

**If God is Sovereign**  
**Acts 27:27–44**  
**July 31, 2022**

In the book of Acts, a few events are described in significant detail. Though this is a somewhat arbitrary number, I took a few moments this week to see which events take up over 40 verses of real estate in Acts. For example, Pentecost, Peter’s Pentecost sermon, and the description of the church formed on that day takes up 48 verses of Acts 2. In Acts 7, Stephen’s speech and his martyrdom takes up 60 verses. In Acts 10, Cornelius’s vision, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles, and Peter’s report back to the Jerusalem church takes up 66 verses. Each of those events surpass the 40–verse threshold. Events that Luke uses *less* than 40 verses to describe include the Ascension, Saul’s conversion in Acts 9, the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, all the speeches made by Paul, and *every* other event we’ve studied in the book of Acts.

As I said, 40 verses was an arbitrary number. And the length of a description certainly does *not* mean something is more or less important. Yet, if we’re looking at verse count alone, coming in fourth place—behind Pentecost, Stephen’s martyrdom, and the narrative surrounding Cornelius—is *this* story we just read about Paul’s seafaring journey to Rome. Luke uses 44 verses to detail this event. Since it comes toward the conclusion of the book, and is so lengthy, many have wondered what Luke’s purpose was. Why devote so much space to this story?

To answer that question, at least one has contended that the entire episode is something of an allegory. A nineteenth-century preacher taught that the ship pictured the church. The voyage is the history of that church, from its “pristine perfection” in Jerusalem at Pentecost (Acts 2), through storm after storm (Acts 3–26), and finally to its moral and spiritual wreck in Rome (Acts 27), which he said was, of course, the Roman Catholic Church. The characters on the boat represent something, the wheat thrown into the sea represents something, and on that preacher goes. I’m guessing he reasoned, “Luke describes it in detail. I don’t immediately see the point. So let’s make *every* detail mean something.”

John Stott describes that preacher’s allegory, dismisses it, and then says, “What, then, is the major lesson we are intended to learn from Acts 27 and 28? It concerns the providence of God.”<sup>1</sup> We often say “Acts is about this, this, or this,” but what if one of Luke’s main purposes in the book of Acts is to convince us and remind us repeatedly that God is sovereign? Luke gave us the table of contents for the book in Acts 1:8, where Jesus said, “This will happen.” Then in Acts 2–28, it does. A number of other times in the book, Jesus or an angel shows up and tells someone, “This will happen.” And then it does. I know that most of you believe God is the Sovereign Ruler, that His providence orders every event, that He’s not playing cosmic goalie, and that there is no maverick molecule.<sup>2</sup> You believe that; and you believe it deeply. I pray that, in this shipwreck, we all are reminded of it yet again. Maybe this week you need to hear it for the same reason you did last time. Or maybe you need to hear it for a brand–new reason. My three points assume the sovereignty of God; and they challenge us to live in light of it. Note, first:

**1. If God is sovereign, we don’t have to maneuver.**

When I say, “maneuver,” I mean the use of the word that implies manipulating something or someone in order to achieve a particular end. You want something to happen. It looks like it won’t. So, you take matters into your own hands. That’s what we’ll see the sailors do.

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST, 401.

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Sproul’s language.

But, first, a quick review. Way back in chapter 19, Luke wrote, **Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome.”** Then, a lot happens. Paul goes to Jerusalem, but is seized and falsely accused. He’s eventually moved to Caesarea where he appears before Governor Felix. Years pass. Then, in chapter 25—before Governor Festus—Paul appeals to Caesar. So, King Agrippa and Festus quote, “send” him to Rome. “Send” is in quotes because back in chapter 23 Jesus told Paul, **Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also** (23:11). Agrippa and Festus were pagan pawns.

If you look at a map, between Caesarea and Rome is the Mediterranean Sea. Chris masterfully walked us through the beginning of Paul’s voyage last week. Verse 9 indicated that they waited too late in the season to embark. So, Paul warns them of the danger ahead. Does the centurion listen? Yes, he listens to the quote, “captain” of the ship (v. 11). He does *not* listen to Paul. A violent wind rushes upon them (v. 14). Because they can’t fight it they allow the ship to be driven along by it (v. 15). The storm is so intense that neither sun nor stars appear for many days. As we might, many gradually abandon hope (v. 20). Until verse 22, when Paul speaks, **I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, saying, “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.”**

The assurance Jesus made Paul is reiterated. Chapter 23: **You must witness at Rome.** Chapter 27, in the midst of a stormy sea, **You must stand before Caesar.** After that vision, Paul tells those on the ship, v. 25, **Keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told.** Why does Luke include this story of the shipwreck? Maybe it’s for *that* verse alone. Can we say what Paul did, that we believe it will turn out exactly as we have been told?

