

## Practically Spiritual Choices

Let's turn to Acts 27. Two years ago last Sunday on Oct. 1st, 2015, a 790 foot cargo ship called the El Faro, on its way to Puerto Rico sailed directly into Hurricane Joaquin and sank, killing all 33 crew members on board. Last week the Coast Guard released a report determining that the ship sank due to mistakes and bad judgment on the part of the captain. He misjudged the strength of the hurricane and overestimated the strength of the 790 foot ship. Recovered recordings capture the terrifying last hours of the crew. As the crew watched the hurricane on their equipment, second mate Danielle Randolph became concerned, saying, "I don't know if any other ships are going right into it like we are." Twice the captain dismissed suggestions they return to shore. "We are not gonna turn around," he insisted.

Returning to the bridge at 4:10am, just a few hours before the sinking, the captain told a crew member, "There's nothing bad about this ride. I was sleeping like a baby. This is every day in Alaska." Recordings reveal an increasingly panicked crew trying to cope with the wind and waves. At 7:15am alerts were sent out to the Coast Guard, and not long after that the captain ordered the crew to abandon ship. No one survived.

Choices are powerful things. This captain was held responsible because he made a series of bad choices based on bad judgments and mistakes. They didn't need to be where they were, and the El Faro didn't need to be lost at sea. It wasn't the storm that doomed the ship, it was the bad choices that put the ship in the middle of the storm that doomed the ship.

Sometimes storms blow into our lives through no fault of our own, and there's nothing we can do to avoid them. But sometimes we are responsible for steering ourselves into storms by making bad choices.

This morning we are beginning a new topical series called Practically Spiritual. The goal of this series is to look at what the Bible has to say about some basic, practical areas in life. The Bible teaches us a lot about wisdom which is all about how to live life well and a lot of what wisdom does is navigational. Wisdom helps us choose good paths. Wisdom helps us avoid bad paths. Sometimes wisdom presses us forward, sometimes wisdom stops us in our tracks.

### **Title: *Practically Spiritual Choices***

I want us to read about another shipwreck because it presents a fascinating blend of practical and spiritual. Just to give some background, Paul has appealed to Caesar and so they are transporting him by ship to Rome along with other prisoners as well as cargo. They harbor in a port called Fair Havens, and now they have a choice to make. Let's read:

### **Acts 27:9-13**

The choice is this: it is late in the season, bad weather is coming, should they find a nearby port suitable for wintering, or put out to sea in the hope of reaching far away Phoenix at Crete and spend the winter there? The question we want to ask is, what does Paul the mighty man of faith, the apostle called by the risen Christ, the miracle worker, have to say about this choice? We find his counsel in verse 10:

*"Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives."*

Wow! If we were expecting a faith-filled, "God will watch over us, let's go for it!" kind of answer, this is pretty surprising and disappointing. Basically he says, if we go we're all going to die! He would have told Captain Davidson, don't sail into Hurricane Joaquin or we'll all die. That's very practical, but is it spiritual? It's practically spiritual and it teaches us this practically spiritual principle about choices:

### **1. It's spiritual to consider practical concerns in making our choices**

When making choices and decisions, rarely does God call us to abandon all practical considerations. Usually He calls us to use wisdom, which takes practical concerns into consideration. Paul knew that the season for sailing long distances across the sea was over. Winter was approaching and along with that dangerous weather patterns that take boats down. He was factoring in the season, the weather, and the potential risks at sea, and he *perceived*, that is, his thought process helped him to know that if they went it would not end well.

Paul's choice, if he had been in charge, would have been guided by practical concerns and it would have been a healthy spiritual choice. The Bible calls that *prudence*.

*The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty. Prov. 22:3*

Prudence is a form of wisdom that gives thought and care for the future. The simple don't give this thought and care and keep going and pay dearly. But why do they keep going? Why did Captain Davidson refuse to turn around when several crew members suggested that they should? Why did this Roman centurion reject Paul's counsel in favor of the pilot and owner of the ship and allow them to set out to sea? This takes us into the world of motives, why we make the choices we make.

