Navigating Wisely in Troubling Times

Last in the series “Lesson from Troubling Times”

# Scripture: Acts 27:13-44

# Key thought: Paul’s shipwreck experience gives us clues as to how to navigate troubling times in our lives.

# Intro:

Coping skills are what we call the methods a person uses to deal with the stressful situations in their lives. One of our goals as we grow I life is to gain healthy and helpful coping skills. In the story from Paul’s life that we read from the book of Acts, we get a chance to learn some healthy ways to cope with stressful times in our lives. Learning from Paul’s examples just will help us navigate the troubling times in our own lives much more wisely.

# Learn from mistakes without being destroyed by regrets

The first thing that Paul said the sailors was, “Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete.” I’m sure they didn’t need to hear that. When troubling times have been caused by our own mistakes, the last thing we need to hear is “I told you so.” But I don’t think Paul was rubbing it in. Paul was reminding them that he had been correct in order to give additional credibility to what he was about to tell them.

Truth was, in the situation that the sailors were in, they could not afford to spend time on regrets. Certainly all of them wished that they had not sailed into this bitter storm. But such bitter after-thoughts would not be helpful in getting them safely to shore. Perhaps Paul was acknowledging their regrets but urging his fellow sailors beyond them so that they could begin to make the good decisions needed to get them all safely to shore.

In our own lives, often times we have many regrets. We wish we had done something differently so that we were not in the situation that we are currently in. But just like the sailors in the ship with Paul, it does us little good to dwell on past mistakes. We need to think about them just long enough to learn from them, to ask forgiveness from God and from people if needed. Then we need to move ahead.

Many people unfortunately are destroyed by their regrets. They feel so bad for what is happened in the past that they can’t see into the future. They remain mired in grief and “what if” scenarios. As a result, they continue to make unwise decisions. And they waste time and miss opportunities for their future. I have known many people with regrets, of many different kinds, who overcome them well, because they learned from their mistake and moved forward.

# Don't be paralyzed by fear; instead have faith in God

## All on board were fearful

I think all of us, if we had been on board that ship would have been fearful. The ship had been driven by the storm for two weeks. It’s hard to eat when you are riding a ship in a storm; so they were hungry too. But the first words of the angel who had spoken to Paul were, “Do not be afraid!” (Acts 27:24) It is a very common word from God for us in the NT.

## Fear paralyzes

When we are paralyzed by fear, we cannot live wisely. Often we simply wring our hands, either literally or figuratively and get more and more anxious and miserable. This is not just true in crisis situations such as the impending shipwreck described here. It is also true in our lives anytime we allow fears to control us. When this happens, the good works prepared in advance for us to do -- don’t get done. Our minds just aren’t in the right place.

I observe that many people have been living more out of fear than faith since the last election. And in these days, unfortunately it is not just the election that is causing fears. In todays’ troubling world the daily news is unpredictable. Violence is commonplace. It is easy to be anxious. Many people are tense and filled with fear. This past week, even one US senator was heard to say into an inadvertently open mike, concerning the US budget situation, “I’m worried.”

In addition, some personalities are more prone to anxiety. Interestingly, Web MD asks and answers the question:

Can Excessive Worry Make Me Physically Ill?

Chronic worry and emotional stress can trigger a host of health problems. The problem occurs when fight or flight is triggered daily by excessive worrying and anxiety. The fight or flight response causes the body’s sympathetic nervous system to release stress hormones such as cortisol. These hormones can boost blood sugar levels and triglycerides (blood fats) that can be used by the body for fuel. The hormones also cause physical reactions such as:

From <http://www.webmd.com/balance/guide/how-worrying-affects-your-body#2>

What follows on that page is a list of about 20 complaints ranging from irritability and muscle aches to digestive disorders and coronary heart disease which can happen if worry continues. So worry is just not good for us physically either. No wonder we can’t be at our best when we are fearful.

## Faith frees us for positive action

Paul’s antidote for fear for his shipmates is to have faith in God. Twice he said to them, “Keep up your courage” (Acts 27:22, 25). He told them that God had promised him that they all would make it to shore safely. “I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me” (Acts 27:25). The implied admonition is that faith in the same God will calm their fears as well and help them to reach shore safely along with Paul. Because of Paul’s faith, he was freed from fear and able to stand up and lead his fellow travelers through their emergency.

We still need to make the same choice whenever we are faced with a fearful situation. **Fear will defeat us. Faith will help us!** We will be more able to choose wisely and live victoriously when we live with faith in God. Faith will free us from the shackles of fear.

The writer of the book of Hebrews uses a maritime object lesson to help us remember to keep our faith in God during troubling times.

We who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. Heb. 6:18, 19 NIV

The sailors with Paul let down multiple anchors during the night to try to keep the ship from being driven onto the coast during the night. Their anchors held firm. Our faith in Jesus and what he has done for us is our anchor, firm and secure, even when stormy waves roll around us in our lives!

The prophet Isaiah said,

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. Isa 12:2 NIV

When we have set our minds to trust in God rather than to fear, then we are ready to seize the opportunities presented to us in our current situation.

# Seize the present opportunities by:

Now it was time for the travelers to take positive action. Land was approaching. Staying put in the storm was not an option. What could they do to help their current situation? Paul’s courage prodded the crew to make the kinds of decisions that would help get the boat to shore—the kind of decisions that only they could make. They hoisted one sail and aimed the ship for a sandy beach. I make four quick observations about how we need to seize the opportunity before us. As the title of a book I read put it “Seize the Day!”