Easier said than done, especially when what we see seems to imply the opposite. That’s precisely what happens in our text. Verse 27: **But when the fourteenth night came, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors began to surmise that they were approaching some land.** In seemingly *calm* sea waters, the drift is unyielding. You go out on a clear summer day, swim a bit, look up, and you’ve moved down the coast. What about the drift in a storm where you don’t see the sun for days? You can drift a long way. After 14 days, the sailors sense something that tells them they’re approaching land, maybe they hear waves crashing on rock.<sup>3</sup> By the way, drifting one mile an hour in a storm of this magnitude is far from unreasonable. So, from where they started geographically, drifting 30 something miles a day for 13 days is right at the distance of an island called Malta.<sup>4</sup>

But these sailors don’t know that quite yet. They instead surmise that they were approaching land. So what do they do? Verse 28: **They took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found it to be fifteen fathoms.** To explain, they had weighted lines that they lowered to determine the depth of the water beneath them. As they’re bringing up these lines, they no longer surmise; they know they’re approaching the shallow end. In a massive uncontrollable ship, they’re hurtling toward land. Verse 29: **Fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern.** This is you looking down at your radio, and looking back up to see red lights on the back of a Mack Truck, and slamming on your brakes. To compound the fear, all this is happening—without headlights—in the dark night of a storm. Verse 29 goes on to say, **they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak.** The storm had been terrifying, surely. But now they’re hearing waves crash

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<sup>3</sup> Eckhard Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 1043.

<sup>4</sup> Schnabel, 1043.

against rocks, sea foam splashing higher than the mast of their ship. And if the anchors don't hold, or the storm picks up, one of those crashing waves will include them. And because it's dark, they might not even see it coming.

It's doubtful that anyone knew the danger that faced them all more than the sailors did. So, what are they going to do? They're going to maneuver. Verse 30: **But as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship and had let down the ship's boat into the sea, on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors from the bow.** You can see it, right? (Loud) "Guys, we know what we're doing. We'll let out the anchors in the back." (Whispers) "Hey, lower the lifeboat."

Didn't Paul just tell them what would happen? The God to whom he belongs said, **God has granted you all those who are sailing with you** (v. 24). The promise was not, "You'll survive if you jump in the dinghy." Back in verse 26, Paul said, **we (WE) must run aground on a certain island.** Clearly the sailors don't trust the predictions of Paul,<sup>5</sup> which also means they don't trust the providence of the God to whom Paul belongs.

Paul continues to believe what God said, **that it will turn out exactly as I have been told.** And, seeing the sailors maneuver, he calls upon others to believe. Verse 31: **Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved."** They were all in this *together*. The "we" of verse 26 is important. The "all those" of verse 24 is important too, **God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.**

Importantly, the promise was for those in the ship, not for those in the life boat. It might seem that Paul is only saving his own neck, but he's actually saving the lives of those trying to escape. The centurion didn't believe Paul in last week's text; he seems to have learned his lesson. Verse 32: **Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it fall away.**

The sailors knew what God had said. Yet, they maneuvered. We do this sometimes. We know what we're supposed to do, but we panic. The night is dark. The waves billow. I must do something.

A few years back, I looked out my office window toward Germantown Road and a tractor trailer was jackknifed in our front yard, right in front of that neighborhood entrance. He'd been coming from Winchester and apparently missed a turn. He saw that extra concrete, panicked, and thought he'd turn around right there. Of course, there's not enough turn radius to pull that off, so he ends up down in the ditch in our front yard, stuck. Germantown Road was shut down for hours. They had to tow him out. I'd be surprised if the driver kept his job. But what has always stuck out to me about that day is that all he had to do was pull into the South Woods parking lot and he could've easily looped around. Instead, he panicked and maneuvered.

That's what the sailors did. When we fail to believe God's promises, sovereignty, and purposes, we do it too. Does your life say you believe what God says? You don't have to neglect your family to advance your career. You don't have to run down that other person to feel better about yourself. You don't have to be unethical in business to succeed. You don't have to indulge in that sin to make yourself feel better. You don't have to punish that person when they wrong you. You don't have to lie on that form to pad your bank statement. You don't have to do the wrong thing to get the right thing.

If God isn't sovereign, yes, you need to maneuver. In fact, it all depends on you. I'm not sure why you're even sitting here. You've got stuff to do. But if He *is* sovereign, you don't have to maneuver.

## 2. If God is sovereign, we can live like He is.

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Keener, *Acts*, NCBC, 606; Schnabel, 1044.

Does “not maneuvering” mean we’re totally passive? No, it doesn’t. Paul acted. He even went to the captain and said, “Here’s what God promised. They can’t do *that*.”

