

"THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD OVER CIRCUMSTANCES"

(Acts 27:1-28:16)

(Ajith Fernando)

We noted that this passage is unique to the exposition of God's sovereignty amidst hardship in Acts because here the hardship comes not from the sinfulness of people but from the forces of nature and the folly of humans. Paul and his team would have avoided the storm if the ship's officers had heeded his words of wisdom. This passage provides a needed check to prevent over application of the story of Christ's stilling the storm (see Luke 8:22- 25). Indeed, Christ can still every storm, but he does not immunize Christians from problems that others in the world also face. Sometimes he miraculously delivers Christians from such situations, while at other times he gives Christians courage to endure natural and other disasters. We thank him for performing miracles but also for his sufficient grace that provides endurance in the midst of storms (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Some Christians will testify how God has saved them from investing in a venture that went bankrupt while others ponder the mysterious providence that permitted them to invest in the same venture after making all the necessary inquiries about it and praying about the decision to invest. One Christian will testify how a traffic jam caused him to miss an ill-fated flight, while the godly mother of three little children will face an uncertain future because her husband died on that flight. We should never say that the one who was saved was any more godly than the one who was not. In fact, the one who suffered perhaps had a stronger faith, so that God felt that he or she was able to go through this circumstance. We must never glibly pronounce that a calamity faced by a Christian is a judgment from God. This may be so, but most often it is not, and by making such a pronouncement we may unnecessarily intensify the suffering of the righteous (cf. what Job's friends did to him).

What use is it to refer to God's sovereignty in view of the Christian who was not spared the experience of disaster? Though Christ can still the storm, we can have the courage to face it when he does not, for we know that through the crisis God's sovereignty will work out something good (Rom. 8:28). We live under God's promises, and these promises brace us to face the challenge. The American poet John Greenleaf Whittier (1907-92) meditated on the mysterious providence of God in a beloved hymn:

*Here in the maddening maze of things,
When tossed by storm and flood,
To one fixed ground my spirit clings;
I know that God is good!*

But what if the trial is too heavy for us? Whittier anticipates this situation:

*And if my heart and flesh are weak
To bear an untried pain,
The bruised reed he will not break,
But strengthen and sustain.*

