

MBC – 11/8/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson
“A Shipwreck and the Sovereignty of God”
 Acts 27

Acts 27 – the amazing story of the sea voyage that finally brought Paul to Rome, where the Book of Acts will end. The overarching theme of this shipwreck story is the sovereignty of God: God had a purpose for Paul—

- Acts 27:24 An angel of God says: ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’

“Paul, in spite all appearances to the contrary, you will make it to Rome to witness to Caesar, and everyone else on the ship is going to make it through alive too – all 276 of them.”

*It’s interesting that just a few years later, Josephus was on a ship of 600 passengers, in the same sea. A storm came up and sank the ship and only 80 people survived. But *everyone* on Paul’s ship survived because they got in on the grace and protection God was showing Paul!

Absolutely *nothing* could thwart God’s purpose because “the counsel of the Lord will stand” (Pro.19.21). Amen? And this has been the theme of Acts, hasn’t it? In ch.1 Jesus says: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and *you will be* my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And these words came to pass because “*The counsel of the Lord will stand!*”

Again and again the Apostles and Paul are in danger for their lives: in prison, sentenced to death, surrounded by angry mobs, stoned and left for dead. But the Gospel continued to spread and bear fruit – thousands are saved, everywhere the Gospel goes.

- Stephen is the best example, back in ch.7: He gave his life to bearing witness of the Lord Jesus, and he was executed. But out of his death, the Gospel triumphed and spread to Samaria, all of Judea, and ultimately to the ends of the earth – I believe God used Stephen’s witness and martyrdom in converting Paul.

And here, at the end of this Book, Paul is on a ship that was ripped to pieces, but God spared him so that he could bear witness. He was still a prisoner in chains when he arrived in Rome, but the Gospel had triumphed – and Paul is still witnessing as the Book closes, even though he is still under arrest.

- Beloved, no matter what pestilence strikes, no matter what fire consumes – and no matter who our President might be, Jesus is building His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it!

But Acts chapter 27 shows us that God's good sovereign plan for His children *often* includes suffering, pain, detours, and delays. It's amazing to me how much suffering God ordained for Paul in his ministry. A few years *before* this shipwreck, Paul wrote about what he had *already* been through for the sake of the Gospel--

- 2 Corinthians 11:23–28 Paul is comparing himself to false teachers: (I've been through) far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

All of this happened to Paul *before* he boarded this ill-fated ship. But in Paul's life and in our lives, we *also* see that God's *richest* blessings often come to us, brilliantly disguised as miserable trials! So don't judge the end of the story by what's happening in the middle of the story. . . Now let's look at it—

I. The voyage begins.

Look at v.1: "And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy." Luke was a passenger on this wild ride, and he loved telling this story in vivid detail!

- In 1848, a Scotsman named James Smith published a book entitled "*The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul.*" He had studied the weather patterns and the navigational methods of sailors in the first century, and actually lived on the island of Malta while writing his book. His conclusion was that Luke's account was written by an eyewitness who nevertheless was a landlubber and not a professional seaman – that's Luke, he's a doctor and an historian – but not a sailor! "No sailor would have written in a style so little like that of a sailor; but no man not a sailor could have written a narrative of a sea voyage so consistent in all its parts, unless from actual observation!" V.1—
- ¹And 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. ²And 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.

Paul was on this ship with other prisoners who were very likely condemned to death and were being sent to Rome to supply human victims for the gladiator games. Paul is a Roman citizen, and still hasn't been convicted of any crime, so he is treated better than these other prisoners,

and even allowed to take a couple friends along: Luke, and Aristarchus, who has been with Paul since the riot in Ephesus back in ch.19, and he will stay with Paul through his house arrest.

The centurion in charge of the prisoners is a man named Julius, who outranks the captain on this trip because this a royal merchant ship which was also transporting wheat to Rome. A centurion had command of 100 soldiers, and in the NT, centurions are always portrayed as pretty good guys. Julius is a good guy too and treated Paul well.

- ³The next day we put in at Sidon. (This was only 75 miles to the north, but they made a stop here either to load or unload cargo – probably wheat.) And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for.

Now do you see that Paul was already earning the respect of Julian? This man was responsible for his prisoners. He would forfeit his life if one of them escaped, and yet, he trusted Paul enough to allow him to go ashore at Sidon so he could visit with his Christian friends there. It must have been the way Paul carried himself, the way he talked, and the way he treated other people. And notice how precious fellowship with other believers was to Paul! If he could grab a few hours, he went for it.

- ⁴And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus – (facing away from the prevailing winds), because the winds were against us. ⁵And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. ⁶There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board.

