“A Blessing, A Healing, And A Place To Serve”

10/08/2017

Ephesians 4:1-15

Please take your Bible with me and open to Acts 28.

The last chapter of a book is often the one where the plot of the story is resolved. The antagonist dies. The hero gets the girl. The murderer is found out. He’s arrested, tried, and imprisoned. Humanity is saved at the very last moment. You could compare it to a beautiful piece of music that ends on a beautiful note. These used to be the greatest words of a fairy tale or a folk tale. *“And they all lived happily ever after.”*

Who was that famous writer who said *“All’s well that ends well”*? His name was William Shakespeare.

Do you remember the last sentence of Margaret Mitchell’s “Gone With The Wind”? *“Tomorrow, I’ll think of some way to get him back. After all, tomorrow is another day.”*

“A book’s final sentence is the ribbon on a packaged plot, tied neatly and prettily before an author hands her story over to her readers’ imaginations for good. It’s a last chance for a good first impression.” [Found on [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com) “21 Amazing Last Lines From Literature That Will Make You Want To Read The Whole Book.”

We’ve come to the final chapter of the Book of Acts. And here’s that last sentence of this last chapter. Acts 28:31 *“Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.”*

I’ve decided to title today’s sermon “A Blessing, A Healing, And a Place to Serve.” Shall we pray?

On September 28, 1994 a ferry went down in the Baltic Sea. This fifteen-year old ship was one of the Viking Line Ferries and was made of solid steel. It was modern. It was 510 feet long and nine decks high. Her name was the “Estonia.”

On September 28, 1994 the ferry was traveling from Estonia to Stockholm, Sweden; about 316 miles across the Baltic Sea. There were 989 people on board. At 1:50 a.m. the ferry sank. The official cause was an unlocked hinge on the bow’s ramp that somehow had come loose and opened. During the storm and during the night, the bow of the ferry flooded with sea water, and eventually sank the ship. At 1:50 a.m. the ship began to sink while most of the passengers were in their cabins trying to sleep and while many others were in the bar singing and getting drunk. Of the 989 passengers and crew, 850 drowned.

The events of that last night of the Estonia were recorded in a short story titled “A Sea Story” by William Langewiesche [in “The Atlantic” magazine May 2004 issue].

The last lines of “A Sea Story” go like this. *“At the last moment, just when it seemed they might be smashed against the hull, they were swept slightly forward and began to pass directly under the ship's front end. An instant later, in the confusion of a nightmare, they passed into the flooded entrance of a huge dark tunnel that was swallowing the surging waves.*

*It was the open end of the car deck, the gaping wound left when the bow fell off. Sörman realized that he had not escaped the Estonia after all—that it would catch him now and take him down. Unable to endure the sight, he turned his head away in fear. When finally he found the courage to look again, the Estonia was gone.”* [From “A Sea Story” by William Langewiesche in “The Atlantic” magazine May 2004 issue].

As I re-read Acts 28 this past week, I wondered about it. Acts 28 is what you call anti-climactic. If you recall, there’s a huge Mediterranean hurricane in Acts 27. And there’s a very exciting shipwreck. And there’s an entire ship of 276 people all swimming to shore. And in Acts 27 we also see that every single one of those 276 passengers arrives safely onshore on the Island of Malta.

You can almost say “And they all lived happily ever after.” But, Acts 28 tells us, simply, that life goes on. And life for the Apostle Paul goes on as he and his fellow prisoners led by Julius, the Centurion, arrive in Rome, Italy.

The seas of the world and stormy weather, as you know, have claimed hundreds and thousands of lives over the years. And, according to one United Nations report, there are no less than three million shipwrecks on the ocean floor today. And so far this year, 2017, there have been 107 shipwrecks around the globe.

Now, surviving. You’ve all heard or read or watched amazing stories of people who survived a wreck in the ocean or a large lake. But, outlasting a shipwreck in an ocean storm during at night is, in many cases, nearly impossible. So some would say that “today’s lesson from Acts chapter 28, is an anomaly.” Why? Because every single person, no less than 276 passengers, survived a shipwreck caused by nor’easter in the Mediterranean Sea in the year 60 A.D. So, there’s a lot to be said about surviving a hurricane.

Would you follow with me at the last verse of Acts 27? Acts 27:44 *“And the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land.”*

Now, Acts 28:1 *“And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita [Malta]. (2) And the barbarous people [people whose language was unknown by Paul and his shipmates] shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold.*

*(3) And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. (4) And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live.*

*(5) And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm.”*

A fourteen day hurricane, ending up on an unknown island, and then getting bitten by a viper. Now it’s hard for us to imagine surviving all this. But that’s exactly what happened to the Apostle Paul.

