

Navigating the Waters of Life

Acts 26:9-26 (NIV)

⁹ Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement. So Paul warned them, ¹⁰ “Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.” ¹¹ But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. ¹² Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest. ¹³ When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. ¹⁴ Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. ¹⁵ The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. ¹⁶ As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure, ¹⁷ so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. ¹⁸ We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. ¹⁹ On the third day, they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. ²⁰ When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved. ²¹ After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: “Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. ²² But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. ²³ Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me ²⁴ and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.’ ²⁵ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. ²⁶ Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.”

Four years of hard work and study paid off. You’ve graduated. Now, what’s the path forward? Do you go find a job and enter the work force? Do you take on more schooling, pursue another degree? Do you move to expand your job opportunities? Do you leave your current job to seek a new, more fulfilling challenge? Decision making is hard. How do you navigate the waters of life?

Paul had to navigate the waters of life – figuratively and literally. He had chosen to appeal to Caesar instead of being unfairly tried by the Jews. This is why he was in custody of a centurion on his way to Rome. The next leg of his journey involved sailing. Luke gives us the setting for navigating these specific waters of life: “Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement. So Paul warned them, ‘Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.’” (verses 9-10)

At this point, we have no indication that Paul had received any special divine knowledge that this voyage would bring great loss. Instead, Paul was going on his experience. He had already been involved in 3 shipwrecks and knew that this time of year in September made sail more dangerous. From his information, his experience, Paul feels the need to warn those in charge not to sail.

We might be tempted, especially as we know how this story plays out, to say that the centurion, the pilot, and the owner of the ship were all stupid to make the decision to sail on. But let’s give them a little bit more credit as we consider the situation, these waters of life. Paul was a tentmaker, not a sailor. The pilot and the ship’s owner made their life on navigating waters. They knew as Paul did that they were just getting into the dangerous time of the year for sailing, but also that their journey would take only 10-20 days while they had a window for about 40-50 days where the voyage was still doable, albeit with risks. They also had to weigh in the fact that if their ship sat there in the harbor at Crete, they were not getting their grain cargo delivered and thus they weren’t getting paid and were probably going to have to be away from their families and loved ones longer. Add on top of that that this harbor of Crete was ill-suited for spending the winter in. The storms could come in, possibly creating damage to their ship and loss to their cargo. And we don’t know what orders the centurion was under, only that he had to get these prisoners to Rome. Did it need to be before winter? Was there a suitable jail for them in Crete? We don’t know all the waters in front of them.

With the information they had, those in charge of the voyage decided that they should take advantage of their window of opportunity and make it to a better, safer harbor to winter in. This would protect the ship and the people while also not be too risky as to sail all the way to Rome. There was caution in their decision. Experience had led them weigh out the odds in favor of succeeding. Then the weather confirmed their choice: “When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.” (verse 13) It seemed like a good decision at the time.

“Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along.” (verses 14-15) From there, everything goes bad. The ship takes a violent battering. They can barely keep afloat. They dump cargo, supplies, tackle – taking loss after loss trying to save their lives and get to safety. They can’t eat or don’t eat maybe because of seasickness or anxiety. They’re worn out, tired. They couldn’t see the stars or the sun to help them navigate. The storm continued to rage. Luke records: “We finally gave up all hope of being saved.” (verse 20b)

Paul stood up and said, “Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss.” (verse 21b) Yeah, time for an “I-told-you-so” moment, right? Rub it in that they made the wrong decision. But that’s not why Paul stood up to say this. The pilot and the ship’s owner took a calculated risk that experience had taught them would be better for everyone involved. Paul wasn’t questioning their decision, but wanting them to take what he said next very seriously as he was going to help them navigate these stormy waters of life.

We have to make a whole lot of decisions in life. Sometimes the decisions are easy, very cut and dry. There is only one moral and good decision that can be made. But then there are a whole lot of other decisions when there is not a clear morally right path forward. When you graduated, you had to make these kinds of decisions. Should I go straight into the work force? Should I switch jobs? Should I pursue higher education and a degree that I want to apply specifically into a profession that makes sense for me, that is financially stable, or is what I want to do? Should I move to improve the options I have? How do I navigate these waters of life?

People will tell you that there is a right way to make decisions. Some tell you that you have to listen to experience, learn from what happened to someone else and make better decisions. Some will tell you that you have to weigh out the pros and cons and if the pros outweigh the cons, then you know what to do. Others will tell you that you have to listen to your gut, that your gut is your ultimate guiding light, that it can’t be wrong. Still others will tell you to look for signs from God, favorable things that happen which are meant to reassure you that you made the right decision.

Here’s the rub. You can go strictly on experience or pros vs cons or a gut feeling or divine signs, and yet the decision you make might still go horribly. Upon graduation, you go straight into the work force, and then, years later, you are limited in how much you can earn and what promotions you can get. You can pursue higher education and a degree in what you want to do, and then when you get it, you don’t find anyone who will hire you and you’re saddled with massive student debt. You can move to a place with better work options, yet all the jobs you get hired on for make you miserable. You can pick the financially stable job that turns out to be anything but. You can pursue the job that you think will make you happy, but then it grinds you down to the point where you see no other option but quitting. We are forced then to make the best informed decisions in a bad situation, like we are throwing out the cargo and the tackle just to stay afloat in the waters of life. You kick yourself, saying how you should have done things differently, thinking that you were too selfish or egocentric, that you did it wrong, that you sinned in the decision you made.

There’s really just one thing that has to be there whenever we make decisions to navigate the waters of our lives: the Word of God. I don’t mean that we have to try to figure out God’s hidden will for us when it comes to these decisions. You won’t find it because it is hidden. There is no Bible passage that directly tells you what career or schooling or place where you should live. He gives you the freedom to make choices, just as he gave freedom to the pilot and the ship owner to decide whether or not to sail from Crete.

What we need is not really to be told if we are making the right or wrong decision when that is not clearly seen, but we need what Paul said to all the people on that boat as they had given up all hope of being saved because of those choices they had made on the waters of life. “But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.’ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.” (verses 22-25) We might be tempted again to say, “Well, Paul had a vision from God. We don’t have God stepping in to give us promises that everything will be okay when we navigate the stormy waters of life.” Or do we?

Paul referred to God as the one to whom he belongs. You belong to God as well. He bought you at the price of Jesus’ holy and precious blood. He adopted you into his family through the waters of baptism, washed away all your sins and clothed you with Jesus’ perfection. You belong to him. As such, you belong to a God who can calm any storm on any waters – literal or metaphorical – with the command of his voice, just like we saw in our Gospel reading. This means that you also belong to his care and his presence as you go through the stormy waters of life. He says to you, “I am with you always to the very end of the age.” He says to you that he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all of your ways, to lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. He calls himself your Rock, your Refuge, your Shelter, your Safe Harbor through the stormy waters of life.

We will not always know what decision we should make through the waters of life. However, whatever decision you make, you have a God who stands beside you. Yes, use the experience, the pros and cons, the gut feelings, etc., but whatever decision you make, trust what God has said to you. Be encouraged and be at peace with whatever decisions you responsibly make believing that God will care for you because you belong to him. That’s how we navigate the waters of life. Amen.