

# ANCHORS AWAY

ACTS 27:13-44 MARCH 24, 2021

Matthew Webb knew what it took to brave the open sea. At age 12, he joined the crew of the *HMS Conway*.<sup>1</sup> As the second mate on a cruise ship, he once dove into the Atlantic in an attempt to save a man who went overboard. By the age of 27, Matthew was a captain in the merchant navy. In 1875 he sealed his place in history by becoming the first person to swim across the English Channel. It took him 21 hours and 45 minutes. He leveraged his fame and knack for staying afloat, putting on swimming exhibitions and staging feats of endurance.<sup>2</sup> His 21 hours in the Channel seems like child's play compared to a later stunt: Swimming continually for 74 hours. That daring display netted him a tidy profit for his efforts. As his fame and fortune started to dry up, he entertained other dangerous ideas of how to once more risk the water in hopes of a hefty payday.

In our text tonight, we pick back up in the story of Paul's fourth shipwreck. He's being transported to Rome from Caesarea, along with other prisoners and a load of grain from Egypt. The ship is a large one, with nearly 300 men on board and they're past safe sailing season, but, despite Paul's warning, the captain and the crew decided to risk the voyage and make for Phoenix, a more enticing harbor.

The trip had already been a struggle, but the sailors had a payday in mind. And so, though it wasn't Paul's idea, he and his friends (Luke and Aristarchus) are brought along on this doomed crossing.

What are Christians supposed to do when the unbelieving world ignores us, but we're still brought along on their ill-fated plans? We find ourselves in a time when God's ways are ignored, good is called evil, evil is called good, and our society sails on and on toward disaster. Is there anything we *can* do or should we abandon ship? In this harrowing account, there is a lot we can take to heart since we are now the ones standing in Paul's place, intervening for a lost and dying world.

Our main goal tonight is to see what the Christians were doing and how that can apply to our own ministry to the unbelievers around us.

**Acts 27:13 - <sup>13</sup>When a gentle south wind sprang up, they thought they had achieved their purpose. They weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.**

The soldiers and sailors should know better, but they were enticed by this gentle breeze which beckoned them like the siren's song. Just like Eve was tempted by the fruit, even though she had been warned, she thought maybe the danger wouldn't apply to her.

We see what they were thinking: "They thought they had achieved their purpose." The soldiers, the sailors, the merchants all had their own, selfish wants. "Let's get to Phoenix. There's indulgence there. It's closer to Rome, closer to our payoff." Because their purposes were materialistic and self-centered, they made a poor decision and they looked to present circumstances to justify it.

We see a different characteristic among the Christians here. They were *careful*. I don't mean they were timid, but they *cared* about what the Lord wanted and what was *really* going on. The truth is, Paul probably wanted to get to Rome more than anyone else on board. But, his personal wants and

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew\\_Webb](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_Webb)

<sup>2</sup> <https://vault.si.com/vault/1955/07/18/death-of-a-shropshire-lad>

his earthly circumstances weren't the driving factors in his life. He was willing to wait and submit to the Lord's leading. Christians should be *careful* in that way.

**Acts 27:14-16** - <sup>14</sup> But before long, a fierce wind called the “northeaster” rushed down from the island. <sup>15</sup> Since the ship was caught and unable to head into the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. <sup>16</sup> After running under the shelter of a little island called Cauda, we were barely able to get control of the skiff.

They were sailing into a typhoon - one so scary it had a name: The Euroclydon! Over the next two weeks it would beat them, toss them, blind them and taunt them. The gentle breeze, which had promised so many good things, was the bait that drew them into a trap they wouldn't be able to escape. They were “caught.”

Here we see the first instance of another Christian characteristic in this story: The Christians were *helpful*. “We were barely able to get control of the skiff.” Throughout, we'll see Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus joining in the work, trying to physically assist as much as possible.

**Acts 27:17-19** - <sup>17</sup> After hoisting it up, they used ropes and tackle and girded the ship. Fearing they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the drift-anchor, and in this way they were driven along. <sup>18</sup> Because we were being severely battered by the storm, they began to jettison the cargo the next day. <sup>19</sup> On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.

