“Cut the Ropes”: Going All in with God

Introduction

The Text

A. Whether you’re ready for it or not, I’ve got one last sermon for us here from Acts 27.

1. As I’ve done with the last couple messages, for the sake of time, I’m not going to read to you the whole of the chapter.
2. Instead, we’ll home in on those verses that are particularly relevant for our discussion this morning. For today, that would be vv. 1-15, 27-32.

    a. So let’s read them, I’ll fill in the gaps where needed, then we’ll pray and dive in . . .

B. “ [1] And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. [2] And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. [3] The next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. [4] And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. [5] And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. [6] There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board. [7] We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. [8] Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

[9] Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, [10] saying, ‘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.’ [11] But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. [12] And because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

[13] Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. [14] But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. [15] And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along” (vv. 1-15).

1. And it carries on like this for a number of verses, until, as Luke tells us there in v. 20: “all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.”

C. But in that place of despondency, God comes with a word—first for Paul and then, through Paul, to the others on board with him: “Take heart. Do not be afraid. All will be well. No one will perish. But we’ll run aground on some island.”

1. It's a great word. And Paul believes it will be just as he has been told.

D. But a number of days later it sure seems like things are still getting worse. So we read in v. 27: " [27] When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. [28] So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. [29] And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. [30] And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, [31] Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, 'Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.' [32] Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go" (vv. 27-32).

1. There's no other option left for them now. They're in this thing together—for good or for ill. But, of course, with God piloting the ship, it will be for good.

2. Therefore, we read down in the last verse of this chapter that, through the ups-and-downs and craziness of all this, even still: "all were brought safely to land" (v. 44).

"Who You Gonna Call?"

A. The past few weeks we've been looking at the various tensions that are present here in the narrative of Acts 27 and drawing out truth from it for ourselves.

B. For this morning, I want you to notice this: When storms come into our lives, they force us towards a point of decision: namely, are we going to place our trust in the wisdom and power of man or are we going to place it in the wisdom and power of God?

1. With Halloween just passed, perhaps you'll permit me to quote from that popular song that gets at this same idea: "If there's somethin' strange in your neighborhood / Who you gonna call? (Ghostbusters!) / If there's somethin' weird, and it don't look good / Who you gonna call? (Ghostbusters!)"

    a. When the seas get stormy, when the sky turns black, when life gets hard . . . "who you gonna call?"
    b. Are you going attach your hope to man in some way, or are you going to "cut the ropes" (as we see they do here in our text) and go all in with God?

        i. Those are the two basic options that are always set before us.
        ii. And they are much in tension on our text.

C. So, for this morning, first I want to make sure we see (1) The Tension as it is present here. And then I'll draw out from it (2) The Lesson for us.

(1) The Tension

Following Julius

A. I think the best way to come at this is to follow along with the character arc of this Roman centurion in our story.

    1. If you noticed, Luke gives us his name there in v. 1: "And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius." That's our introduction to this man.

        a. It's already a bit interesting that he's named for us, as if Luke is drawing our attention to him in some way.
        b. But then it is particularly interesting to see how his own story develops along the course of this larger story, to see how he is personally changed in all of this.

B. And it seems to me we could sum up this change by saying that, through the course of these trials, this storm, he stops placing his confidence in man's brain and brawn . . . and starts placing it in God.

    1. It all culminates in this implicit command he gives to the soldiers under his charge to "cut . . . the ropes" (v. 32).

C. I should say, as we go along with him, perhaps his journey, his character arc, is to be yours as well.

    1. Perhaps what God does with him here in this text, is what God would want to do with you here today: shift your confidence, move you along from one to the other, encourage you to stop mixing your allegiances and finally "cut the ropes."

Trusting in Man

Prophets or Professionals?

A. In the beginning, we see that Julius does have a particular affinity for the Apostle Paul.

    1. As we're told in v. 3, while their first ship is put in at a port in Sidon, "Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for."

    2. But this affinity does not translate to trust in Paul nor in his God . . . at least not at first.

B. This fact really comes to the front when we get down to vv. 9-12.

    1. If you remember, because the wind had been against them for the opening part of their voyage, they're now significantly behind schedule.

        a. The winter months were upon them and the waters would soon not be safe for travel. It was time to "winter" their ship as men would do in those days and wait for the more favorable waters of spring.

C. So Paul advises them in v. 10 saying: "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." He appears to have had some sense from God on the matter.