So they hugged the coastline until they made it to Myra (look on your map). This ship is big enough to hold 276 passengers, but it wasn't made for heading out on the open sea, so they docked at Myra and put all the cargo and prisoners on a larger ship that could sail all the way to Rome – don't you hate it when you can't get a non-stop?—

And this is where things start to get rough.

II. Off course.

- ⁷We sailed slowly for a number of days (so they are losing time already) 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. ⁸Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

So they have landed on the south side of the island of Crete – that's where Titus pastored a church. And they had to make a crucial decision—

- ⁹Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, ¹⁰saying, “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.”

You need to know that we know exactly what the year is: It’s 59 A.D., and we know that because we know from other historical records what year Felix was recalled to Rome and replaced with Festus. And we know exactly what time of year it is because Luke says that the Fast was already over – he is referring to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In A.D. 59, that occurred on October the 5th. So we are looking at maybe mid-October, which was considered to be a dangerous time to set out on the open sea. By mid-November, such a trip was unthinkable. So Paul’s suggestion was that they should just stay put for the winter, and resume their trip in February when the weather improved.

*Notice Paul’s leadership here! He has some chutzpah to put in his 2 cents worth – but he has already been on at least 11 sea voyages already in the Book of Acts, and sailed over 3,000 miles, so he’s no novice. Now he’s only giving his opinion here – I want you to see this – because later, he gets a word from the Lord that no lives will be lost. Paul was not inerrant when he was giving his opinion!

- ¹¹But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said.

“Thank you Paul, but when we want your opinion, we will ask you for it!” I kinda think that’s what Peter thought when Jesus the carpenter would give him advice on how to fish! So what did these men decide?—

- ¹²And 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.

So they decided to make the short trip to the west side of Crete – only about 30 miles – because it had a safer harbor to spend the winter—

- ¹³Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore.

They set sail, and the winds were great. It should only have taken them a few hours to make it to Phoenix, they could dock and spend the winter there. Paul could preach at Titus’ church and go to their Christmas service. It would have been great. But instead, all hell broke loose—

III. The perfect storm.

- ¹⁴But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. ¹⁵And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. ¹⁶Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, (they are blown 25 miles south, way off course) we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat.

Luke uses the word for *typhoon* here. These are hurricane force winds. This was a dreaded “nor-easter” storm. Even seasoned sailors were terrified. Luke implies that he helped to get the ship's lifeboat on board. That was the small lifeboat they would use to make trips to shore – it was probably filled with water, so Luke got some blisters hauling this on board—

- ¹⁷After 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.

This was called *frapping*: they ran cables under the ship and then winched them tight to literally hold the hull of the ship together. They lowered the gear – that probably means that they took down the main sail. This was because they were afraid of wrecking on a dangerous sandbar called the *Syrtis* – it was a graveyard for ships. But it was 400 miles south, off the North African coast! This is how afraid they were. They had lost control of their ship—

- ¹⁸Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. ¹⁹And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.

They were trying to lighten the ship. The cargo was probably most of the grain they were transporting – so there goes all their profit for this voyage – and the ship's tackle was all but the most essential equipment needed to sail the ship effectively—

- ²⁰When 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.

IV. Paul gives hope.

Imagine what they were feeling. The only means of navigation in those days was using the stars, so they had no idea where they were or where they were going. All hope was lost. They just want to survive, if possible. But it's at this point that Paul speaks up again to encourage them—

- ²¹Since 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. (That's a not-so-subtle “I told you so.”) ²²Yet now I urge you to take heart (be of good cheer), for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.

Remember earlier in v.10, Paul gave his *opinion* that they *were* going to lose some people, but now he tells them as a fact: the ship will be lost, but none of them will die. He speaks with authority because he received a divine revelation—

- ²³For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ ²⁵So *take heart*, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶But we must run aground on some island.” (Good news and some bad news!)

Think about this: Paul is probably one of only 3 Christians on that ship – the other two are Aristarchus and Luke. The rest of them are rough soldiers, condemned criminals and the crew – tough bunch. But Paul didn’t hide his Christianity, did he? He puts it right out there: He mentions God three times, “the God to whom I belong and whom I worship!” *God* spoke to him, *God* was granting all of these men their lives – they would be saved because of *God’s* plan to get Paul to Rome to bear witness of Christ to Caesar!

