

# The Shipwreck

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** God's mission goes forward in mysterious ways.

On March 31, 1909, construction began on a ship so large—so *Titanic*—that God Himself, it was thought, could not sink it. After three years of construction, the Irish achieved a colossal feat of engineering: an 800-foot-long, 26,000-ton monster held together by three million rivets. Twenty-four steam boilers generated energy in the ship's belly to propel it from Southampton to New York City in what would be record-breaking time.

But another enormous object was forming in the waters off Greenland at the same time. At 11:40 p.m. on April 14, 1912, the ship collided with a one-mile-long iceberg (mostly concealed underwater). Two and a half hours later, the *R.M.S. Titanic* was on the ocean floor.

Isn't it interesting how quickly our lives can come undone the same way?



How have you, or someone you know, experienced life-change in the blink of an eye?

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## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 85. Mission of the Church

The church is a sign and instrument of the kingdom of God, a people united by faith in the gospel announcement of the crucified and risen King Jesus. The mission of the church is to go into the world in the power of the Spirit and make disciples by proclaiming this gospel, calling people to respond in ongoing repentance and faith, and demonstrating the truth and power of the gospel by living under the lordship of Christ for the glory of God and the good of the world.

While the “icebergs” of life often bring adversity and pain out of nowhere, they also have a way of exposing what we value. Difficulties reveal our faith far better than doldrums do.

Paul had defended himself before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa with complete confidence in Christ. Now, in this session, we will explore the apostle’s confidence in the midst of a storm and shipwreck. We will see that Paul’s confidence was anchored in the gospel and the promises Christ had made to him, which gave Paul the hope he needed to press on in his mission through the storm. Doldrums rarely test a Christian’s faith. But as Paul discovered, when we trust that Jesus is with us in the boat, the storm strengthens our faith, proves God’s promises, and gives us opportunities to introduce others to Jesus Christ.

## 1. Cling to God’s promises when the mission seems threatened (Acts 27:13-32).

*<sup>13</sup> Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. <sup>14</sup> But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. <sup>15</sup> And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. <sup>16</sup> Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship’s boat. <sup>17</sup> After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. <sup>18</sup> Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. <sup>19</sup> And on the third day they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. <sup>20</sup> 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.*

*<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.*



Paul was able to look to God's promises and not the storm raging around him. What are some ways we can keep our focus on God and not the difficult situations we find ourselves in?

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Think about the last time you encountered an "iceberg" in your life, the last time your smooth sailing was turned upside down in a heartbeat. When your world fell apart, what did you cling to? How durable is your trust in God's promise to help you fulfill your mission in this world? Can your Christian convictions withstand mockery from professors, criticism from colleagues, and slander that comes from trusting in Someone unseen by the naked eye?

God's arm can reach us no matter how far away from Him we travel. But instead of repeating Jonah's stomach-churning narrative, let's cling to something—or rather, *Someone*—who clung to the cross at Calvary, who descended into the depths, and who rose again on the third day.



### Voices from Church History

"God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea And rides upon the storm. You fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds you so much dread Are big with mercy, and shall break In blessings on your head. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace; Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face. Blind unbelief is sure to err And scan His work in vain; God is His own interpreter, And He will make it plain."<sup>1</sup>

—William Cowper  
(1731-1800)



When have you clung to a promise of God even when it didn't make sense or when it felt like the world around you was falling apart?

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What one thing might be keeping you from total surrender to God? If God took it from you, how might your character, relationships, ambitions, and attitudes change?

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## 2. See the mission go forward through faithfulness in the storm (Acts 27:33-44).

*<sup>33</sup> As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. <sup>34</sup> Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you." <sup>35</sup> And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. <sup>36</sup> Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. <sup>37</sup> (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) <sup>38</sup> And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.*

Before ever setting foot on the ship, Paul knew he would survive the journey no matter what because of Jesus' words. God also sent an angel to tell Paul that not only would he survive the trip but so would every other person onboard. Paul did not keep that good news to himself. He cared too much about the others on the ship and did not want them to fear the storm around them and miss out on the hope found in God's sovereign hand of protection. At the same time, Paul never wanted to miss the opportunity to make much of Jesus. What better opportunity than to tell others that God would see them through what seemed to be a hopeless situation!

So Paul put into action his faith in Christ's promise and encouraged his fellow travelers to eat. They could join him in casting fear and uncertainty aside and rest in the promises of God.



Whom have you recently encouraged with the promises of God?  
Who has encouraged you?

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We can't miss this: *Belief* in Christ generates *actions* for Christ. When you and I act on God's promises, we prove to ourselves, our friends, our culture, and our King that we believe God will live up to His word. It's true that God could fulfill His redemptive purposes in this world without our assistance, but He has chosen otherwise. God equips us, positions us, and calls us to live out our faith in Him as we invest the time, energy, and resources He has given us to make Him known. That is why we exist. That is why we walk on this earth and why God gives us our every breath. We are here to glorify God in our loving, gratitude-filled obedience.



