38. A rough passage for Christ's Servant

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Date: 09 May 2010

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[0:00] Well, do you turn with me, if you would, to the passage we read together in Acts chapter 27. A passage that describes a very rough passage for Christ's servant.

Well, the return this week of the volcanic ash cloud from that unpronounceable Icelandic volcano is a reminder, isn't it, that even in this 21st century, journeys don't always go smoothly.

And I can certainly testify to that. In fact, as I began to be thinking about this chapter, to preach on it, it was while I was stranded with the family a few weeks ago, during our Easter holidays, because of the same ash cloud.

But this passage itself is a very salutary reminder to us all, that as Christians called to follow Christ and to live lives of witness to Christ, that we are not, any of us, exempt from the storms of life.

And furthermore, even when God has called us, perhaps to a very particular ministry and service for him, it may well be that at times our path is very far from easy.

[1:18] Maybe at times very hard, deeply uncertain, sometimes even very terrifying. And that is certainly, isn't it, what we saw here in Acts chapter 27.

A very rough passage indeed for Christ's servant Paul on his way to Rome. It's a long chapter, it's full of very great detail as you saw.

We might ask, why is that? Why isn't this journey just summarised in a couple of verses, as so many of Paul's other journeys reported in Acts are?

Why don't we just read in verse 1 or verse 2? And so Paul sailed for Rome and arrived there after some months, after a difficult journey, having been shipwrecked on Malta.

Why isn't it just that? The answer can't be just to try and play up the Apostle Paul as some kind of intrepid adventurer.

[2:18] Because of course there are all kinds of other episodes from his life that Luke totally ignores, or mentions very briefly. This wasn't Paul's only shipwreck, was it? Remember he wrote 2 Corinthians, just a couple of years before this event, and in 2 Corinthians 11 he tells us plainly that he'd already been shipwrecked, not once, but twice, three times.

And on one occasion he'd spent a whole day and a night in the sea. We don't hear any of that in the book of Acts. So why do we get such great detail here, at this point in the story of Acts?

Well the answer lies really in asking another question. Why was it such a struggle? For Paul to reach Rome. After all God had told him plainly and clearly that he must testify in Rome.

He told Paul that. And so why was it so hard? And why is Luke so determined that we don't miss any detail about just how hard that journey was?

Well the answer of course is because Luke is not primarily wanting to teach us about Paul, but he's primarily concerned with teaching us about Paul's God, about our God.

[3:39] And he wants us to see in this book not only what Jesus began to do on earth and continues to do through his Holy Spirit working in the church, but he wants to show us how it is that Christ is at work still in this world through his servants.

And he wants us to know that sometimes, even perhaps often, there will be very rough passages for those who are true servants of Christ, who are true servants of the Word as he calls them.

But that does not mean that God has abandoned his servants. That does not mean that he doesn't love us. It does not mean that he's not powerful to help us.

I wonder if some of us this morning have been thinking just exactly those things of late. We might feel that we've been in the midst of a very rough passage indeed, that our journey with Jesus seems at the moment to be turning into nothing less than a disaster.

And we're blown way off course. Not at all where we feel we want to be and we need to be in our own life and our own ministry. Well, if that's how you're thinking, then maybe this passage this morning is exactly for you.

[4:56] And if that's not how you are just now, well, maybe, even though you may be sailing along happily in the sunshine at the moment, maybe it's something for you to store up for when the storms of life do come, as come they will if you're following Jesus.

Learn from this chapter, says Luke. Learn these three things. Learn to trust God's Word to us, however presently silent God may seem to be in your life.

Learn to trust God's ways with us, however puzzling that may seem to be at the moment. And learn to trust that God has work for us, however frustrated we may be at the moment, however far off course we may think that we are.

Learn that even in the roughest passages of your life, that God can, through his servants, bear great fruit in our lives.

Let's think about what this chapter teaches us, about what we need to know about God when we hit the storms and the struggles of journeying with Jesus. First then, learn that God's Word will always prevail, that his sure promise to us in Christ will never, ever fail us.

[6:26] But that very often it may seem as if it's failing us. Verses 1 to 20 that we read relate a very ominous story, don't they?