D. But Luke continues, and now here is the critical point, v. 11: "But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said."

1. It makes sense. You and I would likely be prone to do the same.

    a. On the one side, you have this apostle, this prophet, this eccentric, religious zealot, a Jesus freak—trying to tell you how to sail.
    b. And then on the other side, you have the professionals, the guys who really know their stuff out on the sea, the guys who have been there and done it.

        i. Who would you listen to? "Sorry Paul, you may be an expert in religious stuff. But these mariners know the sea. I'm going with them."

E. And Julius wasn't alone here. All those on board seemed to feel the same, v. 12: "And because the harbor [where they were presently in Fair Havens] was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there."

1. Just to be clear: no one's thinking it's a good idea to go all the way to Rome as they may have once imagined.
2. But everyone save Paul seems to think they'll be just fine going a little further along the island of Crete to the more appealing harbor of Phoenix where they could then settle down and spend the winter.

Tainted Counsel

A. But one of the things we must admit at this point is just how tainted man's wisdom and counsel and decision-making can often be.

1. A lot of times what we think and do is influenced not just by the brute facts of the matter, but by what we want in it all.

B. And it is no different here.

1. Underneath this decision to go by most all on board, isn't just knowledge of the sea, it's a whole root system of desires.
2. It may pose as wisdom, but it's a lot more twisted up than that.

C. One of these desires is made plain right there on the surface of our text. They wanted a better harbor. The harbor in Fair Havens "was not suitable to spend the winter in," they say.

1. This would seem to indicate they had a concern for the preservation of their ship. "It will not be as sheltered here as it will be there. So let's go."

D. But, a look at NT scholar Craig Keener's masterful commentary on Acts provides us with a couple other desires that no doubt were in play under the soil of this decision.

1. The first, as you might expect, is a desire for money. Somehow money is always involved, isn't it?

    a. Well, what we must realize is that this ship they were now on was, as we see back in v. 6 was, "a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy . . . ."
    b. Keener points out, therefore, this would have been a ship transporting grain from Egypt to Rome. Some estimate that nearly a third of all grain consumed in Rome came from Egypt.
    c. And those involved in helping transport such things could make great profit for themselves.
    d. And, naturally, the more runs you could make the more money you could make. So even though they could not get all the way to Rome here. The closer they get now, the sooner they get their money when the seas open up once more.

2. But there is yet one more desire likely in play here.

    a. Keener points out that the harbor in Fair Havens wasn't just less suitable for keeping their ship secure, it was also less suitable in the sense that there wasn't as much to do in the nearby city.
    b. Sailors were notorious for spending their off days in taverns and entertaining themselves with women and the pleasures of this life.
    c. A winter in the fishing village of Fair Havens would have been quite the bore. The urban environment of Phoenix had much more to offer . . . for the flesh.

E. All of these things are likely lurking underneath their decision to push it here. You can't trust their counsel and advice the way you can trust God's. Yet they do.

    1. So off they go . . . and then nearly . . . down they go.
    2. In the words of Paul in Rom. 1:22: "Claiming to be wise, they became fools . . . ."

"Whoever Would Save His Life . . ."

A. And the result is tragic. Did you notice this? Everything they were attempting to get in their own wisdom and strength, they lose in the end.

    1. So they wanted to go to Phoenix to winter in a more suitable harbor for their ship?

        a. Well, their ship is now dashed to pieces on the rocks.

    2. So they wanted to get the wheat to Rome as quick as possible to get as much profit as possible?

        a. Well, in v. 38, what are they doing? They're "throwing out the wheat into the sea."
        b. Why? Because, they were approaching land, and they needed to get the ship as light as possible, as high in the water as possible, to avoid grounding it too far from shore.

i. As Keener notes, ironically: "The cargo, once so precious, has now become completely expendable" (3649). They just toss it into the water. "Forget about the money. I just don't want to die."

3. So they left Fair Havens for Phoenix because were hoping for a little more entertainment.

    a. Well, while this storm at sea surely wouldn't have been boring, this was likely not the kind of entertainment they had in mind, right?

B. Again, everything they were attempting to get in their own wisdom and strength, they lose in the end.

1. I think of what Jesus says in Luke 9:24: "[W]hoever would save his life will lose it . . . ."
2. But I wonder if you remember how that verse concludes? ". . . but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."

    a. And that leads us to the shift in our centurion, in our story here . . .