Paul deeply affirmed the sovereignty of God. He wrote Ephesians 1; he wrote Romans 9. Did that doctrine affect how he lived? The book of Acts answers that question loudly. He walked thousands of miles, endured beating after beating, to tell people about the gospel. He knew the journey to Rome would be treacherous. But God told him to go, and that sovereign God said he’d make it (23:11). So Paul appealed to Caesar. The sovereignty and providence of God is not only something we revel in—rest in—it’s one of the most applicable categories of thought ever considered.

And in these moments, he’s not only believing and living as if God continues to rule—he’s helping others do so. Verse 33: **Until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing.”** Why haven’t they been eating? We’re introduced to this aspect of the trip back in verse 21: **When they had gone a long time without food.** I don’t think that verse is necessarily disconnected from the the previous one, v. 20, **from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.** Little by little they’d been giving up hope. Who wouldn’t? It’s likely they’d dropped those four anchors one at a time. And one at a time the boat kept moving.

In verse 33, another clue to the reason for the fast is given, that Paul was repeatedly encouraging them to eat **until the day was about to dawn.** Throughout the night, they’re wide awake, knowing these might be their final moments. As they’re not sleeping, what are they doing? Paul links the not eating to something else, it seems. Verse 33: **Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating.**

Why aren’t they eating? In part because they’re trying to survive. They’ve not had an idle moment. If your shipmate is grabbing a bucket and throwing water out, you don’t slip off to grab a sandwich. For two weeks now they’ve been riddled with near-death anxiety. Is this the moment we die? Do we have 15 minutes left? If you’ve ever been this stressed, your stomach in knots, survival instincts pumping adrenaline through your veins, food isn’t always foremost in your mind. They’re not eating, in part, because they are **constantly watching.**<sup>6</sup> That seems to be the primary reason. Surely some of them didn’t eat because they were seasick. Maybe others because they were trying to conserve resources.<sup>7</sup>

Whether they hadn’t eaten because of mortal anxiety, seasickness, or in an effort to conserve food, Paul’s telling them to eat now. Verse 34: **Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation.** They’re trying to survive, but they won’t if they don’t eventually eat.

The theological common sense of Paul is refreshing. As is the way he weds the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. Concerning human responsibility, he knows they might need energy for the last push, if there’s a swim for example. And they certainly needed encouragement in the present.<sup>8</sup> Paul’s not a gnostic, believing the physical has nothing to do with the spiritual.

Concerning sovereignty, he’s not worried about them needing to conserve resources anymore. God said the ship would land. They now approach it. In essence, “The island is right there. We can and should eat.” How do we know this is what he was thinking? Note how he ties his instruction to eat with the assurance of God. The end of verse 34: **this is for your preservation, for not a hair from the head of any of you will perish.** The Sovereign God who works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1) can land a ship on an island in the Mediterranean.

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<sup>6</sup> Schnabel, 1041, and Keener, 607, both point to anxiety as a reason for the fast.

<sup>7</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul*, 380.

<sup>8</sup> Being “hangry” is a real thing.

Paul believes what God says. Verse 25 again: **I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told.** Because of that, he tells the anxiety-ridden that it *doesn't* depend on them. They can stop watching long enough to eat. In fact, for their long-term good, it'd be best that they did.

What normal provision of the Lord have you abandoned in the middle of difficulty? For example, if no one has told you, rest is not a-spiritual. Laziness and idleness are warned against, sure, but not rest in toto. It might seem that the demands are such that you can't stop, ever. I need more on my Google calendar. I need to stay up later, get up earlier, answer that immediately, and on we go. The demands will *never* stop. Sometimes our unwillingness to rest is a manifestation of unbelief. And if the physical and spiritual are connected—and they are unless we're heretics—then the effects of beating our bodies—or, conversely, ignoring our bodies—will have spiritual effects. So, what's that mean? If Paul stops to eat on a storm-tossed, battered ship, then you can turn off your phone. You can take a day off. You can take a nap. You can enjoy a meal with people you love. Further, it might be that when things are challenging, we need to lean into those ordinary gifts more. If God is sovereign, we can live like He is.<sup>9</sup>

Still, Paul's notion had to be an insane proposition. The winds blow. The ship is battered. They're all freezing, wet, and tired. So Paul goes first, modeling trust in God before both believer and unbeliever. Verse 35: **Having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all, and he broke it and began to eat.** One of our church members told me this week that he met with a neighbor going through an intense trial. The church member said, "Can I pray for you?" The neighbor responded, "No. Do not pray." The church member responded, and I loved this, "Ok, I'll pray silently then." In other words, you don't want to hear me pray for you; I'll respect that. But I'm praying for you. That church member attempted to live out the gospel in front of a hard heart.