Luke vividly describes a situation that is becoming increasingly desperate. They are in a fight for their lives. The integrity of the ship is in danger. It's so serious that they toss out all loose furniture and even as much of the *tackle* as they could. Meaning, stuff you need to sail or make repairs! But note what they have *not* thrown out: The grain. When it says “cargo” it doesn't include *those* barrels. Though they would've been large and heavy, still the crew were hanging onto the hope of profit.

**Acts 27:20** - <sup>20</sup> For many days neither sun nor stars appeared, and the severe storm kept raging. Finally all hope was fading that we would be saved.

I remember a few years ago when we were in Colombia we drove from the Bible college out to this other river city like 10 hours away. The final hours of the drive are across a dirt road. No cities, no lights, just a shack here and there. We left at around noon and once we hit the dirt section it was dusk. Then the rain came. That meant the dirt became mud and the mud completely covered our headlights. So, there we were: No signs, no lights, no cell coverage, and our driver clearly wasn't sure if we had gone the right way. I don't know about Jacob and Alex, but as the hours passed, I felt my hope seeping away. I can't imagine what it would be like to do a trip like that, not in a Mitsubishi Raider, but in a wooden ship in the middle of the Mediterranean. What Luke is describing is desperate: Little by little each person on board was accepting the fact that they were going to *die* before they reached land. One commentator suggests that they must've sprung a leak by this point, making it only a matter of time before each and every one of them drowned in the dark.<sup>3</sup>

**Acts 27:21** - <sup>21</sup> Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, “You men should have followed my advice not to sail from Crete and sustain this damage and loss.

<sup>3</sup> *Ellicott's Commentary For English Readers*

Yikes, shots fired! Is Paul just sticking a thumb in their eye? No, he's too compassionate for that. What he *is* being is *truthful*. Christians are meant to traffic in the truth. Our message isn't to be tailored to make people feel a certain way, it's meant to be an explanation of what is real. And *this* was the truth. Now, *why* was Paul speaking this truth to them? Was this some sort of "tell-it-like-it-is" rudeness that is, sadly, prevalent in our culture today? No, he was speaking the truth *in love*, just as we are called to do. Look at what comes next.

**Acts 27:22-26 - <sup>22</sup>Now I urge you to take courage, because there will be no loss of any of your lives, but only of the ship. <sup>23</sup>For last night an angel of the God I belong to and serve stood by me <sup>24</sup>and said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul. It is necessary for you to appear before Caesar. And indeed, God has graciously given you all those who are sailing with you.' <sup>25</sup>So take courage, men, because I believe God that it will be just the way it was told to me. <sup>26</sup>But we have to run aground on some island."**

In addition to being *truthful*, we see Paul being *hopeful*. Despite the circumstances, he had full confidence in the Lord's care and goodness. So, even though the storm of the century was physically breaking up the very deck he was standing on, he didn't have to live in fear.

We live in a time where fear is the default. It's being sold to you and thrown at you and it's laying siege to your heart. But part of your salvation is being saved out of fear. God says in Isaiah 43: "Don't fear, for I have redeemed you...When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." Thanks to God's love, we are a *hopeful* people. Paul told the men on that ship to put *cheer* in their hearts.

The fact that he had been right *before*, helped his listeners know he was right *now*. He wasn't rubbing anything in. He was being honest so that they could know his words were true. But, notice this: He wasn't just blowing hot wind. There was plenty of wind already. He wasn't saying, "Everything's going to be fine. Everything's going to work out." As he delivered his message of hope, rooted in the revelation of God, he was honest: "The ship is going down. And the escape is going to be rough." But, his message was clear, confident and definite, full of real answers and real hope.

So, in these verses we see Paul being *truthful* and *hopeful*, but we also see him being *useful* for this ship. How? Well, on one level, because he became a calm and resolute leader in a time of crisis. But also because *he* was the one that made it possible for 273 of them to be saved.

You see, God wanted *Paul* and his two friends in Rome. All these other people we loved by God, but they weren't following Him. In fact, they were living lives of rebellion toward Him. They ignored the common grace of God, those warnings put in place in creation that they *shouldn't* set sail. But they went anyway. Now they were reaping what they sowed. But Paul had gone below decks and prayed that they would all be saved. The fervent prayer meetings of the Christians probably seemed like a waste of time to the frantic sailors, and yet, the angel tells Paul, "God has *given* you all those who are sailing with you." He asked for them. He petitioned God for them.

