

# *What the Apostle Paul Teaches Us about Suffering*

August 27, 2020 by: [Mark R. Talbot](#)



## The Story of a Storm, a Shipwreck, and a Poisonous Snake

In Acts, Luke records an event in the apostle Paul's life that helps us understand our experiences of profound suffering. When God called Paul from being the church's persecutor to be a gospel preacher, the Lord showed him how much he would suffer for the sake of his name (see [Acts 9:10–16](#)). Part of Paul's suffering came during a storm and shipwreck on the Mediterranean Sea (see [Acts 27–28](#)). By this time, he was a prisoner being transported to Rome to appear before Caesar. Luke was with him and details for us the hardships suffered during the storm, including the crew's having to throw the ship's cargo and tackle overboard, and everyone being so worried that they didn't eat for two weeks. Eventually the ship ran aground on a reef and everyone swam for shore after the Roman centurion in charge had persuaded his soldiers not to kill Paul and the other prisoners to prevent their escape. As if all that wasn't bad enough, once on shore Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake.

## When the Stars Disappear

For us, the main lesson of this story is that God remains in control of everything even when those involved lose all hope. For at one point in this story, Luke remarks that when "neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved" ([Acts 27:20](#) NIV). In ancient times, sailors got their bearings by seeing the sun and the stars. So when the storm blotted out heaven's

lights, the condition of crew and passengers was indeed very grave. But then Paul stood up, telling everyone they should take heart because God had assured him in a dream that he would appear before Caesar and that in the meantime he would also keep everyone safe.

What happened to Paul and his companions in this storm when neither the sun nor the stars appeared for many days can serve as a metaphor for what often happens to us when we suffer.<sup>1</sup> God has made us to be needy and wanty creatures who are constantly on the hunt for various goods—air, food, water, shelter, safety, health, love, and happiness. Pursuing such goods requires our learning how to lead our lives so we can navigate through life in ways that are likely to secure what we *want* and *need*. Taking a particular tack on life in order to pursue our wants and needs requires us to get our bearings, much as the sailors in Acts needed to see the sun and the stars in order to navigate the Mediterranean Sea.

A large part of getting our bearings involves our coming to lead our lives in terms of some stories. Stories help orient us by placing us somewhere on an arc or trajectory that has a beginning, middle, and end. Two different kinds of stories are necessary to give our lives their full meaning: a particular story and a general one. The *particular story* is about what our personal lives mean. Each of us needs to believe a story that orients us to the particular people, places, and things around us, describing where we have come from, where we are, and where we think we can go so that we can project ourselves into hopeful futures where we can get what we want and need.<sup>2</sup> The general story answers questions about what human life means. For instance, are we the product of blind, meaningless cosmic forces, or have we been created by God to fulfill some specific purpose? Is human life about nothing but making money or pursuing our own personal happiness? Or is it about serving others and believing and obeying God? Metaphorically, these two kinds of stories are the stars that guide us, helping us navigate life's otherwise uncharted seas.

Suffering tends to challenge these stories and shake our confidence. Even a mild headache can make me doubt a small part of my personal story, which assumes that in a few hours I will be relatively pain free. And profound suffering may threaten to blot out completely the light of the stars that are guiding us by making us doubt the general story we have accepted about what human life means.

Yet as Luke's account of Paul's and his shipmates' suffering portrays, even if we lose our bearings we shouldn't conclude that God has lost his. God is *provident* over life's storms—that is, he sees the future and *provides* in advance for the needs of his people (see [Ps. 107:23–29](#); [Jonah 1:4](#); [Mark 4:35–41](#)). Just as he spoke the sun and stars into existence to illumine and guide us (see [Gen. 1:14–19](#)), so he has given us biblical stories like Paul's to help keep our faith, hope, and love alive.

Paul suffered three other shipwrecks, including one involving a night and a day adrift on the open sea. He was imprisoned and repeatedly flogged and beaten as well as stoned. He had been in danger from rivers and robbers as well as from Jews and Gentiles and false Christians. He knew many cold and sleepless nights and hungry and thirsty days.

