

# Do Not Be Afraid . . . God Will Fulfill His Purpose for You! (Part 2)

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It's become evident this week once more that we are clearly dealing with two viruses these days, are we not? One outside us—COVID-19 and this pandemic. And one inside us—sin, manifesting itself in prejudice, racism, hatred, violence, injustice. One attacks our bodies. The other our hearts.

In either case, it is the gospel that is the solution—the death and resurrection of Jesus holds the answer. With regard to the body, we know that one day soon Jesus will do away with sickness and death, and we shall rise in Him never to die again. With regard to the heart, we know that only Jesus can unearth the stone in our chests and replace it with a heart like His—soft, broad, and brimming with love.

Mercy Hill, in Jesus we have the solution, we have the answer. Far be it from us then to ever add to the problem. Lord forgive us! Let us rather bring the gospel and its message of resurrection and reconciliation to all who find themselves hurting and hopeless in these trying times!

## Introduction

### Part 2

- A. This is now part two of a message I began last time entitled: Do Not Be Afraid . . . God Will Fulfill His Purpose for You!
  - 1. We are dealing here in particular with the narrative recorded for us in [Acts 27](#). It's a long and detailed account of Paul's journey by sea from Caesarea to Rome.
- B. Now, I thought it best not to read the whole of this chapter again up front but instead to highlight only those verses that particularly bring out the matter that shall be our focus for the morning. But a few words of summary are in order here just to make sure we're all on the same page:
  - 1. Paul, the great Apostle, you recall, had only just recently completed his third missionary journey there in Jerusalem. And we might say, from one perspective at least, that it didn't end favorably for him. Indeed, the Jews there grew so furious with him they were seeking to kill him by any means possible.
  - 2. But the Romans, catching wind of the uproar and aggression, in a way, save Paul by imprisoning him and moving him around a bit—from Jerusalem to Caesarea.
  - 3. By [Acts 27](#), he'd been imprisoned in Caesarea for over two years, and eventually, in a turn of events, Paul decides to appeal his case to Caesar in Rome in hopes that he could bring the gospel there to that great city—Rome really was the epicenter of the ancient world in his day.
  - 4. The opening verses of this chapter record how Paul, along with other prisoners and soldiers and sailors, set out on voyage to Rome via ship along the northern Mediterranean coastline.
  - 5. But the wind and weather turn foul on them and things go bleak rather quickly. It looks to all on board as if their journey and, indeed, their very lives are going to come to a miserable

end in all of this. In fact, they conclude as much in v. 20. Listen as Luke records: “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.”

- C. But now we pick up the story in v. 21, and come to a strange word of hope and assurance, given and received even while the storm is still surging round about them. So let me read Acts 27:21-32 at this point, then we’ll say a quick word of prayer, and dive in . . .

## The Text

<sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. <sup>23</sup> For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, <sup>24</sup> 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.’ <sup>25</sup> So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. <sup>26</sup> But we must run aground on some island.”

<sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. <sup>29</sup> And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. <sup>30</sup> 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, <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 away the ropes of the ship’s boat and let it go. (Acts 27:21–32)

And do you remember how the story ends? Through many twists and turns, ups and downs, the people are preserved. The last verse of the chapter reads like this: “And so it was that all were brought safely to land” (v. 44).

## The Agenda

- A. There are just two things on the agenda for this morning. We’ll look at: (1) A Growing Tension; and (2) An Attempted Resolution.

1. I realize you may have no clue what I’m talking about here, but let me at least say this before we begin: There’s a tension in this text, and I want to wind it up tight, make sure you see it, make sure you feel it, maybe even get you a little troubled by it, as I have been . . . so that, hopefully, I can biblically, gloriously relieve it and in so doing bring even greater assurance and rest and stability to yours and my soul!

- B. Do you feel like your life is a sinking ship right now?! Well, my prayer is that when we are done in God’s word together this morning you will look down and find your feet have been planted on solid ground. There is bedrock for the believer here and I want us on it!

