

Acts 27:20-25, 33-38

Thanksgiving Eve, Nov. 22, '23
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

What's your preferred location for a Thanksgiving feast? For millions of Americans, the answer would probably be, "At home, around my table, with my family." If it's not that, the next most common answer is probably, "At Grandma's house with all of our relatives." But not everybody is able to be home or with family for the fourth Thursday in November. So, sometimes the Thanksgiving meal is eaten in a less-traditional place. For instance, there was a Naval Officer by the name of Stanley Collins who served during World War II, and he recounted his peculiar Thanksgiving meal in 1943: "I was on submarine duty in the Pacific. We were in the area off the coast of the Philippines. While the turkeys were cooking, the submarine took a dive. We went down too steeply, and the turkeys fell out of the oven onto the deck. The cook picked them up and put them back into the oven and we ate them, regardless of what may have gotten on them as a result of their fall. That meal was so good!"

Talk about a less-than-ideal location for a Thanksgiving feast! Well, today I want to tell you about another place where a Thanksgiving meal was held: Not just on a boat, but on a sinking ship! Even with their boat about to go down, the Apostle Paul and His companions were eating a Thanksgiving meal. And I don't imagine this is a very familiar account to most of you, but it's a good one to consider this evening before Thanksgiving. The text I would lay upon your hearts is from **Acts 27:20-25, 33-38**:

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. ²¹ 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. ²² Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ 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.' ²⁵ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ³³ 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. ³⁴ 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." ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. ³⁷ (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) ³⁸ And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Thanksgiving on a Sinking Ship

So, the story begins when the Apostle Paul, under arrest for preaching about Christ, was put on a ship to Rome to stand trial as a Roman citizen. Now, in the Mediterranean Sea, the prime sailing months last from April to September, with September departures considered very dangerous. The winter months bring with them very strong winds and treacherous seas, so typically a ship wouldn't depart that late into the sailing season. Well, that's *exactly* when this particular ship set sail, likely to attempt to transport some final supplies to Rome before the winter. And partway through the journey, a decision had to be made whether to continue to fight through the difficult seas or to find an island harbor to find refuge in for the winter. Against Paul's advice, the ship's captain decided to keep going, and as they sailed near the island of Crete, a great cyclone rose up against them, pretty similar to a Category 1 or Category 2 hurricane that we might experience in the Southeastern United States.

And the ship took a beating as you can imagine. It was only with great difficulty that the crew was able to hang onto the lifeboat. They began to throw some of the cargo and sailing gear overboard to lighten the ship's weight, but it didn't really do much good. And the storm *continued* raging on—it was reported that ***“neither sun nor stars appeared,”*** the storm clouds remained thick overhead. Their deep-sea anchors did little to help as they dragged along the bottom and the men were forced to hold the boat together with ropes. Fourteen days passed and the storm *still* did not let up. Those on board became convinced that they were going to die. ***“All hope of our being saved was at last abandoned,”*** Luke describes.

And there was another problem arising—during those fourteen days the passengers and crew did not eat. Why not? It was *not* for lack of food. They had plenty to eat on the ship. It was because they were worried and afraid. Paul said they had been in ***“constant suspense.”*** You know how that is. When you're bombarded by trouble and fear, it's hard to think about food. Anxiety doesn't exactly help your appetite. So, during this storm, fighting for their very lives, nobody even considered eating! Who cares about fixing supper when you might not be around long enough to eat it?

The lack of nourishment *was* becoming a problem, though. The men were becoming too weak. They needed to eat to stay alive and to keep the ship afloat as best they could, but still they just couldn't bring themselves to sit down and have a meal.