## Traveling lighter

I notice the when the ship Paul was in was going through the storm, it was necessary to lighten the ship. The sailors threw more and more things overboard. It occurred to me that in our day, when most of us have such an accumulation of stuff, we also might find that it would be easier in troubling times if we were traveling a little lighter. We could learn more of the discipline of simplicity. The more we have and the more things we are involved in, the more complex our lives become. The increased complexity makes its own demands upon our time and both our physical and emotional well-being. Looking for wise ways to travel lighter might be a good goal for us too. Listen to Richard Foster

Simplicity is the only thing that can sufficiently reorient our lives so that possessions can be genuinely enjoyed without destroying us. Without simplicity we will either capitulate to the “mammon” spirit of this present evil age, or we will fall into an unchristian legalistic asceticism. Both lead to idolatry. Both are spiritually lethal. …The inward reality of simplicity involves a life of joyful unconcern for possessions. Neither the greedy nor the miserly know that liberty. It has nothing to do with abundance of possessions or their lack. It is an inward spirit of trust. (Celebration of Discipline by Richard J Foster p. 74, 76)

In the words of Jesus;

“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” Luke 12:15 NIV

## Taking care of the physical as well as the spiritual

Paul needed to admonish those with him to eat something. The stress, perhaps for some, the seasickness of riding a vessel in a storm for two weeks, had taken its toll. The Bible says they hadn’t eaten anything (Acts 27:33). Now they needed strength for the next step. So Paul took the lead, took some bread, blessed it, and ate it as an example. This act encouraged them to eat as well.

I am reminded by this of another pitfall that I have observed as a pastor in the lives of those going through hard spots. I have seen people going through troubling times neglect to take good care of themselves. Most of us know what we need to be doing to care for ourselves. But when life gets out of control, it’s so easy to make excuses. I’ve done my share of that when it comes to proper exercise and that is one reason I am playing catch-up now.

We need to be reminded sometimes that it is not super-spiritual to neglect caring for ourselves. Regularly or massively stealing from our sleep time is not a good strategy for making extra time for work. When we are depressed, or when we are stressed, we need to pay special attention to caring for our physical needs. Being stronger physically will help us through. Being rested physically helps us mentally and emotionally as well.

The Bible principle is that our body is part of the trust given to us to care for.

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? 1 Cor. 6:19 NRSV

## Attending to the tasks at hand (Today Matters)

### Paul called the sailors to the task at hand

In the story of the shipwreck, it was no small task for Paul to persuade the group to attend to the task at hand. The crew was weary from fighting the storm for days. Everyone was fearful in an obviously out-of-control situation. The crew was taking measures to secretly abandon ship with the lifeboat leaving the rest of the passengers to their fate. Paul warned the centurion of the danger posed by the desertion of the crew and the soldiers cut the lifeboat away. Then, when daylight came, the crew knew what to do to aim the ship toward the sandy beach in the midst of the storm. That was the matter at hand—finding the best course of action for all involved in the circumstances in which they found themselves. For them on that day, shipwreck was inevitable, how could they make it happen under less threatening circumstances?

### To be successful, we need to attend to the important things today

When we are going through difficult times, we too need to get our minds onto the matters at hand. What is the best way to handle the situation? What are the things we can do something about? What are our immediate responsibilities? How do we execute today the plans that we have for our future?

In preparation for this message I was rereading chapter from a great book by John Maxwell called, Today Matters. Here’s the theme of the book in John Maxwell’s own words:

People create success in their lives by focusing on today. It may sound trite, but today is the only time you have. It’s too late for yesterday. And you can’t depend on tomorrow. That’s why today matters… The secret of your success is determined by your daily agenda. (p. 10, 14)

Most of us are looking for some big opportunity or stroke of luck to come down the pike to us. We live in a lottery age and we think someday good fortune is bound to strike suddenly. But the truth is that success doesn’t happen by lottery. Rather, success comes little by little. If we are making the right choices day by day, moving toward our goals however far off they seem, we will be better off. In addition, if we are not making good decisions each day, even if good fortune does strike, we will not be ready for it.

So it is crucial that we attend well to the matters at hand.

## Being courageous

There is one more value that I see here in this story that is a big help to us in troubling times. We need courage. Think with me. The following adjectives – did they describe the disciples of Jesus – timid, retiring, reclusive, or tentative—of course not! Instead we would all describe Peter and John and Paul and the deacons Philip and Stephen as bold, venturesome, outgoing and especially courageous.

At the start of an immense challenge, God said to Joshua:

Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Josh 1:9 NRSV

Psalm 31 says:

Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord.   
Ps 31:24 NRSV

The NRSV translation of Jesus’ words to his disciples in John 16:33 reads like this:

I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" John 16:33 NRSV

Paul’s closing of his first letter to the Corinthians starts like this:

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love. 1 Cor. 16:13-14 NRSV

Courage is not just something Paul needed on the boat in the storm, it is a Christian virtue we all need in our lives today. We need courage to go against the tide of cultural opinion when we need to do so. We need courage to make the right decision when our own desires crave the easy way out. We need courage to step up to the plate had help others in an active way. We need courage to speak up against injustice. We need courage to speak up words of testimony and witness so that others will be influenced to follow Jesus. We need courage to make a choice that our mind tells is the right one even while our feelings are leading us another way. We need courage to move past our fears into positive action.

And it is clear from Paul’s example that courage is a byproduct of faith. When we have faith in God it is much easier to have courage.

The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. 2 Tim 1:7

# Conclusion:

Are you in the midst of troubling times? I encourage you this morning. Do not be paralyzed into inaction by either regret or fear. Instead have faith in God and take courage. Then, with the Holy Spirit’s help, take the next step into a new day.

A Pinterest resource <https://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=Coping%20skills%20for%20adults>