Choices rarely happen in a vacuum. We make choices because we want something. There are benefits and rewards and risks and dangers attached to choices which means that there are desires and hopes and hesitations and fear attached to them. The simple keeps going because for some reason he doesn't want to stop keep going. There is *something* he hopes he can get by keeping going. Captain Davidson wanted to deliver his cargo to Puerto Rico and he didn't want to be embarrassed by turning around and going back to the safety of the shore. So he wanted something and he feared something. The pilot and the owner in Acts 27 stood to gain more by getting their cargo to the market sooner. The centurion stood to discharge his duties and maybe be given a more enjoyable mission sooner. Practical considerations warned them not to go, but there was something they stood to gain by launching out.

Now it's normal and understandable that Captain Davidson and the owner of the cargo in Acts 27 wanted to deliver their goods. It was their job. The problem often comes in when our desires dominate our decision-making process. When we have choices, there will often be a reward attached - something we want on the other side. And there will often be a risk attached and that's not necessarily a bad thing- God doesn't call us to live a riskless life. The prudent sees danger and takes refuge, but he doesn't take up residence in the refuge. So how do we balance the risks and rewards and make wise choices?

#### *a. Be honest about what we want or don't want*

Sometimes we can get into big trouble because we try to spiritualize our desires. We prayed about it and lo and behold, God wants what we want. Well, maybe. And maybe not. But let's not start there. Let's start by being honest: Lord, I want this particular result, or Lord, I want this thing to happen. Or, Lord, I don't

want this thing to happen, or Lord, I'm afraid of that thing happening. Be honest about what we want or don't want. Only when we're honest about our desires can we then submit them to God and pray, like Jesus prayed, not my will but Yours be done.

*b. Be careful in our risk/rewards analysis*

This might sound really unspiritual. I mean, is there ever a risk when God is involved? Actually, yes, there is. Paul does an analysis of the season, the weather, the open sea, and says, "ain't looking good, boys." God's not more involved in our lives than he was in Paul's so we should be careful in our risk/rewards analysis.

One thing that is always wise is to consider worst case scenarios. If we bank our choice on the best happening, we're being foolish. As the ship Paul was on set out, a gentle wind was blowing, and they read into that all is well. And figured all will continue to go well. Best case scenario we've got warm weather and a soft wind all the way to Crete! But they didn't ask the harder question of what if the worst happens? What if a terrible storm hits us? Captain Davidson assumed his ship could handle the storm, but as he approached a storm that no other ship was entering, he should've asked, "what if this ship can't handle the storm? Am I willing to risk that? It's easy to envision all going well and us safely entering the port, but can I envision the ship going down and all these lives being lost?"

The point of this isn't never take risks, or even never take big risks. But the bigger the risk, the stronger and more certain should be our sense of God leading. We need to be honest, is God leading into this big storm of risk, or is it just that I want something badly?

The other component to this equation is how great is the reward, and that needs to be evaluated with kingdom metrics, not worldly metrics. If we take big risks to get more money, or get ahead at work, or some other pursuit that doesn't really further kingdom interests, than that should make us think twice. And if the choice does further significant kingdom interests, then we should be more willing to step out of the boat of safety. The gospel is worth risking our lives for. A promotion at work probably isn't.

Janice and I got a call back in May. Many of you know that our daughter and son in law adopted a high risk baby last year in November. They finally were able to pay off Asher's adoption over the summer, but they were calling to let us know that the adoption agency was asking if they'd be willing to adopt another high risk baby? Because Jenn had to quit her job they wouldn't be able to pay off this baby anywhere nearly as aggressively. In fact, they calculated this baby would be 12 years old before the adoption would be paid for. But they felt faith for it. They felt the Lord leading them to take the step of faith. To be honest, I had mixed emotions. I was excited about their opening their heart and home to another precious baby, but I also knew there was a big degree of risk, not only financially but in other ways as well. Justus was born in August, and he's a healthy, happy baby. A month ago, they still owed a debt of about \$20K on baby Justus. But about 3 weeks ago, they got a call from the agency notifying them that the bill had been completely paid off! Some generous people had anonymously paid off their entire bill! To put this in perspective, in the course of less than a year they took on the responsibility and the debt of two adoptions - about \$60K worth of debt - and with the generosity of friends and their own sacrificial giving, they were able to pay that \$60K in less than a year. The Lord provided wonderfully!

