

Introduction:

Acts 27 is one of Luke's most vivid stories that reads like an epic ancient sea voyage. However, before we think Luke is simply treating us to an epic tale of their travels to Rome, we must remember how strategic Luke is with his use of details. John Polhill comments, "It is precisely through this extensive presentation of the story itself that the full theological impact is conveyed." (John B Polhill, Acts, p. 514). What may seem like nothing more than a vivid voyage at sea actually holds significant theology for our understanding of Christ's Kingdom. Theology that can breathe life into the weak and weary heart. We will approach this story a little different today. Rather than unpacking each verse this morning, I will summarize much of the story and primarily focus on the story arc. This is a literary device that presents a problem, follows its rising tension to a climax and resolution, and ends with a trailing action. The goal is to draw us to a main point found where the climax and resolution meet. Notice, first, how Luke sets the stage in verses 1-3, mentioning two people by name and focusing on one. Names are often given because of the familiarity with Luke's readers with the characters. Aristarchus was certainly well-known, traveling with Paul to Jerusalem in Acts 20 and mentioned by Paul as a fellow prisoner in Colossians 4:10 and fellow worker in Philemon 24. But what do we make of the centurion being named? Does this mean Julius eventually followed Christ? We can't be sure but notice how Luke draws our attention to Julius' relationship with Paul, treating him with kindness. The story arc will hinge on their relationship. Observe with me the problem and rising tension in verses 4-15, where we see,

A Warning & Raging Storm

Let the details draw you into the story. Notice how their voyage begins in verses 4-8. Luke twice describes them traveling under the lee of Cyprus and Crete, which was the side of a land mass protected from the wind. Then, after boarding a new ship at Myra, he details their difficulty multiple times before they arrive at Fair Haven, noting how "the winds were against us" and "the wind did not allow us to go further." From the outset, the voyage is a little ominous. Now, look at verses 9-11, "Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, 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.' But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. 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." The Fast being over places their travels some time after late September or early October. Traveling the Mediterranean Sea was known to be dangerous from mid-September to early November with all travel ceasing after mid-November. So, Paul, an experienced traveler, perceives danger if they continue and warns the crew. However Fair Haven, facing eastward, offered less protection from the dangerous northeastern winter winds. So, the centurion disregards Paul's warning and they put out to sea in hopes of reaching a safer harbor of Crete instead. Continue in verses 13-15, where we see all appears well at first, and the crew feeling good about their decision until a hurricane like wind strikes. A wind, known by a name that recounts their reason for not staying in Fair Haven, that they now find themselves at the mercy of. This brings us to the climax and resolution in verses 16-26, where we see,

Hope Lost & Safety Promised

Focus in on the imagery Luke records in verses 16-20. Look there with me, "Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.

When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.” The crew frantically tries to save the ship as they are driven by the wind. You can almost hear them shouting out, “support the ship, lower the gear, and toss everything we don’t need,” as the storm rages against them. Then, after not seeing any kind of light for days, they lose all hope of being saved. Does this moment sound familiar? It echoes the story of Jonah. Yet, the resolution is vastly different from that story. Look at verses 21-24, “Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, ‘Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.”’” Paul’s reminder of his warning presses them to listen now. And what is his message? Take heart because he knows everyone would be safe. How does he know this? God powerfully met him the night before. Note three things Paul emphasizes. First, he belongs to the God he worships. Second, an angel of God told him not to fear. Finally, Paul must stand before Caesar and God has granted safety to all who sail with him. Look at how he concludes in verses 25-26, “So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on some island.” Paul calls them to take heart because he trusts God’s promise, effectively calling them to do the same. Then, he practically guides them to find land. Family, take this in. When all hope was lost, God met Paul with His promise again and a promise for all who sailed with him. Where Jonah’s presence on the ship was the cause of concern, Paul’s presence was the reason for safety. Now, in every story arc, there is a trailing action that serves to drive the main point home. Verses 27-44 hold an extended trailing action, where we see,

