

Acts 27:9 - 28:10

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Preacher: Benjie Slaton

- [0 : 0 0] The following sermon is from Grace and Peace Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Grace and Peace is a new church that exists for the glory of God and the good of the northeast suburbs of Hamilton Place, Collegedale, and Ottawa.
- You can find help more by visiting gracepeacechurch.org. All right.
- We are continuing on in our look at the book of Acts. We're coming to the end. Next week will be our last Sunday in Acts.
- And so we get this passage that Dusty so thankfully started reading for us so that I didn't have to. And this is one of those.
- It started off as this travel narrative. In fact, this is one of the longest and biggest travel narratives in all of the scriptures. In fact, it is one of the unique travel narratives in all of ancient literature.
- [1 : 0 7] You may not have realized this, but it's one of the most detailed and accurate stories of a sea journey that we have in ancient literature. In fact, Luke is the author of this.
- He is not a seafaring kind of guy. I feel like there should be a sea shanty somewhere in this sermon, but there's not. And so as a non-sailor, he actually writes with incredible detail and accuracy for a non-sailor.
- And so this is one of those stories, as you read it, that actually feels like it should be in some sort of an epic poem. You know, our high schoolers feel like they should have read this in the Iliad or something.
- And yet, here it is in this passage. Why? Well, one reason is actually very interesting. It's to help us know that the Bible that you hold in your hands actually stands up to literary and historical scrutiny.
- Luke's detail here actually holds up to what a normal sailor would have known to be true about storms and ships and sea travel and all that kind of stuff.
- [2 : 1 9] So if you're a kid sitting in, this would be a great thing for you to think about and to draw. You could draw a picture of a ship. There's going to be a storm. There's going to be an island. You could include all of those if you want to draw something while you're thinking about it.
- You know, a lot of people have asked why in the world this story found its way into Acts. Because it does feel a little bit misplaced. It doesn't seem like it's all that important.
- It's just a story of Paul on his sea travels and what happens. It just feels a little out of place. Why is it here? Here's the thing. Here's what I want you to see.
- This story shows the book of Acts and indeed the entire Christian life in miniature. In fact, some writers, people have been trying to figure out why this story was included here for centuries.
- And some people have wanted to make it an allegory, a full allegory. It's not that. It's maybe more of a metaphor. It's a true story. It's not something that's false. But it reveals something about the whole of the story.

[3 : 28] So here's what I want to do. I want to read through this long passage. I'm just going to give you a couple of explanatory comments along the way so you know what's happening. And then I'm going to tell you what I think God wants you to see from it.

Okay? Sound good? All right. Well, just to give you a little bit of a recap of what Dusty read and where we are. So Paul has been arrested. He was in Palestine. He had a trial before Festus, the kind of local Roman official in Palestine.

And after that, Festus put him under the care of this centurion, this well-regarded, well-respected centurion named Julius. Julius seemed to be kind of attentive, a respectful man.

He kind of gave Paul a decent bit of freedom when Paul needed it. And what you're going to see in the story is he takes a lot of control in an uncontrollable circumstance. So he seems like a fairly good guy.

He commands authority. So Luke is traveling with Paul as well as a guy named Aristarchus. And they're traveling with Paul. So you get a lot of we language. We did this. We did that.

[4 : 32] That's why. It's because Paul was with him on this journey. So the plan, you've got a little map that was in your handout just so you can, you know, follow along. If you're into maps, if you're not into maps, you know, make a plane out of it.

Send it across the room. But the plan was to just hug the coastline going up the coast of Palestine and then up around Asia Minor and then stop in Asia Minor to find a ship that could take them through the open waters of the Mediterranean because you needed a big ship.

The Mediterranean was notoriously difficult to sail through. You needed to have a big ship. It needed to be experienced navigators. And in fact, in ancient literature, the sea was the place of chaos, was the place of wickedness.

You remember actually in Genesis chapter 1, the Spirit of God hovered over the darkness, the waters, the waters of chaos. So the sea was generally regarded as this thing that could not be tamed and controlled.