Then, suddenly, the scene in that boat changed rather dramatically. Not the storm—the storm is still raging just as it was—but the passengers are gathered around the Apostle, and Paul is taking out some bread and saying, ***“Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food.” . . . 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. ³⁶ Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. ³⁷ (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.)***

There it is. Out in a sinking ship, during a two-week long cyclone on the Mediterranean Sea, having gone the full two weeks without food, the man of God gathers the people together for a Thanksgiving dinner. He gives thanks to the Lord, breaks the bread, and distributes to 275 other people. My guess is that we are looking *here* at one of the more unusual times and places for a Thanksgiving feast.

Picturing this whole scene taking place, there's such a stark difference between the raging storm around them and the meal taking place on board. Why the sudden change of heart among the people? What had moved them to break their fast and partake in this unusual feast? It *was* because they had learned of God's merciful care and protection. They had come to know that *Paul's* God was watching out for them, graciously preserving their bodies and lives on board the ship!

You see, the night before, an angel of God had come to Paul, stood beside him and said, ***“Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.”*** At this good news from God, Paul's spirits began to rise. His *own* mission for Christ would continue, and nobody else traveling with him would be lost either. So, he said to the others, ***“Take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.”***

And *that's* how they came together for this Thanksgiving dinner on a sinking ship. The Word from God encouraged them all, God's bounteous hand was opened to them, they ate and were satisfied, and they began to regain their strength for the difficult journey that lay before them.

Well, let's take the opportunity this Thanksgiving to put ourselves in the middle of a cyclone. It does not have to be a literal storm, but it can be anything that causes us to be troubled or afraid. What is it *for you* that makes you lose interest in food or your basic daily needs? Is it anxiously awaiting the results of a doctor's test? Is it sadness over some aspect of your life that just hasn't gone according to plan? Is it concern over a relationship? Worries about your finances? A rift in your family?

For each of us, there are different happenings that can cause us to forget that God is always there caring for our bodies and watching over our lives on this earth. He supplies us with food and clothing, family and friends, a nation at peace, our health, our weather, and all things that we need. He is providing for us and preserving us every step of the way, and *still* we can so easily lose hope and be like those on the ship who gave up all hope of being saved. Maybe there's some storm in your life *right now* that makes it difficult to think about celebrating Thanksgiving. Sometimes it's hard to sit down and give thanks. It's hard to remember all the blessings when in the midst of many troubles. Can you still have a Thanksgiving meal when it *feels* like your life has become a sinking ship?

Sure, you can, because just like the angel said to Paul, in so many words, your heavenly Father says to you, *"You will make it through. You will be saved."* God kept His promise to Paul, He would watch over Paul's life all the way until there was nothing left for him to do, and then God would call him home. And God will watch over your life too, every step of the way, until your earthly journey is ended—until He takes you to Himself. In the meantime, you will have your bread. You will have your safety. You will be kept alive by His gracious hand, kept supplied from His endless treasure-store until that time when your Father says, *"Now is when you come with me."*

You are God's child. He has called you by name. He has brought you into His family of believers. He has shown you His dear Son Jesus Christ and given Him *for you* into death on the cross. He has forgiven your thanklessness, and your hopelessness, your fear, and your worry because the Savior offered His own life for it. And, as Paul writes, ***"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"*** (Romans 8:32) He will take care of all earthly things for as long as He needs to take care of them. He will take care of your body and life until Jesus comes again and raises you from the dead and gives *you* life again in the new creation.

Your God cares for you anywhere and everywhere. On the land, on the sea, in the air, at home or abroad. So, we may joyfully give Him thanks for His preservation and protection anywhere and everywhere we are, whether that be gathered around a Thanksgiving table or even on a sinking ship.

You know, speaking of that sinking ship, there's one last interesting thing to note, the last verse: ***"And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea."*** Can you believe that! They celebrated Thanksgiving and didn't save the leftovers! What would they eat the next day? They didn't worry about that. They knew now that God would provide. And He did. And He also does for you, His children, as the Psalmist explains: ***"The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. ...My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever."*** (Psalm 145:14-16, 21) May we join in that song of praise, in Jesus' name! Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.