Decisions taken to sail for Italy to take Paul to the Emperor, but from the very beginning everything seems to be against them. In verse 5, the winds are against us, says Luke. They struggle along then in the Lee of Crete to fair havens in verse 8.

To go any further than that at this time of year was absolutely, plainly, disastrous and dangerous. And Paul says as much in verse 10. Are you nuts, he says. Well, that's in the Greek.

This is a lost cause, says Paul. Now, Paul had seen three shipwrecks already, we know that. He didn't want to see another one. He's not a fool. But professional pride is a powerful thing, isn't it?

It can be a dangerous thing. And to listen to this ship's owner. But this ship's owner was to discover that just as the owners of the Titanic discovered that professional pride, especially in the maritime industry, can be very difficult.

[7:34] You can see Arthur nodding his hair down there. So off they set, despite the risks, keen to get a better winter harbour, but predictably, disaster struck.

A tempest, verse 14, blew up. And one by one, do you notice, Paul's predictions came absolutely true. First the cargo's lost, verse 18. Then all the ship's tackle's lost.

Until we get to verse 20, when we see that all hope of our lives being saved was at last abandoned. That must have been a pretty terrifying situation, don't you think?

I've never been in a shipwreck, but I know and love somebody very dearly who has been, and it was a very terrifying situation. To be within minutes, literally, of drowning.

Very, very frightening. To have to say that all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned. But in a sense, the physical calamity that Paul faced was actually far less, really, than the spiritual calamity.

[8:40] Because this was a crisis facing the very trustworthiness of God's promise. It was a crisis in the truth of God's own word.

Remember back in chapter 23, verse 11, that the Lord himself had come and stood right next to Paul and said in plain words to him, you must testify to me in Rome.

So can God be trusted to keep his word? Does he really have the power to keep his word? It doesn't look like it in verse 20, does it?

That's a question that we often find ourselves asking. Maybe not in such dire circumstances, but in greatly difficult ones. When all the visible evidence appears to be to the contrary, when all hope seems to be lost.

Can God really do this? Will he really keep his promise? That's why verses 21 to 26 are so crucial to this story. The answer says, Luke, is yes.

[9:45] God's word will always prevail. God has said it and God will do it. And Paul isn't superhuman any more than we are.

And so God in his mercy sends his angel to reassure him with these wonderful words that God loves to say to his people, verse 24, fear not. Fear not.

You must stand before Caesar, he says. My sure promise to you, Paul, cannot fail. And strengthened by that reassurance, Paul is able to proclaim that to the others in verse 25.

Take heart. I have faith in God, he said. His word stands. We can trust him, all of us. And Paul has the confidence then to proclaim to the others the God-ordained way of salvation for them all in this calamity.

We must run aground, he says, on some island. And as we'll see, you see, the soldiers, the centurion, the sailors, they begin to realize that it's a wise thing to pay heed to the one who speaks with the clear authority of Almighty God.

[10:52] They'd ignored his words before, that's why they were in this crisis. You should have listened, Paul says. He's not slow to point that out, by the way. You should have listened to me. But now, as you can see from verse 32, they do listen to him.

And that's what leads to their salvation. That is a lesson, I think, isn't it, that we should be praying that our new parliament will learn that ignoring those who speak the truth of God always does lead to shipwreck in a nation.

The only hope for our nation is going to be that our politicians discover that economic reality is not the only factor that counts. There is a spiritual and a moral factor upon which everything else in a national life is built.

Let's just pray that like the centurion, they learn before it's too late to listen to those who speak the truth. But you see Luke's clear message here.

God's word has not failed. His promise is good and true and it will never fail. It seemed that all hope was lost in verse 20, but it was not so, he says. Remember God's promise.

[12:06] It shall prevail and indeed it did prevail, verse 44. And so it was, all were brought safely to land. You can trust God's promises.

God's word will always prevail even if sometimes it seems to us that all hope is lost. Now of course, we've got to be careful here because we don't always have such specific assurances from God about our own personal travel circumstances or indeed about any other circumstances.

To those of us here, and there were quite a number of us who were stranded by that ash cloud, Jesus did not appear, at least to me, did not appear and say, fear not, you can trust Ryanair to get you home.