It's popular today for unbelievers to rail against the phrase "our thoughts and prayers are with the victims." The truth is: Prayer matters! "The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect."<sup>4</sup> The most *useful* action on that ship was not moving cargo or girding the ship or lowering anchors, it was 3 Christians praying that God would intervene.

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<sup>4</sup>James 5:16

One more thing here: Paul told them to be hopeful and full of cheer even though every *material* good was going to be lost. That's not what a merchant wants to hear. But as Paul speaks we discover that it's *life* that matters, not merchandise. Your value is not measured by what you transport or store up or even achieve. You are valuable because you belong to God and are held by Him. Understanding that helps us to put our lives in perspective. You may *be* a soldier or a sailor or a merchant in your day job, but the *purpose* of your life is to be held by God, to serve Him and enjoy His presence.

**Acts 27:27-29 - <sup>27</sup>When the fourteenth night came, we were drifting in the Adriatic Sea, and about midnight the sailors thought they were approaching land. <sup>28</sup>They took soundings and found it to be a hundred twenty feet deep; when they had sailed a little farther and sounded again, they found it to be ninety feet deep. <sup>29</sup>Then, fearing we might run aground on the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight to come.**

On that same Colombia trip we took a drive from Bogota to the Bible college up in the mountains. It was a 4 or 5 hour drive. I've never been that sick before or since. I felt like a lightweight, but the last half hour or so I was just praying for the dawn. It felt like it was never going to end. That was 5 hours and there was little worry that I was actually going to die. These guys are facing imminent death for *two weeks!* We can be sure that, day by day, Paul and Luke and Aristarchus were encouraging these guys and helping them. As Christians, we must keep hope alive. Not with platitudes, but with truth. The dawn *is* coming. There *is* salvation. We know the way, we know the Person. Keep hope alive.

**Acts 27:30-32 - <sup>30</sup>Some sailors tried to escape from the ship; they had let down the skiff into the sea, pretending that they were going to put out anchors from the bow. <sup>31</sup>Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." <sup>32</sup>Then the soldiers cut the ropes holding the skiff and let it drop away.**

These sailors didn't believe. The soldiers did. It's amazing that, after all that had happened, despite Paul's truthfulness and all he had done to help, there were still some who *wouldn't* believe. And, the truth is, salvation is a choice. As Christians, we lay out God's word and His plan to people and then they have to *choose* whether or not to believe.

Now, what we see here is that God had explained some specific parameters to Paul. He said to centurion, "If these guys leave, you all die." There was a moment of decision. And it was very clear.

We also see an important analogy here: The skiff was their lifeboat. The last, manmade hope. God wanted them to let it all go. Would they trust *Him* or would they not? Paul was content to ride that ship until it broke apart. He'd rather do that than trust to skiff. Why? Because he believed the Lord's plan. He knew his Savior could be trusted.

**Acts 27:33-38 - When it was about daylight, Paul urged them all to take food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been waiting and going without food, having eaten nothing. <sup>34</sup>So I urge you to take some food. For this is for your survival, since none of you will lose a hair from your head." <sup>35</sup>After he said these things and had taken some bread, he gave thanks to God in the presence of all of them, and after he broke it, he began to eat. <sup>36</sup>They all were encouraged and took food themselves. <sup>37</sup>In all there were 276 of us on the ship. <sup>38</sup>When they had eaten enough, they began to lighten the ship by throwing the grain overboard into the sea.**

Careful, truthful, helpful, hopeful. Now we see the Christians were *thankful*. He gave thanks to God in the presence of them all. We must not forget that he'd still have to shout over the howling of the wind, he'd still have to endure the stinging spray of the waves. And yet he honored God and thanked Him. Christians hearts are meant to be *this* full. Enough that we sing in the dungeon and give thanks in the storm. How? It's part of the heart and peace of Christ given to us. We put it on and let it in.

The Christians demonstrate some important things. First, look at what a difference a few Christians can make. Not only are they the agents of rescue, they also bring all these hearts back from the depths of despair. Second, we see that these Christians practiced what they preached. They told the men around them to have hope, trust God, be of good cheer, and that's what they were doing. Third, these Christians were *strong* in the Lord. Look at their confidence, not in themselves, but in God and His promises.

