

Title: Trials are not the exception
Text: Acts 28.1-10
Theme: trials are part of a good plan
Series: Acts
Prop Stmtnt: Difficult trials are part of God's good plan.

Read Text:

The movie Jaws traumatized a generation of vacationers who became terrified of ever getting back into the ocean. And of course, people were willing to go to theaters and pay perfectly good money to be traumatized. Then came the sequel; Jaws II with the subtitle: Just when you thought it was safe to go back into the water. That is what Covid feels like right now, doesn't it? Just when you thought it was going to be safe again, we keep hearing that it is still here. Some of you may be saying, "I am so done with Covid. I am so sick of hearing about Covid" but that does not mean that Covid is done with you or with us.

This is true about the nature of trials in our life. We do not like difficulty. We want it to be done as soon as possible. Let's get this over with so that we can get back to life being good and problem-free. Let's have a reality check. Ever since Genesis 3 and until Revelation 21 life is not going to be worry-free. We live in a sin-cursed world. Trials are not the exception. Trials are the norm. We go from trial to trial and sometimes there are moments of reprieve, but for the most part we live with angst. We live with sorrow. We live with lament. We live with pressure. We can have joy even in the midst of these, but we live with them. All of these trials are additional reminders to us that life as we know it, is not how life is supposed to be. We are not home yet.

Cathi and I are friends with a couple who are around our age. During the lockdown, she could not get her hair done and as a result, the gray that is there naturally, naturally started to be seen. For some, that is a time to panic. Why? Now, he didn't help matters when he said, "Yea, I thought that I was now married to her mom." But, underneath the jokes about aging is the reality of aging. Aging is itself a trial. From the day we are born we are closer to death and death gets us all. If that is the case, and if life is really a series of difficulties and trials until we die, then what is the point? This text is so helpful for us because Paul is the recipient of some pretty heavyweight punches and he keeps answering the bell and getting into the ring for the next round. Is he crazy? No. He really sees life in its detail from the bigger and grander narrative.

1. **God keeps his promises.** (1a)

We view everything in life through the lens of God's promises. This is what it means to have a biblical worldview. A biblical worldview gives us a series of files that help us arrange, organize and understand life and our experiences. God's promises to us, rightfully understood help us see life as we should. Notice what I just said. God's promises, *rightfully understood* help us see life as we should. Let me give you an example of a promise of God that is not rightfully understood by many, many people.

Have you ever seen this verse? Jeremiah 29.11, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." Now, let's say

that your 4-year-old daughter was just diagnosed with a childhood cancer like a neuroblastoma. Are you guaranteed that she will be fine because you are claiming this verse? Let's say that you are 15 years old and you see this verse on some Pinterest page and you like it. It speaks to you, so you claim it as your life verse. Are you now living in a bubble where you are surrounded by a spiritual force field that protects you from any difficulty or disappointment? In both cases, the answer is No. Before there was Jeremiah 29.11 there was Jeremiah 29.10 which tells you that this promise was written to the Jewish exiles who survived the massacre, pillaging, burning and raping of Jerusalem and were now in Babylon. Many of them would die in Babylon, but God's plan for them is not to stay in Babylon forever. They will return to Jerusalem. Jeremiah 29.11 is a promise in the Bible, but it is not a promise for me or for you. It is however, an example of the fact that God makes promises and he keeps those promises. In this account, God promised Paul that he would get to Rome. So, Paul really did not have to fear the storm or the shipwreck.

A. God's promises help me process what has happened to me.

Paul could look back on both the storm and the shipwreck with amazement, with courage, with worship even, because these were really big things that he went through. God's promises ahead of time let him know that he was not "lucky." He did not cheat fate. His life was in the hand of God and God told him that he was going to get to Rome and Paul knew that he was bullet-proof (not that they had bullets yet) until he got to Rome.

I want you to read your Bibles regularly and correctly so that your mind is full of the wonderful promises of God so that you can look back over your life and trace the hand of God in it. Your life is not subject to fate or to random forces. God is in the details of your life and you can sleep at night because he doesn't.

B. God's promises help prepare me for what is going to happen to me.

That storm was intense. Being shipwrecked and floating on boards to the shore is pretty scary when you don't know what is lurking under the surface of the water. But, having survived some seriously challenging trials does not mean that I will not face more. In fact, I will. And a proper understanding of God's Word prepares me for them. Paul does not have to wait very long before something else happens. Do you not read this and think, "Good night nurse, what is the deal?!"