On top of it all, he was constantly anxious for all of the churches.<sup>3</sup> Yet precisely because of what he had learned about God and his faithfulness through all this suffering (see [Rom. 5:3–5](#) with [2 Cor. 1:3–7](#)), he could confidently declare, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” For how will he “who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, . . . not also with him graciously give us all things?” ([Rom. 8:31–32](#)). These convictions enabled Paul to believe God when God assured him he would save him and his shipmates. Though the light of this world’s sun and stars had disappeared, Paul kept his bearings by believing what God told him in that dream.

Indeed, even before God had shown Paul the remarkable providence of saving him and his shipmates from this terrible storm, Paul was already urging his New Testament readers to trust in the good news God had called him to preach. This good news is the story of the ultimate triumph we shall know in Christ, the triumph of God’s keeping us in Christ’s love and thus ultimately delivering us from all bad things. Paul’s faith in this story resounds throughout the letter he wrote to the Roman Christians not long before his arrest and his perilous trip over the Mediterranean Sea. It comes out in his attitude toward suffering:

We *rejoice* in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame.  
—[Rom. 5:3–5](#)

It comes out in his trust in God’s perfect providence:

We *know* that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love [him] and [who] are called according to his purpose for them. —[Rom. 8:28](#)(NLT)

## Nothing Separates Us

And it comes out in his unshakable confidence that nothing—absolutely nothing!—can separate Christians from the love of God in Christ: “Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?” ([Rom. 8:35](#)). No! Assuredly not! For “despite all these things,” Paul declared, “overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us” ([Rom. 8:36–37](#) NLT).

*He can—and ultimately will—see his people safely through even the worst storms.*

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Of course, sometimes these great declarations don’t seem to ring true. Sometimes we can be so overwhelmed by what has befallen us that we cannot understand how God could possibly be working through it for our good. How can this, we find ourselves asking, be coming from a loving Savior’s hand? Sometimes it can seem as if our

suffering is so bad, so catastrophic, that we cannot imagine how it can ever be part of any “overwhelming victory” that will one day be ours through Christ. So sometimes our suffering does indeed threaten to destroy our faith in the Christian story we have been using to guide us on our earthly ways. Sometimes the stars of faith and hope disappear.

Perhaps you are puzzled right now by your own suffering or someone else’s. Perhaps you are in the midst of some great or long-lasting storm of suffering that threatens to blot out heaven’s lights and thus tempts you to lose all hope that you will ever see good again. If this is so, then I hope my book’s message may play a part like the one the apostle Paul’s message played when he stood and told his despairing companions right in the midst of their storm that God had given him a word guaranteeing he would deliver them. Paul proclaimed a message of hope in the midst of hopelessness. He knew that God never loses his bearings, no matter how bad things may seem, and that God would not promise what he could not do. And God did as he said, for God sovereignly controls all of life’s storms. He can—and *ultimately will*—see his people safely through even the worst storms. We have his word that when (whether in this life or in the one to come) those storms finally begin to subside and the sky begins to clear, we will look up and once again see the sun and the moon and the stars, and then realize that our loving heavenly Father has been with us all along our way.

Notes:

1. Scripture licenses this metaphor in passages such as [Ezek. 32:7–8](#); Joel 2:1–2, 10; 3:14–15; and [Zeph. 1:14](#) –16. The psalmists often likened their suffering to being in storms at sea, as we shall see.
2. More technically, getting our bearings in life involves understanding our lives as including a set or series of narratives—that is, a set or series of stories that orient us to life by enabling us to perceive series of events and actions as involving meaningful sequences. Some narratives are short (e.g., “When I went to the grocery store today, you’ll never guess who I saw!”) and others longer (e.g., “My high school and college years were quite eventful”). Christians believe God has created the world for a purpose and that he has a narrative that articulates how he will accomplish that purpose. They believe their particular stories should track God’s narrative. Of course, my use of the word story to refer to narratives does not imply that those narratives are untrue. I may, for instance, ask you, “What’s your life story?” and expect you will (so far as you are able) tell me a true story about your life. In fact, you are obliged to tell as true a story as you can.
3. See [2 Cor. 11:16–12:10](#) for Paul’s first-person chronicle of his sufferings and afflictions, including his thorn in the flesh. Paul Barnett explores in detail the place of suffering in Paul’s life and ministry in his *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

*This article is adapted from [When the Stars Disappear: Help and Hope from Stories of Suffering in Scripture](#).*

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