Trusting in God

A. Because down in vv. 27-32, Julius comes to another point of decision. And this time he doesn't dare make the same mistake.

1. He ignored Paul in the first case.
2. He will not ignore Paul now.

B. These ships would have a much smaller boat attached to them—something akin to a "lifeboat," although they were used for other things as well.

1. And, these sailors in our story, they're not making the change that Julius is, from man's wisdom and power to God's. They're still stuck in the same error, relying on themselves, trying to self-save. "We can do it."
2. So they're secretly trying to lower the ship's boat where they think they can get in and paddle their way to safety (though it's another fool's errand and they would certainly die if they attempted such a thing).
3. Nevertheless, Paul catches wind of their plot and sounds the alarm there in v. 31: "Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, 'Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.'"

C. What is the centurion to do? These soldiers are awaiting his command.

1. Should I go with Paul and his God, or not?
2. And if I go with Paul and his God, how far am I willing to go?

    a. Well, as I said, and as we see, he goes all in, v. 32: "Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat [presumably at Julius' command] and let it go [or 'let it drift away']."

i. Now, perhaps you're saying: "It doesn't take that much faith to want the sailors to remain in the boat. He needs them." That's true.
ii. But it does take faith, quite a lot of it, to remove the only other option they would have had in that storm for getting to shore.

D. So Keener concludes: "What is most significant here is the reverence that Paul now commands. All on board would recognize that the boat could be useful in ferrying people to shore should they draw near land too rugged for harboring [which they do]. By cutting off this limited hope, in obedience to Paul, Julius and, apparently . . ., his soldiers ultimately stake everything on the promise of Paul's God" (3641-42).

1. They "stake everything on the promise of Paul's God."

a. "We've tried our own wisdom, our own strength. And look at where it's gotten us.
b. Cut the ropes. All we have is Paul's God now!"

i. And, of course, Paul's God (and ours!), will come through!

E. I thought of what Jeremiah writes in Jer. 17:5-8. I think it captures the transformation of this centurion perfectly: " [5] Thus says the LORD: 'Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. [6] He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. [That is where things were going at the first. If you try to save your life in your own wisdom and strength, you lose it. But then . . .] [7] Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. [8] He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.'"

1. I love that. God doesn't just have my trust. He IS my trust.

a. This emphasizes, I think, the fact that I'm not just trusting in him alongside and among other things.
b. He's it for me. He has my fundamental allegiance. I've cut the ropes. It's Jesus or nothing.

i. That's what's pictured in our text.

F. So there's the tension: trusting man or trusting God? Now, what's the lesson?

(2) The Lesson

Three Parts

A. Well, I think there are at least three parts to the lesson God wants for us to learn in this.

1. We see that, first, he casts us into crisis; then he concedes us no compromise; and finally he carries us to the coastline.

B. Let's look at those one at a time now . . .

Part #1: God Casts Us Into Crisis

A. One of the things God does with his people is he intentionally brings us into storms to bring us to the end of ourselves.

    1. God is the one who casts us into crisis . . . in an effort to care for us.

B. We all, by nature, like to imagine ourselves wise and strong, self-sufficient, capable.

    1. To be born in sin (as we all are after Adam) is to be born insane. And, as such, we come into this world with little sense of our grave and desperate need for God.

    2. And one of the ways God helps us see it is by bringing us into storms to bring us to the end of ourselves. Because where we end, he can finally begin!

C. We see this all through Scripture. The whole storyline of redemption is peppered with magnificent examples of such a thing.

    1. I'll give you just a few of the high water marks with some of the key figures . . .

D. Think of Abraham's story.

    1. What is God doing promising a child (even a nation!) to him when he's 75 years old and his wife has been barren through the course of their whole marriage? And then he waits until Abraham is 100 to actually fulfill it.
    2. It all sounds insane to them. They can't imagine it. That's why Isaac is named Isaac which in the Hebrew means "he laughs." Because when Abraham and Sarah hear of this from God they just laugh. That could never happen.

    3. Why does God do this? He brings them to the end of their own wisdom and strength so they can finally see his. It's impossible for us, but not for you. Let's "cut the ropes." Let's go all in with him.