- They were blessed to be on the same ship as Paul! I read Jonah this week, and I’m positive that Paul was thinking about the similarities between Jonah’s situation and his: the horrible storm – throwing the cargo overboard – everyone fearing for their lives - but one big difference: In Jonah’s case, it was his presence that was the cause of the storm. In Paul’s case it was his presence that would save them from this storm.
- Someone said: “Unbelievers have no idea how much they owe, in the mercy of God, to the presence of righteous men among them.” Isn’t that true? As God blesses His children, some of it splashes over and gets on them! It happened when Joseph was a servant in Potiphar’s household: “*the Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake*”
- It happened when Jacob was serving crooked uncle Laban: “He said to [Jacob], “. . . *I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you*” (Gen 30:27).
- Paul said in 1 Cor.7 that unbelieving spouses and children get blessed when there is a believing parent in the home.

So the other 273 pagans were on the right ship with the right man! They were the recipients of Paul’s faith: Paul believed *God* that it would happen just as *God* said it would. And it all did happen just that way – you have to wonder if some of these men became believers after this whole ordeal.

- And we see Paul’s leadership again – this is a sub-theme in this story: A godly leader encourages and always, always, keeps hope alive. There are plenty of pessimists in the church who can tell you that the glass is half-empty, but a godly leader says, “Nope, it’s half-full! Look what God is doing! I can’t wait to see what He will do next!”

V. The plot to escape.

- ²⁷When the fourteenth night had come, (two weeks into this horrible storm) as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land.

They couldn't see anything, but these were experienced sailors and they *heard* the sound of waves breaking against the northeast side of Malta. They had no idea where they were – but they knew they were near some land—

- ²⁸So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. (120 feet). A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms (90 feet). ²⁹And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come.

Who knows what god they prayed to, but it wasn't Paul's God – a few of them conspired to desert the ship and all the passengers and escape with the lifeboat—

- ³⁰And 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, ³¹Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved."
³²Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go.

Before when Paul gave his nautical advice, Julius blew it off, but now, at Paul's word, he cuts the ropes and lets their only lifeboat drift away from them – this is the boat that would take them to shore, right? But he was so sure of Paul's promise and his warning that he didn't want any more escape attempts!

VI. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

But does something seem *not right* about what Paul said? "*Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.*" Hmmm . . . There is a human condition which must be met, or lives will be lost.

But back in v.22 Paul said very confidently: "*there will be no loss of life among you,*" and he was confident because the angel said to him, "*God has granted you all those who sail with you.*" From the mouth of God, not a single soul on that ship would be lost!

- Okay, so which is it? If God had decided that not a soul on that ship would be lost, then how could Paul add: "as long as you stay in the ship!" If they couldn't be lost then they could do whatever they wanted: they could run each other through with swords, drink poison, climb to the top of the mast and get struck by lightning – and nothing could kill them because God promised: "there will be no loss of life among you." Right? Wrong.

There are two principles in this passage: God's sovereign control over all things, and man's responsibility: God ordained, before time began, that every man on this ship would be saved (physically, not spiritually!). But Paul also warned that unless those sailors stayed on the ship, they *wouldn't* be saved. And there is no contradiction here: It was within the sovereign plan of God that these men would be warned, and that they would heed that warning. We say it often around here: *God ordains the end, and He also ordains all the means to that end—*

- E.g. – God has chosen certain persons to be saved – that *will* happen. God's elect *will* be saved. (Jn.6:37: "All that the Father gives Me, will come to Me.") But He also commanded that we are to evangelize the lost, and they must believe in the Gospel to be saved. So we could say that unless we evangelize and they believe, the elect will not be saved, and that would be a true statement, but God also ordains the evangelism and the belief as the means by which they will be saved! J.I. Packer wrote a little book on this called *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* – where he explains this very well.
- Prayer is another example. If God is going to love on His children and give us all the good things we need, then why should we pray? 'Cause He told us to. There are things God will not do unless His people pray, but if He has already ordained those things, then He has also ordained the prayers for those things.

And you ask, "Why does God do it this way?" For His glory. We aren't passive puppets waiting for our strings to be pulled until we move: God works through our prayers and obedience and hard work and persevering, to get us to where He has already ordained that we will be. The passage that puts this together is—

- Philippians 2:12–13 . . . work out your salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

So back to our passage: Paul's *warning* to the sailors, and their compliance was the God ordained *means* by which His promise to save them would come to pass. And all other hope was lost by now— if Paul's God didn't come through, they were all dead. And again, Paul demonstrates his leadership—

VII. Paul encourages again.

- ³³As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. (That was because they were trying to conserve what little food they had left, and also because the storm was so fierce no one had an appetite!) ³⁴Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you." ³⁵And 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. ³⁶Then they all were

encouraged and ate some food themselves. ³⁷(We were in all 276 persons in the ship.)
³⁸And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

This is amazing: At the beginning of this voyage Paul is just one of the prisoners, and by the end, he's practically the captain! And he earned his leadership, didn't he? The men on that ship were all in the middle of the same storm, but Paul rose to the top as they observed his godly character, his wisdom, his initiative, and his example. They *wanted* to follow him.