## (1) A Growing Tension

## In the Text

- A. So first, The Tension. I imagine many of you caught it even as I read, but let me make sure we all see it now together.
1. Paul is addressing this hopeless crowd of men on the ship and he makes a wild promise there in v. 22: The word of promise is given: “There will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.” What a crazy thing to say while the winds are howling and waves are crashing. Where could such confidence come from?
  2. Well, Paul goes on to tell them. He grounds his prediction in the very promise and plan of God: “<sup>23</sup>For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship,<sup>24</sup> 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’” (vv. 23-24). This is not Paul merely wishful thinking, this is a word from God.
  3. Therefore, he concludes in v. 25: “So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.” Exactly. No fear! God has spoken. It will come to pass.
- B. And then, as the days and nights go on, as the tempest shows no sign of slackening, when it seems at last that they are going to wreck on the rocks—the sailors, cook up a plan to save their own necks, even at the expense of the others. Pretending to drop anchors from the bow, they in truth begin to lower the ship’s only lifeboat into the water.
1. And, just as they are about to board and paddle away towards the shore, Paul, perhaps even by some revelation of the Spirit, catches wind of it. And he sounds the alarm, crying out in warning to the Centurion and the soldiers remaining on the ship, v. 31: “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.” “If the sailors head out into the water now, everyone will be dead in the water very soon!”
- C. To which I say: “Come again, Paul?! . . .
1. In vv. 22-25 you said there would be no loss of life? You said God told you that? You said it would play out exactly as you had been told?
  2. And then here you are, just a few verses later, backtracking on all of that? ‘Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.’
    - a. Which is it? Are they going to be saved? Or are they going to die? Are the people on this ship going to make it to shore? Or are they all going to belly up in the sea? Is God going to be true to His prophetic word and promise or is everything up in the air and subject to whims and will of man?”
- D. Now, you may recall, I used this story last week to bring out the reassuring truth that is captured in the title of these sermons: namely, that we do not need to be afraid because God will fulfill His purpose for us.
1. That’s really the essence of the word that came to Paul from God by way of this angel. “Listen Paul, do not be afraid. You must go to Rome to testify about Me there. That’s a big part of God’s purpose for you. It must be.”

- a. I used the word Destiny and I talked about how God, in Christ, would fulfill that sort of thing, not just for Paul, but for all of us.
  - i. But here it seems, on the surface at least, God uses that word “must” rather loosely. “You must get to Rome. Oh, but if those sailors jump, I take that back.”

## Winding It Up Tight

- A. And the tension gets even more pronounced when we recall everything else that’s been said of Paul to this point regarding God’s purpose and plan for his life. Let me quickly show you this just to kind of wind all this up a bit tighter, as I said I would:
  1. In our text it’s an angel that says Paul must get to Rome. But this is just the crowning word atop a whole structure of promises and prophecies made about him along these lines.
  2. Back in [Acts 23:11](#), Jesus Himself said precisely the same thing. Paul is there in Jerusalem, imprisoned by the Romans, locked up in the barracks, with his own people wanting to put him to death—no doubt a little bit scared, a little bit discouraged. And then we read of something marvelous: “[The following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.’](#)” It’s going to happen. Take courage. An angel of God has said it. And here now Jesus is saying it.
  3. But we can keep going. Back further in [Acts 19:21](#), we’re given yet another divine witness to this plan of God for Paul. Add to the angel and to the Son, the Holy Spirit: “[Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, ‘After I have been there, I must also see Rome.’](#)”
  4. And all of this business with Rome it seems is really just particular fleshing and flowering out of the very purpose Jesus says He’s laid hold of Paul for in the first place.
    - a. You remember, Paul was running antithetical to Christ, persecuting His followers, imagining it his God-ordained duty not to advance the church but to destroy it. And there on the road to Damascus, Jesus literally stops him in his tracks and sets him on another course. A course spelled out in the way Jesus speaks of Paul: “[\[H\]e is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel](#)” ([Acts 9:15](#)).
  5. This is why Paul himself would say in [Gal 1:15-16](#): “[<sup>15</sup> \[God\] who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, <sup>16</sup> was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.](#)”
    - a. And, of course, some of these “[Gentiles](#)” among whom he must preach—according to the Holy Spirit, according to Jesus, according to this angel of God—are those Gentiles in Rome.

- i. It's a purpose of God for Paul set in motion by sovereign grace before he was even born!
- B. And now I want to ask: Here in [Acts 27](#), is all of this suddenly thrown into jeopardy? Because some sailors want to abandon ship a little prematurely?
  - 1. Let me force the matter upon us most pointedly by putting it like this: If a few renegade sailors can upend the plans and purposes of almighty God then you and I, brothers and sisters, are helplessly imperiled.
    - a. There is no hope. There is no assurance. There is no solid ground for our feet. There is no bedrock for a believer. These sermons are a sham.
      - i. And we have all the reason in the world to be afraid—because, though God said one thing to us yesterday, if we or anyone else make one wrong move He can just as easily back out on it tomorrow.
- C. Do you feel the weight of this? Do you catch what's on the line here? I hope you do. Now, let's try, in what time we have left, to relieve a bit of this tension and try to make sense of it as best we can . . .