In fact, I can confidently say that I wouldn't trust Ryanair as far as I could throw Michael O'Leary. But don't forget that Paul, Paul wasn't so different.

Very often, Paul didn't have specific assurances about his own travel or safety either. We saw that back in Acts chapter 20. Do you remember he said, I don't know what's going to happen to me in all these places I'm going.

[13:18] The only thing I know is that it'll involve floggings, beatings and imprisonment. I don't know what's going to happen to me. He said the same in Acts chapter 21. Many other places. He just didn't know.

Philippians chapter 1, he says he's unsure. I don't know if I'm going to live or I'm going to die. What I do know, he says, is that whatever happens, Christ has promised that he will be honoured through my life.

And we also know, don't we, that God's purposes for us cannot possibly be derailed by storms and tempests that we might face with our journey with Jesus along the way.

We know that because God has told us and his word will always prevail even if it seems to us sometimes that all hope is lost. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ, he says.

That's what Paul wrote to the Romans just a year or two before this. Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword or shipwrecks he could have added.

[14:25] No! None of these storms that we face in our life as believers or in our church life, none of these storms, however powerful, however apparently disastrous, can possibly separate us from God's purpose for us in Christ.

none of them will derail his plans and purposes. Quite the opposite, he says. All of these things rather work together for the good and for the ultimate glory of God's precious children.

That's his certain word. And we need to be reminded of that, don't we, in the midst of the storms of life. And that's why this scripture is here.

And perhaps it's here this morning just to be like God's angel, his messenger to you this very day. Perhaps the scripture is here and God has brought you to this place this morning just to hear those words from him to you.

Take heart. Fear not. Have faith in God. It will be exactly as he's told you. Take courage because it's in all these things that we are proved to be more than conquerors.

[15:40] Notice, not in being saved from all of these things or even despite all of these things that Paul says, but in all of these things that we are more than conquerors.

And that brings us to the second message of this passage. God's word will always prevail, but God's ways will often be puzzling.

His sure path for us may indeed greatly perplex us at times. God's promise did not fail Paul and all were safely brought to land in this island of Malta but not noticed not through some miraculous calming of the storm.

Verses 27 to 44 tell of a long and arduous battling away with the elements battling against almost a mutiny by the crew. Something that had to be put down by the soldiers battling against a ship break on the reef battling against the waves and having to actually swim for the shore.

And therein lies a big question doesn't it? It's what David Gooding says in his book in his comments on this chapter. If Paul was God's appointed apostle and ambassador sent to represent the gospel of God's own son to the highest authority on earth the Roman emperor and if God is the God who created nature who as the psalmist says rules over the surging sea and when its waves mount up stills them then why did God's kingly rule not order the Mediterranean to give his ambassador a smoother passage instead of torturing him for two weeks and throwing him up like a half drowned rat on the beach why did it have to be that way that's a question that we often find ourselves asking don't we the missionary family working as ambassadors for Jesus in a hostile

[17:50] Muslim country and at a crucial time for their work and their family circumstances and their children's education the wife is diagnosed with cancer throws everything into uncertainty or the pastor who's seeing a lot of blessing in an inner city church with all sorts of opportunities among all kinds of people from different countries many of them asylum seekers from countries very hostile to the gospel and yet open to the gospel and able here to hear the gospel and much fruit going on in that work and yet first his children and then his wife plagued by ill health and very serious illness why or the Christian workers who come all the way to Europe from a country in Asia to attend a vital conference but they do get stuck in the ash cloud and can't get there and instead of a one hour journey on the plane from Germany to Sweden it's two days of grueling travel across land in a tatty old van and various buses that's just three of the things that we were praying about this very Wednesday in our church prayer meeting but why

Lord why why for your servants with these tasks in your service is it so hard at times indeed why is it hard so often for all of us as Christians as we seek to follow you why doesn't the Lord of earth and sky and sea just arrange things so that our lives could be much smoother much easier after all surely that would be much better for God surely it would be much much better if God really wants a strategy that will grow his church if he really wants things to be more impressive for him to just pave the way like that for his servants why doesn't he do it don't you find yourself thinking that or even praying that and yet what we find instead is that so often God's ways with us and with his servants are so very puzzling and the path that he leads us in is as we sang so often very very perplexing why why is it so often that way well the answer is twofold the first answer is that though we are in