For many years it has been fashionable for Christians to embrace and promote "brokenness." I'm sure it's rooted in the idea of being poor in spirit and recognizing that none of us are perfect. But, here's the problem: What it converts to is a celebration of instability. When you see Christians talking about brokenness a lot, it ends up just being an excuse to not progress in our walk with the Lord, to just surrender to the difficulties of life and stay at a low, broken-down level.

Listen: we *do* come to God spiritually bankrupt. But *then* He does something: He makes us *strong*. He makes us *stand*. He makes us *steadfast*, like a mighty tree, not blown down by the winds of this world, but firm and resolute, with fear cast out even if the earth gives way beneath us. Be strong in the Lord and of good courage. God does *not* leave you broken. He transforms you. After all, He's the kind of God that cares even about the hairs on your head. Did you see that in verse 34? Your hair *matters* to God. That's His love for you.

**Acts 27:39-44 - <sup>39</sup>When daylight came, they did not recognize the land but sighted a bay with a beach. They planned to run the ship ashore if they could. <sup>40</sup>After cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and headed for the beach. <sup>41</sup>But they struck a sandbar and ran the ship aground. The bow jammed fast and remained immovable, while the stern began to break up by the pounding of the waves. <sup>42</sup>The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners so that no one could swim away and escape. <sup>43</sup>But the centurion kept them from carrying out their plan because he wanted to save Paul, and so he ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. <sup>44</sup>The rest were to follow, some on planks and some on debris from the ship. In this way, everyone safely reached the shore.**

Don't ever say, "Things can't get any worse!" There might be a sandbar in front of you! One more '*ful*' shown by the Christians. They had been careful, truthful, hopeful, helpful, thankful. Here we see they were *faithful*. They stuck with the Lord's plan all the way to the very last. It's hard to hit the water when you don't know how to swim. But they did it.

We also see here wonderful demonstrations of God's providence. He made sure that His servants were saved from execution and that every one of those 276 travelers made it safely to shore. He put vigor in the muscles of the swimmers, and sent flotsam to those who couldn't. He brought each one away from the carnage of the wreck and delivered them onto land. What a good and gracious God!

At the start of this voyage Paul and the other Christians were, from one vantage point, only ballast. In the end, we see how meaningful their part to play was. At first glance it didn't seem like there was

much they could do. But when we look closer we see that what they *could*, they *did*. And what they did made a huge difference. They were careful to go God's way. They were truthful with the people around them, which ultimately showed them all the way of escape. They were hopeful, even in the darkest dangers, knowing that God's love never fails. They were helpful in big and small ways. They weren't content to let the ship go to hell in a hand basket, but put their shoulders to the work. They were thankful and faithful and because of all of that, their presence was powerful as God worked through them in a time of great need.

I wouldn't be like these Christians if I didn't take a chance to speak to anyone listening who is *not* a believer in Jesus Christ. We may not be on the Mediterranean, but you're in even worse danger. You see, while this story really happened, it's also a picture for us of life without Christ. You are the soldier, the sailor, the merchant on the ship and it's headed to the bottom unless you get saved. You can't avoid the shipwreck, there's no lifeboat that can save you. It doesn't matter how many battles you've won or how much merchandise you've delivered. In the end, you're going to die. The grave is going to claim you like this storm claimed the ship. There is one way and *only* one way for you to escape and that is through faith in Jesus Christ. He loves you and knows you and is calling out to you. He's the only hope for you to escape death and receive everlasting life. But, to receive that gift you must believe and obey. Jettison every other cargo. Cut free every other scheme or plan that you have. Believe what He has said and surrender to Him. If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

Matthew Webb, the man who swam the Channel, tried one final stunt. He thought he could swim the rapids of Niagara. It was a huge risk, but he had been promised a large sum of money if he succeeded. John McCloy, a veteran ferryman, tried to warn him. He said, "If he goes in he'll never come out alive."<sup>5</sup> But Matthew thought he was strong enough to make it through. He went in the water on July 24, 1883. Four minutes later he was gone. His body was recovered on the 28th.

Without Christ, you cannot be saved. You won't come out of the wreck. With Christ, the wreck can't hurt you. Because nothing can separate us from His love. To be a Christian makes all the difference, not only in *this* world, but most importantly, in the next.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://vault.si.com/vault/1955/07/18/death-of-a-shropshire-lad>