Hymn-writer William C. Martin wrote these words back in 1902.

1. Though the angry surges roll  
   On my tempest-driven soul,  
   I am peaceful, for I know,  
   Wildly though the winds may blow,  
   I’ve an anchor safe and sure,  
   That can evermore endure.
   * *Refrain:*  
     And it holds, my anchor holds:  
     Blow your wildest, then, O gale,  
     On my bark so small and frail;  
     By His grace I shall not fail,  
     For my anchor holds, my anchor holds.
2. Mighty tides about me sweep,  
   Perils lurk within the deep,  
   Angry clouds o’ershade the sky,  
   And the tempest rises high;  
   Still I stand the tempest’s shock,  
   For my anchor grips the rock.
3. Troubles almost ’whelm the soul;  
   Griefs like billows o’er me roll;  
   Tempters seek to lure astray;  
   Storms obscure the light of day:  
   But in Christ I can be bold,  
   I’ve an anchor that shall hold.

Life includes the storms of trouble and hard times. Now, I hope you believe in the sovereign hand of God in this world and upon your life. You can’t help but see that God not only allowed Paul to board a ship bound for Italy, against some very good advice; but He also allowed a hurricane to capsize the ship.

By the way, did you know that Paul experienced no less than three shipwrecks during his lifetime and survived every one of them? II Corinthians 11:25 *“Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; …”*

But on the matter of the sovereignty of God. Why does the LORD allow volcanoes to erupt, earthquakes to shake the ground, and hurricanes and other natural disasters to fall upon the world?

The answer, folks, is not very far away. From the very beginning of the creation, you find troubles coming upon the human race. And part of the reason for the troubles we all experience is because when sin entered the world, so did trouble.

And a large part of life is learning how to cope with and to overcome trouble. Now, I know that many people try to overcome their problems without turning to the LORD. But, the key to success in the face of trouble is surrendering to God’s working upon your character.

Do you think that most people would like to live a trouble-free existence? It would be nice, wouldn’t it? Well, there’s no such thing as a “problem free” life. And as Christians, we are not exempt from problems or even serious trouble according to Jesus who said this. John 16:33 *“These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation [affliction]: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”*

If there were no sin, there would be no troubles in this world. There would be no disasters and there’d be no loss of life. So, with sin came trouble and death.

Romans 5:12 *“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: …”*

So, if you take the simple, ordinary, common sense, literal reading of your Bible, you see where both death and natural disasters come from. God does allow storms and hurricanes and tsunamis and volcanoes to erupt. It’s simply part of our existence in this world.

Now, what does the LORD want to teach you and me from this last chapter of the Book of Acts?

First, you are to bless others with your hands. Look with me at Acts 28:1*“And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita [Malta]. (2) And the barbarous people [people whose language was unknown by Paul and his shipmates] shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold.”*

Can you see the blessing here? The inhabitants of Malta saw the swimmers arrive on shore. And they extended their hands to help them. Paul and those who were with him were certainly exhausted. They would have been cold and hungry and extremely. So, God sent them the blessing of a hand extended by a barbarous people. Now, typically, barbarians were known in history as cruel savages. But these weren’t savages. They simply spoke a different language. So, the Bible uses the term “barbarous.”

And what does the LORD do? He uses the hands of barbarians to help the hurricane survivors. They blessed them with shelter. And they blessed them with the warmth of a fire. And they blessed them with food.

Often when you’ve been in a large trial, you have one focus; getting out of it. But, along with the trouble, do, look for the blessing? Just as surely as God allows hurricanes and large troubles to enter your life, He’s also fully able to send a blessing right that’s right around the corner. Haven’t you noticed that, after a severe trial in your life, you find tremendous comfort and relief by some blessing the LORD sends your way? So, what is the LORD asking of you and me? He’s calling us to trust Him; trust before, trust during, and trust after the storm.

Of course, there are those who, when they’ve experienced the larger troubles of life, they run *from* God. And then there are those who judge God when things don’t go as they’d hoped. Then there are those who, as one man put it, make lemons out of lemonade.