## (2) An Attempted Resolution

### Respecting the Distance

- A. Now, the first thing we must invariably say whenever we come to discuss the relationship between the sovereign will of God and the free and responsible will of man is that, in many ways, the matter will always elude us—it will surpass our intellectual abilities and capacities. There will be mystery and a certain incomprehensibility to it all.
  - 1. And this subsists simply, and indeed rationally, by virtue of the fact that we are creature and He is Creator.
    - a. In the same way that your dog, as cute and fluffy as he is, can in no way understand the ins and outs of human complexity and conceptualization, so man shall never fully understand the ways of God. No matter how hard we think on the matter, we shall always be left with a great deal of mystery.
- B. And this ought to lead us, in the end, not to despair but doxology.
  - 1. We go where Paul goes when he himself discusses these matters in his letter to the Romans. [Rom 11:33-36](#): “<sup>33</sup> Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! <sup>34</sup> ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ <sup>35</sup> ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ <sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”

- C. I suppose this doxology ought to be both the end-point and the starting-point of our discussion. Which is why I bring it up here at the outset.
1. We bow before the majesty of God. And in that place, ironically, we do our best thinking. As the author of Proverbs has said: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10).
- D. But now, having said all of this, I do believe that God does want us to try to understand what we can where we can—to make an attempt at answering the questions put forward thus far in this sermon; to see if from Scripture some of these apparent tensions can be resolved.
1. While, in the last analysis there will certainly be some mystery here, this doesn’t mean we just throw up our hands and excuse ourselves from doing the deeper work of biblical exposition and interpretation. It just means we hold our positions loosely and are humbly open to other points of view.
    - a. So what follows, then, is my attempt. Emphasis on that word “attempt.” Each one of us is free to come to other conclusions as Word and Spirit guide . . .

## Avoiding Extremes

- A. The issue at hand, just to restate it, is simply this: Can man with his own will somehow thwart or overpower God and His? In our text, did God promise and even prophecy one thing that could truly be upended by a few sailors a few days later? Is the plan of God that fragile?
1. If not, then how do we understand the warning in v. 31? Is it all a farce? Does God not mean what He says? Does human choice even matter at all? Does God even care what we do? Is He just going to accomplish His will anyways?
    - a. These are the sorts of knots that need untangling.
- B. It seems to me there are two extremes we are trying to avoid here:
1. On the one hand, we do not want to say that God fulfilling His purpose for us means my choices and actions don’t matter. “If He’s going to do it, I’ll just sit here and let Him do it. Who cares. I can sin and wander and coast and He’ll get it done.”
    - a. No! I think this the meaning of these sailors. Paul is not bluffing here. He means it. If they abandon the ship, everyone will die. Human choice and action matters. Those sailors, understandably so, are important to the safety of all on board the ship. They’re the only ones who know how to navigate it!
  2. But, on the other hand, we simply cannot go on to say with this that everything God has said of Paul up to this point is suddenly now in jeopardy, hanging in the balance—as if somehow man’s will is ultimate in it all and can derail the plans of God. That is not the biblical position either.

- a. For we know, as Paul puts it most emphatically in [Eph 1:11](#): “[God] works all things according to the counsel of his will.” I looked it up in the Greek: “all things” means “all things”—τὰ πάντα ἐνεργοῦντος κατὰ τὴν βουλήν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ (“all things working according to the counsel of the will of Him”).
  - i. [Acts 27:31](#) doesn’t somehow undermine this fundamental reality.

## Charting through the Middle

- A. So how do the two hold together—God’s will, man’s will? How does this work so that the plan and promises of God still stand even though the warnings and threats are real?
  - 1. Well, I’ll tell you what I think, give some biblical support for it, and then draw things to a close.
- B. My sense of it is that, while the warnings and threats are real, they are actually part of the means whereby God keeps things moving forward according to His plan and promise. They are as spurs put to the back of His people, keeping them along the narrow way.
  - 1. Considering [Acts 27](#) in particular, He uses the warning as a means of fulfillment—everyone on the boat is saved, Paul does go to Rome, just as He said. And the threat here is part of the way God ensures that it is so! It holds the people in line. It wrangles their rebellious wills back. It awakens them to danger and moves them to action.
    - a. “[T]he soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship’s boat and let it go” (v. 32). And, hence, “all were brought safely to land” (v. 44). In the end, it does come to pass “exactly” (v. 25) as the angel, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit had said.

## Other Examples

- A. Let me quickly show you a few other examples of this same kind of dynamic taking place throughout Scripture so you can see why I’m inclined to think this is what’s going on here . . .

### Example #1: Exodus 32

- A. One example that came immediately to mind was that of God’s dealings with Moses back in [Exo 32](#). I wonder if you remember this . . .
  - 1. Moses is up on Mount Sinai, receiving the tablets of the Law and other directives, but down below the people of Israel are growing restless, and they make that golden calf and begin to worship it as an idol of some sort.
  - 2. And while Moses is up in God’s presence, God lets him in on something that He’s tossing around in His mind, as it were. He says, in essence: “Moses, I’m already sick of these people. They’re down there right now lost in idolatry. I’m going to just wipe them out in my wrath and start a new nation with you. What do you say?!”