2. Trials provide opportunities for gospel ministry. (1b-9)

When you view your life through the grid of God's Word, you interpret trials accordingly. God keeps his promises at all times. Trials are real and they can be very intense, but they do not change God nor his promises. If your life is not based on God's Word, then you have to come up with another system to explain why things happen. That is a very difficult position to be in. But, that is the position that these islanders were in and frankly, most of the world. Here is a great example of it.

One of life's great questions is, why do bad things happen? And, (narrowing the lens a bit) why do bad things happen to me, or to this person? In order to answer that question, the human race has come up with all sorts of systems that are flawed and therefore break down. But, people tend

to hold on to their flawed systems of belief and will fight for them, but in some cases when they are exposed as being flawed, it opens the door for the gospel.

So, here is Paul. He has survived this harrowing trial at sea, manages not to get drowned when the ship breaks apart on the reef or sandbar, and now, finally on shore, is attacked by a poisonous snake. Put your eyes on verse 4 (read). The translators of the ESV capitalized Justice. Did you notice that? In that culture, many, if not most of the people in that part of the known world believed in the ancient mythological gods and goddesses. This was their attempt at answering life's great questions such as, where did we come from, what went wrong, what can we do about it and what happens to me after I die? In their system, Zeus was the big dog god. He ruled the rest, but could go on a tantrum every once in a while. In Greek and Roman mythology, Zeus and his second consort (Themis, who ruled over divine justice) had a daughter named Justice who ruled over human justice. Justice was one of Zeus' favorites but, she was like a super-tattletale. She reported immediately to Zeus all of the unrighteous deeds of mankind so that those people would have to pay for their crimes. Justice was also in cahoots with some of the gods of the underworld and she was known for being a very powerful goddess who would exercise terrible wrath through whatever weapons of revenge were at her disposal. In Greek mythology, snakes were associated with justice for murderers. So, when this snake latches onto Paul's hand, they naturally concluded that he was a murderer, who narrowly escaped divine justice at sea but had to face it on the land. This was their world view and it was not only wrong, it was hopeless.

How can you live with anything other than sheer panic or empty hopelessness when your life is at the whim of these moody and capricious gods and goddesses? The same thing holds true for those who try to explain some of the questions about life with evolution. I am saddened for them. Evolution is so intellectually and personally unsatisfying. I do not engage in those conversations trying to win an argument as much as trying to rescue someone from a hopeless system. (Hope of the gospel vs. Justice of the impersonal Karma) And this is what I love so much about Paul. The guy has been through the ringer. He is a faithful believer.

A. Faithful believers are not immune to trials.

Hebrews 12 speaks of the discipline of the Lord that is designed by God to correct us and deepen us in order to make us more and more like Christ. Paul is not running away from God. Paul is doing exactly what God has called him to do. Not only that, but instead of sitting by the fire and getting warm and dried out from this horrific experience, the guy goes out and helps the islanders collect some wood for the fire. What a great guy! Once again, he puts the needs of others above his own and what does he get for it? A viper latches onto his hand. If, he hadn't been so nice and considerate, he wouldn't have been attacked by a snake. No good deed goes unpunished?

But, what a minute. Go back to point 1. God keeps his promises. God has told Paul that Paul will get to Rome. Paul is bulletproof until he gets to Rome. He knows that. Was he frightened in the moment? Did he for a second fear for his life? All we know is that verse 5 says, he shook it off into the fire. It probably, as they say, tasted like chicken.

Faithful believers are not immune to trials. But the trials are not meaningless, random and purposeless. There is always something bigger going on. In this case, there were some islanders

who had wrongfully concluded that Paul was a murderer who was attacked by the snake because he was supposed to die. But, he didn't die. Look at verse 6. God used the viper to cause these people to watch Paul. There are 276 people who made it to shore and now these islanders are watching one of them, Paul. That is wonderful, because Paul has a message that they need to hear, but they do not know that they need to hear it. When the snake attacks Paul, they conclude that he is an evil man who should die. When he does not respond like they think he should, then they conclude that he is a god. Neither conclusion is correct but at least with the last one, it helps give Paul a potential hearing. But the snake attack is not the only thing that has happened to him.