That's what Paul was doing too. These prisoners were not white-collar tax evaders. They were on their way to Rome to die, some of them in the Roman Coliseum.<sup>10</sup> These are rough, pagan, evil characters in a highly stressful environment. Yet, Paul's not merely concerned for their physical well-being, or even his own. In the middle of the storm, **in the presence of all**, Luke writes, Paul gives thanks to God. What did Paul say on that ship? He knew Psalm 107:24: **They have seen the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep. For He spoke and raised up a stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They rose up to the heavens, they went down to the depths; their soul melted away in their misery. They reeled and staggered like a drunken man, and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distresses.** In his giving of thanks, did Paul point them to Christ, the One that slept in a storm? The One that told the sea to hush? The One that died and rose so they need not fear death?

Paul gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then, he took bread, broke it, and began to eat.<sup>11</sup> What happened? Verse 36: **All of them were encouraged and they themselves also took food.** They are still on a ship in the middle of a storm, but they were encouraged. **All of them.** Did this include the sailors that had attempted to escape moments before? The prisoners? It seems so. Luke tells us what "all" means. Verse 37: **All of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons.** The Lord's used Paul to get everyone on the same page. Verse 38: **When they had eaten enough, they began to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea.**

This is how we know the situation remains precarious. To survive, they needed to lighten the ship. Again, the sovereign promise of God that all 276 would survive *did* not mean they couldn't or shouldn't do sensible things. But Paul lived, and encouraged others to live, as if the One that spoke to him was sovereign.

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<sup>9</sup> As Chris said last week, "The Captain of this troubled ship 2,000 years ago is the Lord of our unpredictable voyage." See "Trusting What God has Promised," here: <https://subspla.sh/hqn73f2>

<sup>10</sup> Keener, 610.

<sup>11</sup> I do not think this is the Lord's Supper, for the record. Nor did anyone I read. See Stott, 392.

### 3. If God is sovereign, everything He says will come true.

Verse 39: **When day came, they could not recognize the land; but they did observe a bay with a beach, and they resolved to drive the ship onto it if they could.** If this were a film, after the minor key drone of weeks, Hans Zimmer's score might switch to the major key. The cellos and violins would bow triumphant notes. The French Horns would blast. Why? Because the sun rose. And they'd seen land. A beach! And when they did, they likely thought, "This is our opportunity."<sup>12</sup> So, they cut the anchors loose. Verse 40: **And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea.** Then, they unbound the rudders and raised the sail. Verse 40b: **while at the same time they were loosening the ropes of the rudders; and hoisting the foresail to the wind, they were heading for the beach.** You've seen films or read stories where men and women crawl onto the beach and kiss the sand. This moment seems to be imminent.

Not yet. Verse 41: **But striking a reef where two seas met, they ran the vessel aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern began to be broken up by the force of the waves.** Though they saw a beach, we should not think this is the Gulf Coast on a calm Saturday. The storm had not abated. Having cut the anchors and raised the sail, they were headed toward the bay full bore. They were going so fast that when they hit a reef the front of the ship stuck and remained immovable. The waves were so intense that the ship's being destroyed.

Remember back in Acts 16 when Paul and Silas escaped from prison and the guard's immediate reflex was to harm himself? That's because a guard would receive the punishment of the escaped prisoner.<sup>13</sup> So what do these soldiers plan to do? They're closer to the island; the ship is breaking up. Verse 42: **The soldiers plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none of them would swim away and escape.** Surely this would be easy. The prisoners are bound. The soldiers have weapons.

But what had God said to Paul? Verse 24: **God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.** The soldiers plot, but it's subplot. Verse 43: **but the centurion, wanting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land (Good thing they ate!), and the rest should follow, some on planks, and others on various things from the ship.** And 44 verses later, the tale of Paul's ship voyage comes to a close, simply and beautifully, **and so it happened that they all were brought safely to land.** If God is sovereign, everything He says will come true.

### Conclusion

Luke takes up significant real estate in the book of Acts to describe this voyage in detail. He does so for the purpose John Stott mentioned: as a treatise on the providence of God.<sup>14</sup> And that purpose is not to be limited to Acts 27. One of Luke's main purposes in the book of Acts is to convince us and then to repeatedly remind us that God is sovereign. And that this sovereign God is the Ascended Christ, who continues to rule and reign. Why does Luke need to repeatedly remind us, tell us story after story that prove it? Because the Spirit of God knows our propensity to believe otherwise.

So, if God is sovereign, are we maneuvering, taking matters into our own hands? If God is sovereign, are we living as if it's true? That is, do we believe God that it will turn out exactly as we have been told?

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<sup>12</sup> Keener, 609.

<sup>13</sup> Schnabel, 1048.

<sup>14</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST, 401.