Christ called yes to be citizens of a new world of the kingdom of Christ that that kingdom is not yet consummated and so until the coming of Jesus we live in a world which is both a natural world and indeed a fallen world and so in common with all other human beings we too are subject both to the laws of nature and also to the consequences of sin and evil and the curse of death and Christians don't escape do they from the laws of gravity or from the other laws of physics and the same laws which enable clever engineers to make planes fly in the air so that we can travel to all parts of the earth to spread the gospel are the same laws that will bring Christian missionaries crashing down to earth in those planes when something goes wrong in the engine and there is a crash and we shouldn't expect otherwise should we we shouldn't expect God to be constantly interrupting to bend and break the natural physical laws that hold our universe together just to make life easier for you or for me on a particular occasion if God did that the whole universe would collapse wouldn't it you might think as a missionary going to a hot country well I'm going on Christ's business surely he'll protect me from the sun I'll not need to wear sun cream or a hat well if that's what you thought you'd be a fool wouldn't you because for God to turn down the thermostat for you in your particular place would probably freeze the rest of the planet you see the very nature of our physical world means that we'll face many apparent enemies in our walk with Christ just from the natural world itself just from very nature from the way that God has made a stable universe but of course this world has more even than mere natural enemies because it is a fallen world and believers following Christ will also face many enemies because of that both the consequences of sin in our world human folly and selfishness and wickedness and also on top of that supernatural enemies our chief struggle Paul said is not against flesh and blood actually but against the spiritual forces of evil and the heavenly places that underlie all of these other things that's what he tells the

Ephesians things and so inevitably friends because as yet we only see in part because we don't yet see all things made new forever and a new heavens and a new earth God's ways for us and the path in which he calls us to walk will often greatly perplex us and it was so for Paul and it will be so for us because we still live in a natural world subject to the laws of nature that God has created and in a fallen world subject to the consequences of sin the first thing the second is this that the Bible actually gives us a deeper reason and insight it tells us that as Christians our ways are often dark and perplexing because we are those who are called to follow a crucifixion Saviour and to the path Jesus leads us though it may perplex us it should not surprise us remember what

[23:53] Paul wrote from prison later on to the church at Philippi to know Christ he says and to know the power of his resurrection is to be given power to do what to share in his sufferings to become like him in his death to be granted to you he says that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake we follow a crucified Saviour and Christ's servants he's telling us are called to the mighty privilege of sharing in Christ's work and his work is a redemptive work it's a saving work but that work was a suffering work God he's telling the real question that we're asking when we ask Lord why do things have to be so hard for your people why are we often called to serve this way the real question we're asking that lies behind that is this why did

God's saving work of lost human beings have to be so hard so costly only through the death of his son who was a servant who gave his life as a ransom for many we are servants of the crucified Saviour who was a servant of all and he calls us to serve in his way death worked in our Saviour Jesus Christ that life might work in us and Paul knew that his calling and indeed our calling as witnesses for Jesus is a call to follow and serve in that same pattern the pattern of Jesus that's why he writes to the Corinthians for we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus sake so that the life of Jesus may be manifest in our mortal flesh death is at work in us he says but life in you and that brothers and sisters is the reason why your life and my life and the life of all who serve the Lord

Jesus and walk in his way is not going to be a life of ease and serenity it's going to be one of effort and sweat it's often going to appear far more cursed than charmed it's going to appear more touched by misery than by magic more touched by poverty than by prosperity more touched often by agony than by ecstasy because the deepest truth is this that the message of Christ crucified can only be passed on effectively by crucified men and women by those whose lives are shaped by Gethsemane and by Golgotha and who often therefore in their very own experience share the deep and the distressing perplexity and darkness and feeling of forsakenness by God himself even though it's in and through that very distress and darkness that life and glory eternal is being forged so yes for us as for Paul God's ways will often be puzzling this path will often be deeply perplexing even deeply painful but as one of the Puritans said out of the presses of pain cometh the soul's best wine because we follow a crucified saviour and so the third thing that Luke wants us to learn in this passage is this whatever our circumstances however perplexing God's work will always be possible his sure presence with us will always bring blessing and that's true always however far off course we may feel that the ill winds of life have blown us however unplanned however unforeseen however trying and frustrating our circumstances are this was a great setback for Paul there were months of his precious time being wasted he was blown totally off course and blown into near disaster and yet see how