E. Think of David's story.

    1. The people of Israel had already tried getting a king for themselves in accordance with their own wisdom and strength. They got Saul. He was handsome and head and shoulders above the rest, literally (cf. 1 Sam. 9:2). He looked good. But it was terrible. He didn't serve the people of Israel, he exploited them.
    2. And then when Samuel comes to anoint one who will replace Saul, the people are still thinking with the flesh.

        a. They knew it would be one of the sons of Jesse, but they thought there's no way it could be the little shepherd boy David, the youngest, the smallest. So they didn't

even go get him from the field when Samuel came by. Surely it's one of these more impressive boys.

b. No. It's David. It's the one we would never expect.

3. Why does God do this? He brings them to the end of their own wisdom and strength so they can finally see his. It's impossible for us, but not for you. Let's "cut the ropes." Let's go all in with him.

F. And then, of course, as Matthew makes plain in his Gospel's genealogy, in the line of Abraham and David comes the Messiah.

1. And we would think that we've started to learn the lesson. The Messiah isn't going to come like we'd expect. He's not going fit into the box we've built for him in accordance with our own wisdom and strength.
2. But we don't get it. And we don't see him. He comes small and pathetic.

    a. He's born in a stable, laid in an animal's feeding trough. He doesn't look like a king. He looks more like a servant.
    b. And then, when he's finally hung up on that cross, condemned as a criminal, we're sure he's not the one. But he is.

        i. In his condemnation we find our redemption.

        ii. As Paul puts it in 1 Cor. 1: 18: "[T]he word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

3. But what is God doing? He's bringing us to the end of our own wisdom and strength so we can finally see his. It's impossible for us, but not for you. So let's "cut the ropes." Let's go all in with him.

G. That's the story of Abraham and David and Jesus. But now what about your story?

1. How is God doing this in your own life? Is he casting you into some crisis?

    a. Don't resent him for it. He's trying to help you.
    b. He's trying to move you along with Julius—from trusting in man to trusting in him, from losing your life to saving it.

2. I'll tell you this is precisely how I got saved. He brought me to the end of myself, so he could begin.

    a. I have no doubt he's doing that with some of you here this morning.

Part #2: God Concedes Us No Compromise

A. This is the part that really stood out for me with the whole "cut the ropes" thing.

1. Again, as Keener mentioned, that boat could have been saved for a "rainy day" so to speak, just in case we need it as we're getting closer to shore. It could be useful to have a second option, a plan B.
2. But Julius has the ropes cut and they all just watch from the deck as plan B drifts away. "We don't need it. It's God or nothing!"

B. I love that! Because I think it really confronts a particular temptation we're all prone to even after we've decided to follow Jesus.

1. Julius could have said: "Paul, I believe you and your God, but let's keep that lifeboat tethered here just in case."
2. And there are a lot of us who do the same sort of thing. "Jesus, I trust in you, but you're not my trust (in the sense we mentioned earlier). You're not the only thing I've got here. I think, overall, you're reliable. But, if you don't show up, if you don't move things along in the way I want them to go . . . I have plan B, I've got contingencies lined up, I've got a life boat or two. If you don't get me out of this mess, I can always shift to that."

C. This is the kind of thing Jesus is combatting when he says: "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). And then again just a few verses later: "[A]ny one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (v. 33).

1. This is his way of saying "cut the ropes." You're either all in . . . or you're not in.

D. He's not trying to be mean here. He's trying to help us. He knows: our compromises on this point end up compromising us.

1. You realize Abraham and Sarah had a plan B, a "lifeboat"—just in case God didn't make good on his promise to them, right?

    a. His name is Ishmael. And, if you know the story, then you know it doesn't go well. It creates all sorts of trouble for the everyone involved.

2. That's what happens. Our compromises compromise us—our life, our security, our joy. Even though, ironically, we turn to these things because we think that's what they offer us.

E. So let me ask you: Do you have any lifeboats still tethered to your ship that need to go?

1. Is there anything you're holding back from God, that you're unwilling to let go of—because, though you trust him, he's not your trust . . . and you feel the need to diversify your trust with these other options in case he doesn't steer this ship in the direction or way you'd like?

2. Even though you know the promises of God for you in Jesus, is there anything else you're looking to for your identity, your security, your joy?

