

FAITH IS AN EYE-OPENER!

Today's Text: Acts 27: 1-44

Extracts:

And when it was decided that we should sail to Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to one named Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment...[At Myra, a city of Lycia], the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing to Italy, and he put us on board...Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, "Men, I perceive that this voyage will end in disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives." Nevertheless the centurion was more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship than by the things spoken by Paul.... But not long after, a tempestuous head wind arose, called Euroclydon... and because we were exceedingly tempest-tossed, the next day they lightened the ship... Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up....Then Paul stood in the midst of them [and said], "You should have listened to me...I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only the ship" [Acts 27: 1, 6, 9-11, 14, 18, 20-21]

Amanda Clayton is a 24-year-old mother of two who lives in Detroit, Michigan, USA.¹ During the fall of 2011, she won a US\$1 million jackpot. She elected to collect her winning in a lump sum. So, she was paid about half that amount, less of taxes. She bought a new car and a new house. Nevertheless, she continued to collect \$200 per month in food stamps- a government welfare scheme for those without income. In defence of her action (which is not necessarily illegal), she told a local radio station that it was not her responsibility to cut herself off the scheme. She added, "I feel it is ok because I have no income and I have bills to pay. I have two houses."

On the surface, Amanda may look selfish. But if you scratch beyond the surface, you can see a bigger problem and it is spiritual. It is fear of the unknown. It may in part explain why she preferred a lump sum to installment payments of her lottery winning over time. It may explain why she refused to give up her welfare income even after collecting half-a-million dollars in a jackpot. She saw her future with her naked eyes, not with the eyes of faith. In that sense, we are not better than Amanda! Most of us are worry freaks because of the unknown tomorrow and that takes us nowhere. Only faith is an eye-opener of your inscrutable future. In this week's story, Paul relied on faith to beat navigation experts. It is an important lesson for coping in an increasingly ungodly world.

¹ Based on "\$1M lottery winner still happily uses food stamps," *msn.com*, Thursday, 8 March 2012; <http://now.msn.com/money/0307-lottery-foodstamps.aspx>

1. Background: Faith defeats Expertise!

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His disciples, “Do not worry about your life, *what you will eat or what you will drink*; nor about your body, *what you will put on*” [Matt. 6: 25]. “Will” is a future tense. So, our today’s worry deals with future matters that may or may not happen!

In trying to control or understand that unknown future, people use different methods, depending on the eye lenses that they trust. For example, *some people go to diviners, soothsayers or magicians who rely on Satan and his demonic forces for spiritual information about their future*. You may wonder how evil forces know about such things. The answer is quite simple: it is what God allows that happens. For example, when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, Satan also came among them and God spoke with him [Job 1: 6-7]! When God wanted wicked King Ahab killed in the battle for Ramoth Gilead, He allowed an evil spirit to be a lying spirit in the mouths of four hundred prophets to assure him of victory [1 Kgs 22: 1-23]. At the beginning of the earthly ministry of Jesus, while the people doubted His divinity and even wanted to throw Him down a cliff for saying so [Lk 4: 28-30], it was the demonic spirits that He cast out that first revealed Him as “the Christ, the Son of God” [vv. 33-34, 41]. It follows that relying on such forces is short-lived because God will not always allow it. In fact, *their interest in our future is more to hurt than to help us*.

Some other people rely on experts, such as astrologers, statisticians and other scientists to make predictions about the future. However, since science is based on empirical knowledge, that is, what you can see, smell, taste, touch or hear, it is limited in scope and cannot explain all of truth. Science can only tell you about the future in a probabilistic sense, that is, by way of chances. For example, a group of astronomers at the Observatory in Green Belt, Maryland, USA, were asked to determine the future positions of the stars and planets 100 to 1,000 years from now.² They plotted a trend line from the past, using computer animation. Soon, they had a flash on their computer that a day was missing in space and time that neither their model nor the scientists could explain. But with the help of one of them who remembered his childhood Sunday school Bible studies, it happened during the time of Joshua when God at Joshua’s command made the sun to stand still (not go down) “about a whole day” [Josh. 10: 12-14]! Their estimate made it 23 hours and 20 minutes- indeed almost a whole day. They found the remaining 40 minutes from the story of Hezekiah’s sickness, when God “brought the shadow ten degrees backward by which it had gone down in the dial of Ahaz” as evidence that He had extended the king’s life by fifteen years [2 Kgs 20: 9-11].³ *Therefore,*

² Testimony by Sir Lionel Luckoo can be found in “If you think faith is so hard, try expertise!” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 2 No 8: 18 March 2001; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/Ifyouthinkfaithishardtryexpertise.pdf

³ The earth’s circle rotates around the sun every 24 hours. There are 360 degrees in a circle. That means that it takes 4 minutes per degree for the earth to rotate around the sun [(24 X 60)/360]. By moving the dial of Ahaz 10 degrees back, the rotation of the earth was slowed by 40 minutes!

it takes more than science to see your future more clearly. Can you build your future on chance?