- *You are not a leader by virtue of your title or position, you are only a leader if other people are following you.

So it's really Paul's faith in God that is carrying all of them at this point – do you see that? They might not believe in his God, but they're sure hanging on to the coattails of his faith. He trusts his God enough to eat, and they follow his example and do the same. Have you ever noticed that as much as unbelievers might mock Christians and belittle their faith – they sure like to have them around when life gets really hard and they are desperate!—

- They turn to pastors and Christian friends when their families are falling apart. They want *Christians* to pray for them. They seek out help from churches during fires and natural disasters. They are sure thankful for the meals from the Mercy Chefs. And we need to be ready to make the most of these Gospel opportunities – go back to last week's sermon for more on that!

Now when we read v.35 – it sure sounds like Paul is leading them in the Lord's Table, doesn't it? Well, he's not, because the Lord's Table is for believers. This was the customary Jewish blessing before a meal – but again we see Paul bringing His God into this situation, don't we? For Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus, God had supplied this precious food, and God was to be thanked and praised for it. So these Christian men just behaved as Christians right in front of these unbelievers! They didn't go off into a corner to bow their heads and pray. They didn't hide their light. One of the best ways to witness to unbelievers is simply to talk and behave and PRAY around them the very same way you do around believers. I hope you bow your head and thank God for your food when you are out at a restaurant, just the way you do at home.

- Now if you don't bow your head and thank God for your meals at home with your family – *why not?*

VIII. The shipwreck – and salvation.

- ³⁹Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. ⁴⁰So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach.

The land they didn't recognize was the island of Malta, 103 miles south of Sicily – that big island that the Italian boot is kicking! And they were at what would be called, St. Paul's bay. The plan now was to run the ship up on to the beach – this is why they had just thrown all the remaining grain out to make the ship lighter, to ride higher to get onto the beach, but that didn't happen—

- ⁴¹But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf.

The front of the ship was lodged in the reef while the storm was smashing the back part of the ship to pieces—

- ⁴²The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape.

We've seen this before, haven't we? A guard was responsible for the life of his prisoner – if the prisoner escaped, he would pay with his own life. That's why that Philippian jailer was ready to kill himself back in Acts 16, when all the cells suddenly opened up. But the providence of God overrules again—

- ⁴³But the centurion – Julius, 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, ⁴⁴and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

This was “Every man for yourself! All who can swim, go for it, and the rest: grab on to a piece of wreckage and paddle for your life!” The ship was completely destroyed, but all 276 men were saved. Just as God had said!

* * *

And don't you see this as a picture of our salvation? isn't this the way all of God's elect are going to make it home? Sometimes we're swimming, sometimes we're just hanging on for dear life, but by God's preserving grace, we will all be brought safely to shore. Every one of us will make it home.

*When I read this story I think about how God saved me. I was running away from God, and the Gospel. I felt my heart hardening and sin overcoming my life until I worried that I might never come to Jesus. Verse 20 was true for me: *“all hope of being saved was at last abandoned.”*

- We sang about it last Sunday: “I once was lost, my soul was drifting, Toward a dark eternity, Until I found in this an anchor, The blood of Jesus, shed for me.”

That's what happened to me, and Jesus' blood has been my anchor for 48 years, “through many dangers, toils, and snares.” “In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil.”

What this story is teaching us is that all God's promises and purposes will come to pass regardless of all appearances to the contrary! It was true for Paul, it's true for you and me, and it's true for the church of Jesus Christ—

- 1 Thessalonians 5:24 Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

Our future certainties are not threatened by our present calamities. Our heavenly Father is in sovereign control over pandemics, politics, and presidential elections. His divine purposes will come to pass, right on schedule, and our Lord Jesus will build His church until the last straggler comes floating in on a piece of shipwreck. Hang on to that hope! V.25: *"Have faith in God that it will be exactly as we have been told."* Do more than that, do what Paul did: encourage your brothers and sisters to keep trusting God through these hard times. Beloved, when it's all said and done, Jesus wins! I love this story, especially during times like these—

A little boy was playing baseball when a man came along and said, "Hey buddy, what's the score?" The boy said "Forty to nothing." The man asked, "Who's winning?"; the boy answered, "The other team." The man wanted to be sympathetic and said, "You must be very discouraged." The little boy's face lit up and he said, "Oh, no, I'm not discouraged.

We haven't come up to bat yet!"