Dale Carnegie wrote a book in 1948 titled “How To Stop Worrying And Start Living. In it you’ll find this. *“If you have a lemon, make lemonade.”* But the words were originally written as part of an obituary back in 1915 for a man named Marshall Wilder. Here’s what the original said. “He [Mr. Marshall Wilder] was a walking refutation of that dogmatic statement, [*Mens sana in corpore sago*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mens_sana_in_corpore_sano) (“Healthy Mind, Healthy Body”). His was a sound mind in an *unsound* body. He proved the eternal paradox of things. He cashed in on his disabilities. He picked up the lemons that Fate had sent him and started a lemonade-stand.” [[*Hubbard, Elbert*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elbert_Hubbard)*(February 1915),*[*"The Fra: A Journal of Affirmation"*](https://archive.org/details/theFraByElbertHubbardvolume14)*,*[*The Fra*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fra#Roycroft)*,*[*Elbert Hubbard*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elbert_Hubbard)*, vol. 14 no. 5, p. xxiv–d, archived from*[*the original*](https://books.google.com/books?id=faVJAAAAYAAJ&pg=RA4-PR8&lpg=RA4-PR8&dq=lemonade+hubbard&source=bl&ots=DuV-zq1Zuz&sig=KMHCpKn6GujysjbkX7va_fsqFAY&hl=en&sa=X&ei=lhxNUNClNcaXiALl9YHoAg&ved=0CDIQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=lemonade%20hubbard&f=false)*on September 13, 2012*]. We don’t have to know a lot about Mr. Marshall Wilder to know that he’d been dealt some great obstacles in his life. But, he found a way to overcome them.

Rainbows are just as much a part of life as the storms. And when does that rainbow appear? It’s always after a rain shower or after the thunder storm. Can you guess when this picture was taken? August 28th, 2017, just after Hurricane Harvey hit Texas. Can you guess when this picture was taken? Right after Hurricane Irma hit Jacksonville, FL. And this one is a picture of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria had passed by.

In Paul’s case, the rainbow appeared in the form of some strange-speaking people on an island somewhere in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. He’d trusted God before the storm. He trusted God in the storm. And He is trusting God after the storm. Your blessing might appear in the form of someone taking the time to help you or to meet some particular need. But, the blessing is there if you look for it.

Now I said earlier “first, you are to bless others with your hands.” Look again at Acts 28 and now see with me Paul blessing others with *his* hands; verse three.

Here’s Acts 28:3 “*And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire …”*

Do you see Paul using his hands to bless those around him? He might have let others do the gathering of sticks to add to the fire that night. After all, he was tired, I’m sure. Bu, instead, he chose to bless the others by a simple servant’s heart. He saw a need and he met it.

How many times have you seen a need and let it pass you by? How many times has the LORD sent someone your way and, when you could have taken the time to lift your hand to help, you went on your way?

Folks, you’ve all been given good hands. But your good hands need to be hands God can use to bless someone else. Think about the ways you could use your hands today to supply someone else’s need. Then, like Paul, just do it; not so that someone will notice. Just do it and let God use your hands to be a blessing.

Oh, and by the way, sometimes when you extend your hand to help and bless someone, you get bitten. Well, that’s exactly what happened to Paul

First, you are to bless others with your hands.

Second, healing is God’s work; verse three again. Acts 28:3 “*And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand.*

*(4) And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. (5) And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm.”*

Sometimes, when you’ve decided to use your hands to help someone, you get hurt, you get bitten. Now, I’m using these words in a little different manner than Luke used them. But I’m sure you can understand what I mean. You go out of your way to help someone and your help is rejected; or worse, you are rejected. What you intended for good, someone else took completely the wrong way and you suffered for it.

I’ve had this happen to me on a number of occasions. But, folks, what can you do about it? Sometimes; nothing. All you can possibly do is to surrender again to the LORD and let Him write that last chapter.

In Paul’s case, God had other plans for the bite of that viper. Look again at verse four. Acts 28:4*“And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. (5) And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm.”*

Can you see how much greater God is than the gods these Maltese Islanders believed in? They were quite superstitious, to say the least. They thought that, since a viper bit Paul, that Paul must be a very wicked soul; even a murderer. And now that he’s survived the shipwreck, justice will get him by way of the poisonous viper.

But folks, just like God was all-powerful during a fourteen-day hurricane on the Mediterranean Sea, He’s just as all-powerful to protect Paul from a viper bite.

And, you ask, what good could come of Paul getting bitten by a viper? Here’s the good. When the quote “barbarians” saw that Paul wasn’t hurt, they thought he might be a god. Furthermore, this led to his becoming friends with the Governor on the Island; a man named Publius, whose father was very ill. Paul got to pray for him and to lay hands on him and then to see the LORD miraculously heal him.