That leaves us with *the only sure option of knowing definitely about your future- by faith.* The word of God says “For we walk by faith, not by sight” [2 Cor. 5: 7]. Faith has been defined as the “*substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen” [Heb. 11: 1], and without it, no one can please God [v. 6]. Substance and evidence are tangible and empirical. Therefore, *faith is more than mere optimism or bold-face. Faith is fact from God’s perspective. That is the main thrust of this week’s Bible story.*

Following his appeal to Caesar, Paul was one of the prisoners put on a ship that was sailing to Italy [Acts 27: 1]. Here is an account of the voyage as described by Luke, the writer of the book of Acts:

a) *The experts reject Paul’s faith-based advice*

Paul observed that the going was rough because the wind was contrary, not permitting them to proceed smoothly. So, he spoke to Julius, the Centurion leading the prisoners to Rome, and the helmsmen and the owner of the ship, saying, “Men, I *perceive* that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives” [vv. 2-9].

Paul was a tentmaker, not a fisherman like Peter; nor was he versed in navigational sciences. Much more, he was a mere prisoner! So, who was he to advise experts in such matters? Understandably, therefore, the centurion was “more persuaded” by the views of the experts “than by the things spoken by Paul.” Much more, on the advice of “the majority,” they decided to set sail right away [vv. 11-12]. How often do we ignore the warnings of poor lowly prophets in our various places of worship only to act on the opinions and preferences of our pompous pastors and their influential professional and rich backers to our regret in due course?

b) *A storm threatens the lives and livelihoods of the experts!*

Soon after they had set sail, a major tempest, named *Euroclydon*, broke out. It tossed them about violently to the extent that they were forced to toss their cargo overboard. For many days, they could neither see the sun nor the stars; the tempest grew worse, and all hope that they would be saved “was finally given up” [vv. 13-20]. Reliance on expertise had led them into a major disaster! You can imagine the reading on their “worry-metre”!

c) *But Paul’s faith navigates all to safety!*

After they had starved for a long time, Paul stood in their midst and said to them, “You should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss.” Then the man of faith gave them the substance of what to hope for! He urged them to take heart “for ***there will be no loss of life among you, but only the ship.***” How could he be so sure? It was because the night before, an angel of the God to whom he belonged and whom he served stood by him to assure him that he would be brought before Caesar and God had granted him all those that sailed with him! Then, he put the icing on the cake as follows, “Therefore take heart, men, for ***I believe God that it will be just as it was told me***” [vv. 21-25].

From that point on, the man of faith took over the navigation of that ship and the nourishment of the hope of the experts on board. They would have to run aground on a certain island, Paul said. Fourteen nights later, they sensed that they were drawing near some land! As the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, Paul warned the centurion that unless they remained on board, they could not be saved. So the soldiers cut away the ropes of the skiff and let it fall into the sea [vv. 26-30]!

In their full view, Paul took bread and gave thanks to God. As he began to eat, “they were all encouraged and also took food for themselves.” In the end, the ship was wrecked on the island of Malta. All the 276 people on board were saved but the ship was wrecked [vv. 31-44], just as the man of faith had told them.

That is a remarkable story. Faith trumped expertise. The tentmaker and prisoner led the mariners to safety by the power of his faith in his God. How about you?

2. How faith can open your eyes wide

Many of us boast of having been Christians for donkey years. Some of us behave as if they can speak in tongues more than Paul. Yet, at the slightest challenge, they begin to waver. All of a sudden, their prophetic word begins to change from moment to moment as if God is so ephemeral! How can faith open your eyes to deal with the challenges that you face day by day? Here are some general principles that the above story has taught us, among others:

a) *Faith can give you advance notice of what to expect*

If you know what to expect, you will not fret. So, if you can know ***in advance*** what to expect, you will know what to do without unnecessary worry. In the case of Paul, God sent an angel to tell him that he would appear before Caesar in Rome, and that He would grant him the favour of taking all the 276 people on board to safety. Paul was told that at the

height of the hopelessness of the ship's crew, when all hope had been lost that they would arrive alive.