- B. Now why does He do this? Why's He talking like this with Moses? Remember to this point He's made covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He's made a great deal of promises and spoken to them about His plans. Is He really now just going to scrap all that? I don't think so.
1. He's using these threats to form and shape Moses and actually push His plan further along. You see, Moses, hearing this returns immediately to the promises of old and says: "It can't be. You can't do this. What about Your glory, Your honor, Your name? The nations will hear of it and think You're a liar. The Egyptians will hear of it and think You are cruel—that You just brought Israel out here to kill them. Far be it from You! *'Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever' (Exo 32:13).'*"
- C. And so God relents. But the result here is that these threats had driven Moses deeper into the character and promises of God. He was being shaped and fit as a mediator and a type and foreshadow of Christ, really.
1. Ironically, the warnings and threats were part of the means by which God goes about fulfilling His plans for Israel.

## Example #2: Romans 8 and 11

- A. To give another example, many of us have stood in awe, no doubt, of the incredible promises strung together in [Rom 8](#), not the least of which, comes to us in [vv. 29-30](#), often referred to as the "golden chain of salvation": "*<sup>29</sup> [T]hose whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son . . . <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*"
1. Paul speaks here of the invincible and eternal security of the saint. The chain proceeds unbroken from foreknowledge to predestination to calling to justification to glorification.
    - a. In Paul's theological system, glorification is undoubtedly a future reality, where it is understood that at last our lowly bodies will be transformed to be like Christ's glorious body (cf. [Phil 3:21](#)). But here he speaks of it in the past tense: "*. . . and those whom he justified he also glorified.*"
      - i. At first, such a past tense may seem puzzling. But upon reflection we come to understand that this is because, according to the sovereign plan and promise of God, such a future prospect is as good as already accomplished for us in Christ! God will fulfill His good purpose for us and bring us to glory unscathed. Hallelujah, yes and amen!
- B. And yet we keep reading in the epistle and come just a few chapters later to [Rom 11](#) where Paul essentially says this: "Though you are grafted into the people of God through Christ now, don't become haughty lest God cut you off. Continue in His kindness or you will know His severity" (cf. [vv. 17-22](#)).

1. And you say: “What?! How does this work? I thought I’m secure?” Well, you see, if I’m understanding the way God uses these warnings correctly, those who truly are His children will be awakened by them, moved by them to repentance and humility, driven by them back to the promises of [Rom 8](#) and the grace of Christ.
  - a. And in so doing, ironically, the warnings are actually part of the way God keeps us secure, and maintains that unbroken golden chain. Do you see?
    - i. You cannot say: “Well, because I believe in [Rom 8](#) I can live however I want and God will fulfill His purpose for me and bring me to glory.”
    - ii. No! A true child of God doesn’t speak like that. You know God has a hold of you because the warnings and threats are taken seriously and they actually end up pushing you deeper into His promises and grace. “You’re right, I would grow haughty and foolish, if you don’t keep me! Keep me God!”

### Example #3: Jude

- A. And the last example I’ll give you here is probably the clearest and most poignant of all because the two realities are put unmistakably and unashamedly side by side.
- B. In the book [Jude](#), after warning the saints of false teachers and coming judgment, Jude exhorts them like this: “<sup>20</sup> But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, <sup>21</sup> keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life” (vv. 20-21).
  1. Now if you stop reading here, this sounds like the keeping is ultimately my job—like it’s up to me, or else. I better be building myself up in the faith, I better be praying fervently in the Holy Spirit, or I’m going to be falling away and growing cold to God.
    - a. And, in one sense, certainly we could say this is absolutely true. And we need to let these exhortations and warning land on us, move us, challenge us. Our choices and actions matter.
- C. But as we keep reading, another player into view: namely, God. And we see what He’s up to in all of this. Jude moves from this call that we keep ourselves to this most glorious promise that God is, in fact, keeping us. Here’s how he ends his letter in vv. 24-25: “<sup>24</sup> Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, <sup>25</sup> to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”
  1. The call for us to keep ourselves drives us to the only One who can truly keep us, and in so doing, we start to grow up more in our faith and we become more fervent in prayer.
    - a. Do you see? The exhortations, the warnings, the threats, they are part of means by which God keeps you in His grace and continues to fulfill His good purposes for your life!
- D. So, can a few renegade sailors upend the plans and purposes of God for you? No way!

1. In Jesus, there is solid ground beneath your feet. There is bedrock for the believer. Do not be afraid . . . God will fulfill His purpose for you!