*<sup>39</sup> Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. <sup>40</sup> So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. <sup>41</sup> But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. <sup>42</sup> The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest*

*any should swim away and escape. <sup>43</sup> But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, <sup>44</sup> and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.*

We can follow Christ each day knowing He is in control—knowing He will not fail us and that the results of our evangelism and ministry are ultimately up to Him. It's liberating when we live under God's sovereignty. But at the same time, we acknowledge that we do have responsibility. We are to obey. We are to practice spiritual disciplines and grow in our faith. We are to share our faith. We are not passengers but sailors with work to do.



Which spiritual disciplines do you need to cultivate in order to better fulfill the mission God has given you?

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### 3. Take courage in the fulfillment of God's Word (Acts 28:11-16).

*<sup>11</sup> After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. <sup>12</sup> Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. <sup>13</sup> And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. <sup>14</sup> There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. <sup>15</sup> And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. <sup>16</sup> And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.*

The final leg of the journey brought Paul to Puteoli, a prominent Roman port on the western coast of Italy. Still supervised by Julius, Paul remained in the city a full week, fellowshiping with like-minded, Spirit-filled believers.

What encouragement Paul must have found in his conversations with those coastal Christians! Imagine the stories Paul must have shared with them: his trial at the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem; his defenses before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa in Caesarea; his miraculous survival of the shipwreck. Imagine also the countless gospel moments Julius must have experienced.

When the week was over, Paul set out for his intended destination—Rome, where Festus had sent him but more importantly where God wanted to bring him. What joy and anticipation he must have felt when he arrived, knowing he was right where God wanted him and was about to do what God wanted him to do: proclaim the gospel in the seat of the Roman Empire! This is the hope that had sustained Paul through the perilous trials in Jerusalem and Caesarea and on the sea. And now, this hope was fully realized. God had kept His promise and proven once again to be faithful.



How have you seen God's faithfulness recently?

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Where has God's faithfulness led you to share the gospel?

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Paul found courage not only in the *places* God brought him but also in the *faces* God sent him. While Paul was encouraged in experiencing the fulfillment of God's promise by stepping foot in Rome, he also found courage from the Christians he met on the Appian Way (Acts 28:15). Once again, as He had in Puteoli, God was kind to provide other believers to encourage the apostle. For much of Paul's life, he was the one nourishing and encouraging the church. He had traveled around the Mediterranean region planting churches and then revisiting them, praying for them, and writing letters to them. Now he was the one who needed encouragement from other brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul's trust in God and desire to share the gospel did not mean he was not prone to moments of weakness. He was not immune from doubt. He was not numb to fear and worry. He was not exempt from temptation and sin. Like all of us, Paul needed the church around him. He needed other believers to remind him of God's promises and warn him of the dangers of disobedience.



### Voices from Church History

"Bear up the hands that hang down; by faith and prayer support the tottering knee; reprove, encourage...Storm the throne of grace, and persevere therein, and mercy will come down."<sup>2</sup>

—John Wesley (1703–1791)

Paul needed the church, and so do we. God has not intended for any of us, not even Paul, to live in isolation from gospel community. He has given us the church and us to the church so that we can spur one another on in love to fulfill the mission He has laid before us. We are not alone; we are never alone. Christ is always with us, and our loving Father delights in providing other believers in our time of need.



Just as the apostle Paul needed encouragement, so do your church's leaders. How can you encourage your pastor, ministry staff, and other leaders this week?

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## Conclusion

Sometimes God puts us in the water so we will have nothing to cling to but Him. We are better off for it, and so are others. Christ often shines more through our suffering than He shines through our safety. Our testimonies are forged by rough weather more than by calm waters.

But a day is coming when we will no longer be in need of rescue; we will have been rescued. Fully and finally. Yes, we are secure in our salvation today, but we still experience trials. We still hurt. We still weep. We still need to cling to Christ in faith, hoping for the day when the storms are no more. And when that day comes, Christ “will wipe away every tear” (Rev. 21:4), and as Paul reminded the Christians in Corinth, we will see Him “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). Until that day, we cling to God’s promises and find courage to continue our mission in God’s unending faithfulness to us and in the encouragement we receive from one another.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Paul made it clear that the only way to be rescued would be to stay on the ship as it endured the storm. This story echoes other events in which salvation came through judgment (Noah on the ark, the children of Israel walking through the Red Sea, etc.). Because Jesus endured judgment in our place, we cling to Him and His promises, trusting that He is able to carry us through the storm.



# HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** God calls us to continue to live on mission, even when our work seems futile and the future unsure.

1. List some of God's promises as they relate to our mission to share the good news of Jesus with the world.

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2. What steps will you take to practice spiritual disciplines in order to grow in your faith?

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3. Write a prayer asking God for His strength through the Holy Spirit to remain faithful to the mission even in the midst of hardship and difficulty.

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