Take the case of David and his troops whose camp at Ziklag was burnt with fire in their absence while their wives and children were taken captive. After weeping like the rest of us would do, David sought the face of the LORD and asked Him, "Shall I pursue this troop? Shall I overtake them?" God answered him, "Pursue, for you shall surely overtake them and without fail recover all." With that assurance, he went in search of their loved ones and indeed recovered all in accordance with the word of God [**1 Sam. 30: 1-19**].

Therefore, the starting point in dealing with the uncertainties about your future is to know God's word on your situation for God does nothing unless He first reveals it to His servants the prophets [**Amos 3: 7**].

Through dreams, visions or prophesies, He will give you a firm word on what to expect [**Num. 12: 5-8; Joel 3: 28-29**]. If you can follow them, you cannot lose!

b) *Faith can give you specific guidelines on a specific matter*

When God knows that you will obey *whatever* He asks you to do, He will even give you very specific steps and guidelines to follow to bring you to the expected outcome. See, for example, how the children of Israel brought down the impregnable walls of Jericho without throwing a single spear or arrow. God said to Joshua, "See! I have given Jericho into your hand, its king, and the mighty men of valour." He first showed Joshua the substance of what to hope for; the evidence of things not yet seen. Is that not the definition of faith? Then, God gave Joshua a clear blueprint on how to go about it. He and his men of war should march around the city once every day for six days and seven times on the seventh day. Seven priests would bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day, after marching around the city seven times, the priests should blow the trumpets and the people should make a great shout. Then the wall of the city would fall down flat. They did so and that was exactly what happened [**Josh. 6: 1-5, 16-20**].

The problem we face is that we allow our priests or pastors to vary what God has specifically told us to do under the guise that it is unscriptural or not allowed in your denomination. Was it not the same God that said "Thou shalt not kill" that asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to Him? Where in the ministry of Jesus or of the prophets before Him did they use shadows [as in the case of Peter- **Acts 5: 15**] or handkerchiefs and aprons [as in Paul's case-**Acts 19: 11-12**] to heal the sick? Obedience is better than sacrifice. Partial obedience is disobedience. You either fear God or man; not both at the same time.

c) *Knowing what to expect can minimize your present anxieties*

Most of us are worry-freaks. We worry when we have; we worry when we lack. Faith helps in both cases. When you know what to expect, you have taken the sting out of worry. For example, when Judah was surrounded by enemy troops from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, we are told that the king of Judah, Jehoshaphat “feared.” Then he gathered all his people to fast and seek the face of the LORD before the temple in Jerusalem. After offering a powerful prayer, he concluded, “We have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.” Immediately, the Spirit of the LORD spoke the word of assurance through a prophet in their midst, saying, “Thus says the LORD to you: ‘Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God’s.’” With that kind of assurance, he went to war with praise singers in front of the troops, and he won a decisive victory without firing a single weapon [2 Chron. 20: 1-26]!

If others have done it, you can do better!

3. Conclusion: Only faith in Jesus can open your eyes wide!

Before His Passion, Jesus reminded His disciples [Jn 14: 28-29]:

You have heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away and coming back for you.’ If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, ‘I am going to the Father,’ for My Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe.

He said that He would rise from the dead. He did and you believed Him even though you did not see it [Jn 20: 29]. He is coming back soon “for the time is at hand” [Rev. 22: 10]. Do you also believe that? Or are you wavering by listening to the views and fantasies of scientists and revisionists who are all over the place trying to discredit the gospel of Jesus the Christ?

Eyes cannot see without light. They cannot see far without gadgets, such as glasses and telescopes. Yet, Isaiah with his mere dim eyes saw God sitting “above the *circle* of the earth” [Is. 40: 22] at a time that scientists thought and taught that the earth was flat! It is only in God’s light that you can see light [Ps. 36: 9]. Jesus is that “true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world” [Jn 1: 9]. When you accept Him as your Lord and Saviour, you become born again and “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” [Jn 3: 3].

Only faith in Jesus can keep your spiritual eye wide-opened.