Paul's focus was not lost at all just as he can write to the Philippians that being imprisoned rather was for the furtherance of the gospel so also he shows here that being shipwrecked even can be for the furtherance of the gospel just look at what trusting God's promised word meant for Paul in the way he reacted to this situation first of all he's not so focused on the problems that his life lost all practicality some Christians are it said so heavenly minded they're no earthly use absolutely not the apostle Paul look how practical and realistic he is verse 26 we've got to get ourselves run aground somewhere he says verse 31 we've got to keep these sailors on board if we're going to survive verse 33 we've got to keep our strength up and eat food if we're going to survive what a blessing to have somebody so sane and confident as that in a crisis isn't it and Paul was that and the presence of Christ that was real in his experience turned out to be a blessing for that whole ship's company you know sometimes

[29:43] God puts us in crisis situations just to be a blessing to those who are around about us to see Christian faith practically at work in the midst to remember that next time you find yourself in a crisis at work or wherever it might be and look at verse 35 Paul's not so focused on the disaster that he loses all real perspective on life a believer should be getting on with give thanks in all circumstances that's what he wrote to the Thessalonians and that's exactly what he does here Lord we thank you for this good and satisfying food at this difficult time and everybody else was encouraged and ate you see real faith comes into its own in a crisis it's very revealing because a crisis is what reveals isn't it our real priorities what really matters to us in life I think of a couple I knew who had been in Christian ministry for many many years but an illness in one of them led to total panic total preoccupation they lost all sense of everything else the whole world focused in on their own personal health issues all they could talk about all they could speak to others about and I recall the word that a sane older

Christian had an observation that they made to me about that person sometime before it really seems to be the sort of person about whom the whole world seems to revolve in his mind and alas that crisis just revealed that comment to be absolutely true but I think by total contrast of another couple I've known all my life and she was the greatest worrier this world has ever known she worried about everything endlessly unnecessarily but when her husband was diagnosed with incurable cancer and one might have expected intense focused worry constantly it was quite the reverse she met that diagnosis with a serenity and acceptance that was just a wonder to behold and that was an evidence of somebody's natural personality traits being totally overcome by the strength of real Christian faith in their hearts never losing the real perspective on life of what

Christian life really is all about it was a great and mighty witness to many in the midst of that crisis that was Paul here he was able to give thanks even in these circumstances and Christ's presence with him in the midst of it all showing him to be more than conqueror saved that company on board that ship it's the very reverse isn't it of the story of Jonah to have Paul on board the ship was their salvation quite the opposite with Jonah they had to throw him overboard to be saved be the kind of Christian that people want on board in a crisis not to be rid of to solve their crisis it was abundantly clear to all of them wasn't it that here was a man who was in touch with the living God here was a man to listen to in a crisis as the centurion indeed did and the result was the saving of many lives what if

God should sometimes ask us to pass through great storms so that we should become more and more clearly the kind of people that people will instinctively be willing to listen to because the presence of Jesus is so obviously with us in such a way in such a way that can often only be forged through living faithfully through that kind of crisis have you ever thought that the storms that God might be asking you to pass through in your life at the moment is God's way of making you into a steadfast witness that people will simply have to take seriously when you speak about spiritual things somebody was telling me just this week they'd been at a meeting about voluntary euthanasia and the bill that's to come before the Scottish Parliament and they told of the deeply moving and powerful testimony of somebody who spoke against that somebody who had been paralysed and greatly handicapped right from the earliest years of their life and yet through that had achieved the most extraordinary things intellectually and in all kinds of other ways you see their witness was authenticated so deeply and obviously by their experience the Apostle

James understood that that's why he opens his letter like this count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of all kinds for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and people listen to steadfast Christian people in the midst of a crisis someone who doesn't lose perspective on the whole of their life and finally Paul was not so preoccupied with his delay and the disappointment to his own personal plan that he forgot all sense of purpose in his missionary calling the verses we read in chapter 28 tell us of him landing on Malta and of course Paul's as practical as ever he's gathering sticks for the fire and what do you know a poisonous snake attaches to his arm isn't that just the last straw wouldn't you feel that you've been through all of this and now a snake bites you seems that