Trust, Encouragement, and Deliverance

God’s promise stands but their troubles aren’t over. Continue in verses 27-30. They finally see land on the fourteenth night of being driven by the sea. Taking bearings as the ship moves closer to the shore, they eventually let down anchors to avoid hit the rocks and pray for the day to come. But some of the sailors secretly lower the ship’s boat down to try and escape. Look at verses 31-32, “Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, ‘Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.’ Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship’s boat and let it go.” This time, when Paul encourages the centurion and soldiers to keep everyone on the ship to be saved, they trust him and let go of the boat. Continue in verses 33-34. Recognizing their need for food after going without it during the fourteen-day struggle on the sea, Paul urges them to eat for strength and reminds them of God’s promised safety. And look at verses 35-36, “And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves.” In the midst of this storm, Paul leads them in giving thanks to God. Then, we see everyone encouraged and eating. Continue in verses 37-41. Luke shares the large number of people on board and them lightening the load by throwing the remaining wheat into the sea. Then, when day comes, they see a beach to run the ship ashore, but their troubles still aren’t over. They make arrangements for the wind to run them aground on the beach, but strike a reef, the bow gets stuck, and the surf starts to break up the stern. Will the struggle ever end? Look at verses 42-44, “The soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.” Roman law made soldiers liable for the same crimes of escaped prisoners. So, to ensure their safety, the soldiers plan to kill the prisoners lest they swim away. But the centurion stops them to save Paul. Despite another threat, Paul is protected and all 276 people make it safely to the land. God promised, and God delivered. As we consider this story arc, what truth is Luke communicating through it?

True Safety is Found in the Arms & Plans of God

When all hope was lost, Paul is met with comfort and a promise. Paul belongs to God, God had plans for him, and God granted safety to all who sailed with him. His expression of trust calls everyone to trust God with him. And as trouble continues, the sailors and soldiers try to save themselves, but the centurion trusts and protects Paul, Luke is showing that, though the storm remained, true safety was found in the arms and plans of God. Church, we need to bury this truth in our hearts. Safety drives how we live in and react to our world. It causes us to avoid certain locations, activities, and people, moves us to prioritize security measures, and even carry weapons on our person. But will these things really ensure our safety? I remember attending a memorial service for an police officer, with a sea of officers present, and the first thing out of someone's mouth was, "you will never be safer than you are right now." I don't say this to speak down on anyone, or discount the service of officers, but the real truth is you are never safer than when you are in the arms of God and walking in His plans. This is first and foremost because true safety isn't found in avoiding danger in this world. The violent storm is nothing compared to the wrath of God to be poured out for the sin of the world. When that day comes, like those with Paul on the ship, only those who are in Christ will be saved. And here is the crazy part. Salvation in that day comes because Christ absorbed the storm of God's wrath for those who trust in Him. That's the most important thing to understand about true safety. Yet, our story reminds us that safety is not always as it seems. Safety exists even when troubles abound for those in Christ. Paul says in Romans 8:35-37, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Family, nothing can ever separate you from God's loving arm. And nothing can thwart God's plans. Nothing can ever take away our true safety. Have you considered this? Even death is a place of safety for those in Christ. In fact, it might be the safest place we will ever be. How? Because, through Christ, death becomes a doorway into the presence of God forever. If we can take hold of this, it will transform our approach to life, causing fear of harm and death to dissipate, and faithful kingdom living to flourish. Now, I know this truth can be hard to see in the midst of various storms of life. The angel started by telling Paul not to be afraid. We often only understand the truth and comfort of God's providence in hindsight. But within the storms of life, we struggle to see light in the darkness. How can we train our hearts to see more clearly? Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." When you're in the storm, don't lean on your understanding of things. Instead, acknowledge God to train your heart to see the light. Instead of asking "Why me," we should ask, "Show me how you are moving God!" Corrie and Betsie ten Boom were placed in the punishment barracks at Ravensbruck after hiding Jews in their Holland home. In "The Hiding Place," Corrie writes, "Life in Ravensbruck took place on two separate levels, mutually impossible. One, the observable, external life, grew every day more horrible. The other, the life we lived with God, grew daily better, truth upon truth, glory upon glory." She describes a particularly difficult situation when they were moved to Barracks 28, with broken windows, soiled and rancid bedding, and backed up plumbing. Then, as laid down to sleep, Corrie felt something pinch her leg and cried out "Fleas! Betsie, the place is swarming with them...how can we live in such a place!" Betsie immediately said, "Show us how. Show us how." It took a moment for Corrie to realize Betsie was praying, and then Betsie excitedly said, "He's given us the answer! Before we asked, as He always does! In the Bible this morning. Where was it? Read that part again!" Corrie proceeded to read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." And Betsie said, "that's it, give thanks in all circumstances," then led them through prayers of thanksgiving, ending by thanking God for the fleas. Corrie goes on to describe the sweetest worship services with a large group of women that were never interrupted by the guards. Later, they discovered why. The guards wouldn't come into the barracks because of the fleas. Betsie modeled what not leaning on your own understanding looks like. She acknowledged God and they discovered God was powerfully at work.

Whether trials come as discipline for our rebellion, the enemy's attacks, or to carry forward God's plan, we can rest assured that He is working over and through all things for our greatest good. As C.S. Lewis says, "God walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate. The real labour is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake." (C. S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer, p. 75). Will we come and remain awake? Will we trust in our understanding, or acknowledge God in all our ways? Will we trust that true safety is found in the arms and plans of God?

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes for our time of response, can I end by sharing my heart with you...