A risk/rewards analysis acknowledges the financial risk, and the other risks, but those risks seem small when compared to the reward of a precious, eternal soul being raised in a loving home and with the knowledge of Christ and the gospel. Taking bigger risks are more thinkable when the rewards are so great in light of the kingdom of Christ.

Evaluate your desires and evaluate its kingdom value. Look hard at the worst case scenario and ask yourself can you live with that? Ask hard questions, press on the vision hard before you launch out to sea. If it's God, it will be able to take hard questions and tough evaluation. If it's not, you don't want it even if you want it. Let's continue reading.

### **Acts 27:13-32**

To me this is really fascinating. Paul is told by an angel that God has promised to spare not only Paul's life, but all the men on the ship. He encourages these men - who are not Christians - to take heart because he has faith in God. Talk about a strong faith!

Later as their situation seems to worsen, the sailors try to quietly make their escape for the boat. Paul has this promise from God, but he knows that the sailors are the ones who have the skill and expertise to navigate the ship through the storm and whatever lies ahead. If they leave, the ship is doomed. So the same guy that says, God is going to save everyone on board says, *"Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."* (vs. 31) This presents a second practically spiritual principle:

#### **2. Trust in the promises of God and take practical steps to achieve the desired goal**

I think most of us tend to go to one extreme or the other. We either bend towards trusting God or we bend towards taking practical steps. The point we want to reinforce as we go through this series is that being practical and being spiritual don't have to be at odds.

If by practical someone has in mind leaving God out of the equation, I would challenge that definition of practical. Leaving God out of the equation isn't practical, it's foolish. The Bible says the fool, not the practical man, has said in his heart there is no God. The fool leaves God out of his calculations and ultimately their lives end up in a bad place because the author of all that is truly good in the universe is God. No God, no good. So leaving God out of the picture isn't practical, it's foolish.

But we can go to the other extreme too - praying about things, asking God for blessing and guidance and help, but not taking the practical steps to get where we want to be. Someone might say, I'm really going through it with my marriage, or with my kids, or in my finances, but I'm praying and asking God for help. That's good, but are there some practical steps that God wants you to take? Wouldn't that be a sign that I wasn't trusting God? No, not at all.

Paul had a promise from God, but that promise didn't negate their need for experienced sailors on board the ship. God's providence and their skill worked hand in hand. Usually that's how God wants to work in our lives. He works, but most often He chooses to use means.

- If we experiencing financial woes, or owe a lot in debt, we do want to pray, but then do the hard work of budgeting and trimming expenses, and paying down the debt. Maybe even working a

second job, or applying for a better paying job, depending on our situation. Trust God and take practical steps.

- For the marriage that is struggling, or when our kids aren't turning out the way we hoped, or our relationships with others in general seem to go sour, absolutely bring it to our Father in prayer. But then consider prayerfully, are there things I am contributing to the problem that I can work on? Trust God and take practical steps.

The point of this is not to depend on our own efforts to the point that we write God out of the script. We will never have testimonies of what God can do if we never launch out into anything we can't completely handle without God. But I've also seen over the years Christians not ask hard, practical questions or not give prudent thought to the future and pay a dear price for it.

Our hope is to lay a foundation of biblical principles and wisdom - not formulas, life doesn't work that way - but biblical guidelines and instructions for some big areas of life. And it's our prayer that this series will strengthen us in some important, practically spiritual areas of life.

Before we close, when we consider the power of choices to change our lives, the greatest choice is what we do with Jesus Christ. Will we receive him and believe in him as our Lord and Savior, or will we reject him? As long as we have breath, we have that choice to make. But the Bible says that when this life ends, that choice also ends. That if we sail into eternity without Christ, we will be lost forever. Using a different metaphor, of a play coming to an end, CS Lewis writes about making that choice before God brings the play to an end.

*When the author walks onto the stage, the play is over. God is going to invade, all right; but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else comes crashing in? This time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. That will not be the time for choosing; It will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. ~ C.S. Lewis.*

If you have never made the choice to trust Jesus as your Savior, will you pray with me now?