F. Here are a few common lifeboats to get you pondering . . .

1. Money:

a. Yes I know God will provide for me, he owns the cattle on a thousand hills, he'll give me my daily bread.
b. But, nevertheless, just in case he doesn't, look at my bank account. I'm secure.

i. I'm kind of like that rich young ruler in the Gospel accounts. I'm trying to follow God in a lot of different ways, but I'm not ready to cut the ropes on this.

2. Work:

a. Yes I know I'm justified in Jesus and he loves me and that's enough.
b. But, nevertheless, it sure still feels good when people notice me, when people respect me, when I'm successful in what I do. The grace and love of God, that's nice. But this really gets my heart pumping. This is where I find joy.

i. I don't want to surrender it. I don't want to cut the ropes and let him have it. What if he wants me to be mediocre or behind the scenes. No. I want to be, I have to be great. I want my name in the lights!

3. Relationships:

a. Yes I know Jesus is my heavenly bridegroom. He washes me with the water of his word. He nourishes and cherishes me.
b. But, nevertheless, I really want a spouse to do that. I want a husband, I want a wife.

i. I'm not ready to cut the ropes on that and say, "Not my will but yours be done. Whether you do or don't have this for me, that's okay."
ii. That's not okay. If you don't make it happen. I will.

G. I'm telling you right now: if you're still tethering lifeboats to your ship, because it feels too scary to go all in with Jesus, then you are sabotaging your spiritual life.

1. These things we keep around because we think they will satisfy and save us . . . will sink us in the end.

H. I still remember one of these lifeboats for me. It was the relationship one.

1. I was back in college. I'd already come to Jesus. But I really wanted this relationship, I thought it would make me happy.
2. And I'd had one and I got dumped. And it messed me up.
3. And I still remember, we were supposed to go to this Christian conference together, and now she wasn't going, but there I was alone, struggling with this, frustrated with God. And this guy from the stage was challenging us. He was wondering if we were able to say: "God, I'll go anywhere, do anything, say anything, give up anything that you want me to." In other words he was calling us to "cut the ropes."

4. And I heard this and I could feel it hit my heart. I can cut the ropes on a lot of things. But I don't want to cut the ropes on this idea of marriage and a relationship. I don't want to put

that in your hands, because what if I don't like what you'll do with it? In other words: "I don't want to put it in your hands because I don't fully trust your heart."

a. That's what it's saying. That's why it's so poisoning for the spiritual life to keep those things tethered.

5. And so, by God's grace, I stood up when the speaker called us to and I said those things to God. I cut those ropes.

a. And it hurt.
b. But almost immediately back in streamed life and joy and a sense of his presence and all this stuff.

I. Of course, I hope you know, I'm not saying these things are evil in and of themselves.

1. Money is fine, work is good, relationships are a blessing.
2. But, if you're not willing to surrender it all to him, if you've got your hope tied off to some of this and you're unwilling to cut it loose for him . . . these ropes aren't going to be a lifeline for you, they're going to be a noose around your neck, they're going to strangle your soul.

J. I don't know what it is for you right now? But, if you really want to be free in Jesus, "cut the ropes"!

1. All this leads us to the last part I'd like to mention real quick . . .

Part #3: God Carries Us to the Coastline

A. Jesus doesn't ask you to cut the ropes from your lifeboats so he can kill you out at sea (that's what we fear, right?). No. He does it so he can carry us to shore.

1. If we're tied off to all these other things, there's too much drag. It's harder to get us to solid ground. That's where he's taking us.

B. That's where the story ends, right? "And so it was that all were brought safely to land" (v. 44).

1. Who "brought" them? God brought them! He carries us to the coast.

2. And if you put your trust in him today, or perhaps I should say if you will make him your trust today, you can rest assured he will carry you too!

C. There's an old hymn that was written for sailors. But it might as well have been written for you and me. I wanted to read it to you as we close now: "Jesus, Savior, pilot me / over life's tempestuous sea: / unknown waves before me roll, / hiding rocks and treach'rous shoal. / Chart and compass come from Thee: / Jesus, Savior, pilot me.

As a mother stills her child, / Thou canst hush the ocean wild; / boist'rous waves obey Thy will / when Thou say'st to them, 'Be still!' / Wondrous Sov'reign of the sea, / Jesus, Savior, pilot me.

When at last I near the shore, / and the fearful breakers roar / [between] me and the peaceful rest, / then, while leaning on Thy breast, / may I hear Thee say to me, / 'Fear not, I will pilot thee'" (Edward Hopper, 1871).