God's adding insult to injury but no he's not in fact God is opening a door to ministry for [35:31] Paul because God clearly vindicates in the eyes of everybody this particular prisoner the superstitious Maltese people get a demonstration in a language that they in their pagan ignorance can understand they're told no this is a special man of God this is a man to be reckoned with this is a man to be listened to and that's how Paul was able to be used by God as verses 7 to 10 tell us most wonderfully to bring blessing to countless people across that whole island we see a little outpouring of the wonderful kingdom blessings in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ who is their God as well as their God as well as their God of Paul so easy isn't it when our circumstances turn out to be not at all as we'd hoped or planned them to be so easy to wallow in self-pity and frustration to just wait until at last our proper plans will come together so we can go on doing God's work according to plan friends the fact is we will often find ourselves in circumstances that are far from ideal far from planned even very painful very hard very very frustrating but here's the thing Christ the Lord of glory can be at work through you even there his presence among his servants can always bring blessing even when we may feel that the circumstances are far from the Lord of glory can be at work through you even there the ones that we would have chosen in fact there are no ideal circumstances ever for doing the work of Christian witness there are only the circumstances that we find ourselves in and that God puts us in whether it's our plan or whether it's not our plan and you may find yourself at the moment or in the months to come in a very difficult job situation for example perhaps without the job that you desperately want and feel you need maybe with no job at all looks like that's going to come a lot in this year you might find yourself struggling in a very difficult marriage situation with a spouse who is very ill in body or in mind or facing addiction or it might be that your children are causing you great heartache great worry and great pain maybe you're living through the midst of the darkness of bereavement and loss or you simply feel the lack of of the partner in life that you would love to have had but never have had or the children that you would love to have had but haven't had or a whole host of circumstances that are so different from the plan for your life as you had hoped that it would stretch out and be fulfilled there might be all manner of circumstances that we think are far from ideal and very very hard but listen the mere fact of you going on faithfully living for Jesus Christ in the midst of it sharing the love of Jesus Christ with others as Paul did despite your frustrations despite your disappointments that very fact of your faithful witness can go on to bring wonderful blessings for God not the ones perhaps you'd thought of but yes the ones he has thought of so often to people and places that we would never otherwise have experienced an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ as these Maltese never would have but his sure presence with us can bring great blessing whatever our circumstances no matter where we are no matter what's happening around us whether we're where we want to be

> and doing what we want to be doing or whether we seem to be in the very opposite place God's work will always be possible for us the work of bringing the blessings of Christ through the people of Christ let me ask you are you feeling today that your journey with Jesus has been blown way off course into very choppy waters does it seem to you that the Lord is allowing a very rough passage indeed for you as his servant maybe verse 20 does sum up how things seem to be for you of late neither sun or stars for many days no small tempest up against you perhaps even all hope abandoned well friends if that is so don't stop reading at verse 20 perhaps the Lord brought you here this morning to hear the words of verse 24 clearly as Paul heard them as your word from God for today fear not fear not verse 25 take heart have faith in God no storm not even this storm that you're facing now no storm can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord and remember when the storm comes remember Acts chapter 27 remember what it tells us about Paul's God and our God yes it's true it will always be true that God's ways will often be puzzling and that our path will often greatly perplex us and even pain us at times but it's also true that God's word will always prevail that his sure promise to us in Christ will never fail us not ever and that in the midst of it even in the worst of it

God's work for you and for me will always be possible his sure presence with us can always bring blessing whether we had thought it was possible or not so fear not take heart we can have faith in God that it will be exactly as we've been told let's pray Lord in the darkness of the many storms of our lives what a comfort to know that you are there that you're speaking that you are leading and that you are with us to do your good and gracious will and purpose through even us your harassed and distressed and very weak feeling servants remind us Lord of your gracious presence and may we rejoice in it even in the midst and long for the day when we will see with our eyes the fruit of these days which have seemed so dark to us so help us to have thankful hearts and faithful bodies through Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen Amen Amen Amen on Amen All NOT on Amen Amen I have a show of Video on the according to the system and on welcome on