B. Faithful believers are not immune to multiple trials.

The Storm, the Shipwreck and now the Snake are very serious events. The storm lasted for days. Back in 27.33 the people had gone without food for 2 weeks. Then the ship they were in wrecked. They were in trouble. There is nothing like being in the middle of a large body of water to realize that you are at the mercy of power that you cannot control. Living through the storm, then the shipwreck would have been enough, right? But, no, now there is this snake. Good grief, how much more can a guy handle? Paul is a faithful believer. He does not need these trials in order to bring him back to the right road. He is not like Jonah. He is enduring these trials on the right road. We do not like trials. We call them trials for a good reason, but there are somethings that are infinitely more important than getting through with the trial, such as the glory of God, the spread of the gospel, our sanctification and faithfulness. God is worth our trust not because he is the means to getting out of the trial. He is worth our trust and faithfulness because he is worthy. The fact that God keeps his promises means that there will be an end to the trials and the trials will all work together for a good end. Paul often wrote about this and certainly lived it out.

In this case, the islanders are watching Paul and his response to this trial forces them to reevaluate their view on snakes and Justice. But, then something else happens. The man chief official of the region, who was very kind to the survivors has a father who is very sick. Paul visits the man, prays for him and puts his hands on him, and the Lord heals the man. This results now in many people started bringing people to Paul who were sick and Paul healed them.

Now, do you see what is happening? For the people on the ship, Paul's response to the storm, to the shipwreck, to the snake and now to these sicknesses obviously makes them aware that Paul is not just an unusual person, but what he believes and (we can only assume) what he shares with them gives them an opportunity to turn from the darkness and hopelessness of mythology to Christ. But, the Lord uses this for something else.

3. Trials provide opportunities for good. (10)

When it came time for them to continue on to Rome, they needed to find a ship, and they needed food and supplies. They lost everything in the storm and shipwreck. These 276 people are at the mercy of these islanders. I do not see how they could possibly promise to repay them for the food. But, the Lord gave them favor with the people on account of Paul. Paul was used by God to rescue these people from the sea and now by procuring provisions for the voyage. The viper was a grace of God to generously provide supplies.

4. **God is at work through the trials.**

A. **Some trials are severe.** (storm)

There is a lot of detail about the storm in chapter 27 because Luke was one of the 276 survivors. He said in v.20 that neither sun nor stars appeared for many days. Sounds like Michigan in March, right? For days they were being thrown about in this tempest. They gave up hope of being rescued. Some of them did not eat for 13 days. It was in the midst of the severity of this storm that God's promise came to Paul and was a reminder that God was at work through the trial. God was at work through a severe trial.

B. **Some trials are short.** (viper)

The incident of the viper was much shorter, but no less serious. But again, God was obviously at work in that and used that for good purposes.

C. **Some trials have an obvious purpose.**

The sickness of Publius' father resulted in Paul having the opportunity to demonstrate the kindness of God that probably led to some gospel opportunities. It certainly provided the people with the needed resources to get to Rome. This was also recorded in God's Word and has the obvious purpose of helping us see the impact of the gospel in Paul's life in the midst of trials too. Neither Luke nor Paul had any idea of the millions upon millions of people who for over 2,000 years would read the book of Acts. Their trial now has an even more obvious purpose to us.

D. **Some trials are long.**

We do not seek to focus on Christ in order to get through the trial, but because Jesus is worth focusing on. Focusing on Christ is not a tactic to get rid of the trial but a means to become more like Jesus. If you are one of those people who always think, "Oh there's a pill for that" be careful. If you don't feel anything, you probably won't learn anything.

E. **There is not an obvious rhyme and reason to every trial, but there is one.**

Paul was able to heal others, help others, even be delivered from some things, but not from everything. The same God who delivered Paul from the viper did not deliver Paul from the trial of his trial. God used Paul to deliver others, even though Paul himself was not delivered.

It reminds me of Jesus. The only way that we could be rescued from the penalty of sin was if Jesus wasn't. The only way for us to be saved was if Jesus wasn't. The only way for me to avoid the wages of sin was if Jesus didn't. Jesus did not run from the ultimate trial. He leaned into it and felt it all and endured it all, and believed through it all. Trials are not the enemy, unbelief is.

Conclusion:

There are always things that we can learn through trials. And there are always things that we can learn deeper.

1) Sin is terrible.

If the wages of sin is death, and the process of dying is so hard, then I need to be reminded how serious sin is. Many of you ask me about my mom. ...

2) Sin is natural to us, but not natural to creation.

Therefore, trials are normal even while they still feel so unnatural and out of place.

3) Sin has been defeated, which means, trials are on a leash.

Trials will not last, but Jesus will. God, help me to focus more on Christ than on my trial. Help me to love the appearing of Jesus more than the disappearing of difficulty, but let the difficulty cause me to distrust this world and release my grip on it, even while I trust Christ more and grip glory more than ever.