in our lives we just don't see the forces of God and we just think that nothing's happening. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that they who are for us are more than they who are against us and the Lord is never defeated even though we don't see what He's doing. I love that message.

And I've thought often about a missionary couple whose testimony I heard one time. They were in the South Sea Islands, the Japanese in the Second World War were coming, they had advanced knowledge and so there was arranged a rescue ship for the women and for their children so that at least they could escape the Japanese. And something happened and this missionary wife and her child were, I would say providentially delayed, and missed the ship. And so they went through four or five years of difficult prison camp in the concentration camp of the Japanese and oftentimes she said she was bitter about missing that ship because her life could have been so different, and especially the life of her child. But then after they were released, she found out that that rescue ship had been torpedoed off the shore and that everybody on the ship had been lost. So it is, we just don't know what the Lord is doing in our lives and how He is protecting us in ways that sometimes seem very unfriendly and very unforgiving. The hymn we sang by Cowper says, “Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds you so much dread, are big with mercy and shall break in blessings upon your head.” So again, I just say that God is at work in our lives but in these days oftentimes it's behind the scenes.

And quickly now a third point from this text. When that angel messenger came to Paul on the ship he said, “Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand before Caesar.” Now it was wonderful that Paul was delivered from the sea and that all of these people were rescued with him. That in itself would have been a grand providence, but God had far more for Paul in this. God wanted Paul in Rome because God had a lot of people there to hear the Gospel. God wanted Paul in Rome because there were soldiers and captains of the guard who were to be saved because they were chained to Paul. There was a church there in Rome that needed to be strengthened and there were people even in the emperor's household, Caesar's household, who would respond to the Gospel message. And beyond that, Paul would be the means or part of the means for the Gospel moving westward, as was God's plan, so that the Roman Empire, unwittingly, was part of God's instrument to spread the Gospel even to, eventually to Great Britain. They had a great roads system. They were conquering all these lands. Behind them came Christian preachers and missionaries. So there was a grand plan that was far more ranging and far sweeping than just saving them from this ship. It was a plan that included the spread of the Gospel to all unknown parts of the world at that time.

And so it may be in our lives that sometimes we think that God is just working in a small way in our lives and I suspect that some day, maybe not in this life but in the next, we will see that what God was doing in our lives and in our situations and in our family plans were part of a grand, sweeping plan that all culminated in the glory of God. You see it there in that story with Joseph, one of my other favorite Old Testament stories. You remember, sold into slavery by jealous brothers, rough life imprisonment for a long time, finally elevated to be second in command of Pharaoh and here stand before him his brothers who had done all of this to him. What would we have done? We would have probably taunted them a little bit or even sought revenge. But he says to them, "Don't be angry with yourselves, for God sent me here, ultimately," he says, "to save not only our family but this nation. God had a grand sweeping plan that was so far beyond just saving me from what you did, but actually saving a whole people, promoting the covenant blessings of His Gospel through all of this."

So as the hymn writer says to us, "Judge not the Lord by feeble sense but trust Him for His grace. Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face." And, "His purposes will ripen fast unfolding every hour; the bud may have a bitter taste but sweet will be the flower."

Our heavenly Father, I thank You for Your wonderful teachings on providence that give us such assurance that our lives are not in our hands but are in Yours and that You are working all things together for good according to a plan that You have had for us and for the Church since before the foundation of the earth. And I just pray that if there are folks here tonight who are undergoing difficult circumstances and just don't see Your work at all in their lives, that You would reassure them that You are there and that You are working. And I pray, heavenly Father, if things are going well now in our lives that You would help us to store up this Biblical truth for difficult days that may lie ahead for things that we now do not foresee, things that we will need this anchor on which to rest our souls to see us through. Thank You, heavenly Father, for this love and this grace. And we pray in the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

We will close our service after the benediction with the singing of the last stanza of this hymn that I have been quoting, "God Moves In A Mysterious Way," but I would ask you now if you would stand for the Lord's benediction.

May grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit keep your hearts and minds this night and until Jesus comes again.

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