God, as you know, is the Healer. Doctors are only a means to God’s healing in many, many cases.

Here’s what the Bible teaches. Exodus 15:26 *“…I am the Lord that healeth thee.”*

In Psalm 103 we find this. Psalm 103:1 *“Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. (2) Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:*

*(3) Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; (4) Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; (5) Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's.”*

Jesus went everywhere healing as well as teaching and preaching. And in many cases, every single person that was there on those occasions was healed.

God is the Healer. Yes, you need your doctor. Yes, doctors are often very good. But doctors can only do so much. God is the One Who knows the body and mind better than anyone.

[Show video titled “I Am The God That Healeth Thee” by Don Moen - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0H2PxM4LmnM> ]

First, you are to bless others with your hands.

Second, healing is God’s work.

Third, a place to serve; verse twenty-three.

Acts 28:23 *“And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening.*

*(24) And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not. (25) And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, (26) Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive:*

*(27) For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.*

*(28) Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it. (29) And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves.*

*(30) And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, (31) Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.”*

You may not understand some or even many of God’s ways. But you can understand this. Whatever it is God allows into your life isn’t just for your good. It’s for the good of others as well. Yes, He allows storms to come into your life. But He delivered you through everyone thus far. And why? Because He intends for you to have a place of service to people.

Some would say that Paul wasn’t privileged to pass through a hurricane; but that he was privileged to minister to the Romans. But folks, part of the reason for Paul’s usefulness to God was that storm.

So, as we close the Book of Acts, know this. Acts 28:30 *“And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, (31) Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.”*

Before Paul arrived in Rome, because of the way things went during and after the hurricane, he was now treated extremely well by Julius, the Roman centurion. Julius had previously rejected Paul’s recommendation to wait. So, the ship sailed. They had now been ship-wrecked. Yet, not a man lost his life in the storm.

And Julius had seen God’s hand upon this man and now he was to deliver him to the authorities in Rome. Yet, in Paul, the LORD had a man He could use for His kingdom. So, in Rome, chained to a guard, Paul is given the opportunity to preach and to preach in the Name of Jesus.

You too are the LORD’s servant and you have the joy of preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things you are learning about the LORD Jesus Christ. You can go out this week in confidence that God has given you not only a place of service, but people that you can reach for Him.

Let me close with this. The LORD has called you to be His servant.

Mark 10:45 *“For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*

Philippians 2:6 *“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: (7) But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: (8) And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”*

The LORD didn’t save you to have others serve you. Rather, He saved you to put you where you are to serve people.

Yesterday, Janet and I sat in a restaurant. And in a matter of minutes a man walks us to our table. He was on his way to the cash register to pay his bill. And in just a few minutes we were on the topic of the LORD and His grace. I told him my simple testimony of how I’d met the LORD in a movie theater.

We soon discovered that he was a Christian and he discovered that we were Christians. We had the joy of ministering to each other from what the LORD had done in our lives. And I had the opportunity to pray for him and his wife.

You don’t know who it will be that God will send your way this week. Just know this. You are *His* servant and He’s using you. He’s the Vine and you’re His branch. Open your mouth and let Him speak through you.

Sometimes you will pass through great trials and troubles. And afterwards God will send you a blessing. Yet, beyond the blessing is a place of ministry. God allowed Paul to suffer. And He allows you to suffer. Yet, His purposes cannot fail. He is working in you and on you. And He will use you to reach others if you will submit to Him.

Shall we pray?

Now let’s sing Hymn # 632 “Open Our Eyes LORD”

A few more sentences from “A Sea Story” by William Langewiesche. “Survival that night was a very tight race, and savagely simple. People who started early and moved fast had some chance of winning. People who started late or hesitated for any reason had no chance at all. Action paid. Contemplation did not. The mere act of getting dressed was enough to condemn people to death, and although many of those who escaped to the water succumbed to the cold, most of the ultimate winners endured the ordeal completely naked or in their underwear. The survivors all seem to have grasped the nature of this race, the first stage of which involved getting outside to the Deck 7 promenade without delay. There was no God to turn to for mercy. There was no government to provide order. Civilization was ancient history, Europe a faint and faraway place. Inside the ship, as the heel (ship’s tilt) increased, even the most primitive social organization, the human chain, crumbled apart. Love only slowed people down. A pitiless clock was running. The ocean was completely in control.”