It was scary. That's where you see a lot of, like, mythology originates in the sea oftentimes. So they go up.

[5 : 47] They find this ship in Myra in Asia. They get a larger boat. We're going to find out there's about 275 people on this boat. It's a big boat. And they start out. And where Dusty kind of left off, they went down to Crete.

The weather was ominous, and they stop in a place called Fair Havens, which, you know, if you know anything about good literature, they're giving you some foreshadowing here that things are not going to be Fair Havens as we go along.

All right, so let's jump in at verse, where are we? Verse 9. So they're in Fair Havens. Since much time had passed, the voyage was now dangerous because even the fast was already over.

The fast meaning the Day of Atonement, which in this particular year would have fallen probably in early October. Most of the time, ships would not have sailed across the Mediterranean at this time because after about the middle of October, things started to get dicey.

You definitely would not be sailing in the Mediterranean in November and beyond throughout the winter. So, the fast was already over. So Paul advised them, saying, Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only to the cargo and the ship, but also our lives.

[7 : 06] Just so you know, this is coming from Paul in his... We're supposed to see this not just as Paul's seafaring wisdom.

I perceive. That's not what it is. But Paul, this is a spiritual insight because there's going to be another one of these. Paul is apparently praying with diligence about this journey and God is showing him that this is bad news.

So he's telling them, but nobody's listening. Verse 11. But the centurion, Julius, paid more attention to the pilot and the owner of the ship than to what Paul said, which I guess is understandable.

You know, they do this for a living. 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 to spend the winter there.

Phoenix would have been about another 40 miles or so. So they're risking it to go about 40 more miles. That kind of sounds like a dad who's on a summer road trip who's like, got to make great time. Hold it in the back.

[8 : 10] We got to get to the next stop. Now, when the south wind blew gently, supposing they had ordained their purpose, obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete close to the shore.

But soon a tempestuous wind called a northeaster struck down from the land. And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, they gave way to it and were driven along.

Running under the lee of a small island called Kauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. The ship's boat is like the, we would call this like the emergency life raft or something, the small boat that's on the side of the big boat.

You know? After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that we would run aground on the Sirtis. Now, okay, so this is kind of cool.

The sands of Sirtis are this place in the southern Mediterranean near the coast of Libya, which on your map is labeled as Cyrene. And it's like 60 miles off the coast or something like that.

[9 : 15] And it's these sand dunes that are constantly shifting in the water. And this was like a graveyard for boats at this time. Because what would happen is, a boat wouldn't see it coming because it just looks like water.

You're not expecting sand dunes this far from the shore. They would get caught in the sand dunes and it would be too difficult for other ships to come rescue them. So the sailors on these boats would literally die of dehydration in a sea of water with nothing to drink.

So they knew that this was down there and the wind was blowing them towards that. Okay. Fearing they would run aground on the Sirtis, they lowered the gear and thus were driven along.

Lowering the gear means that they actually, commentators think that they actually took the main, like, mast and sail and took it off the ship because they wanted to reduce anything that would catch any sort of wind shear.

So anything that could get caught in the wind. They took that and the tackle, they threw it all into the sea. They were hoping to just get blown by the wind past all of that. Okay. Where was I?

[10 : 27] 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 upon us. All hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, Men, you should have listened to me. Nobody likes it when people say that, Paul. And not have sailed 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. Apparently, Paul's been praying again. And he heard from the Lord. For this very night, there stood before me an angel of 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. So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I've told you.

But we must run aground on some island. So when the fourteenth night had come, can you imagine that? Fourteen days of being driven along in rough seas, not seeing the sun or the stars to be able to navigate, not knowing where they were going.

[11 : 40] Fourteen days. As they were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight, the sailors suspected they were nearing land. That means that they probably heard the breakers of waves in the shore.

So they took a sounding at about twenty fathoms. A little further on, they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. They were headed towards shore. And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come.

And as the sailors, listen to this, as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship and had lowered the ship's boat, the escape boat, into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.

Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship, of the ship's boat, the escape boat, and let it go. So the sailors knew this was bad and were trying to mutiny and get away from everybody else.

But the soldiers, Julius, was like, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. We're all in this together. Cut the escape hatch. Escape boat. As 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.

[12 : 58] Therefore, we 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. And when he had said these things, he took bread, and in giving thanks to God in the presence of them all, he broke it and began to eat.

That sounds familiar. Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. They were in all 276 persons in the ship. And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Now, 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. So 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 as fast as they could for the beach. But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow struck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf.

The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. Sounds reasonable. But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan.

[14 : 13] The centurion ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, the rest on planks of wood or on pieces of the ship.

And so it was that all were safely brought to land. Every one of the 276 people made it to shore. After we were brought safely through, we learned that the island was called Malta.

The native people showed us unusual kindness. For they kindled a fire and welcomed us all because it had begun to rain and it was cold. Everything seems good.

Not yet. Verse 3, When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on a fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, No doubt this man is a murderer.

You know, karma, right? Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has allowed him to live. The gods are coming after Paul, they thought. He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.

[15 : 23] It must have been a dry bite. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune to him, they changed their minds and said that he must be a god.

Now, in this neighborhood, in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days.

It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. Dysentery. This was actually a common illness that people got in some of the islands of the central Mediterranean.

They could have fever and dysentery for up to four to six months before dying. Ugh! Sounds terrible. Paul visited him, prayed, putting his hands on him, healed him.

And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. Just like Jesus. They also honored us greatly.

[16 : 27] And when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed. Okay. Good night. That's a lot. What in the world is going on?

Why in the world is this a story that Luke has spent this much time talking about? Well, like I said, this is the Christian life in miniature.

In the book of Acts. I mean, think about it. There's a plan. Paul has a plan. He's going to sail from Palestine. He's going to Rome. This is the way for him to put into action everything that he had wanted to do.

God had a plan at the beginning of Acts. Do you remember right there what Jesus had a plan for the disciples in Acts? You are going to be my witnesses. My witnesses.

You're going to start here in Judea. You're going to go to Judea and Samaria. And then you are going to go to the ends of the earth. God had a plan. Paul had a plan right here.

[17 : 25] The direction was set. But, that big but, little word, big consequences, there's unexpected difficulties. Things always go sideways.

In the book of Acts, I mean, they weren't even like two chapters in before the Jews started with opposing them. There was persecution. Here, almost as soon as they get going, the weather turns.

There's even a shipwreck. You know, the old phrase, battle plans survive only as long as first contact with the enemy. Circumstances change. Unexpected circumstances change the plans that we have.

There's a plan, but there's unexpected difficulty. But, in the midst of that unexpected difficulty, God's presence is there. God made His presence known in the middle of all of it.

For Paul, he got two visions from God to tell him how to deal with this situation. And not only that, God showed up and did two miracles once they landed on Malta.

[18 : 27] As you think about the book of Acts, the book of Acts started with this amazing plan. It got sideways really quickly, and yet the Holy Spirit continued to show up in the very midst of those difficulties.

He came in power with miracles, through preaching, through the fellowship of the believers. And so, what's Paul to do? Well, you keep on going on, right?

You keep after it. You keep your head. Paul had to keep his head in the middle of the storm. He seems like he, him and Julius, seem to be about the only calm people in the middle of this storm.

In Acts, the leaders had to constantly work through these unexpected circumstances, totally unprecedented things. They had to come up with, like, new ways of doing government.

They had to come up with elders and deacons and Jerusalem councils and all these kinds of things that were totally new for them. They were called to pray and to trust and to wait and to discern and then pray some more.

[19 : 29] And then, by the end of it, God's purposes went out. At the end, by the end, there's nothing that can thwart God's purposes. So think about that. There's a plan, unexpected circumstances come along.

In the midst of that, God sends His presence to be with His people. So His people have to keep their head. They've got to just keep going. Keep His presence with them.

Keep praying. And then God's purposes ultimately went out. I mean, that is in microcosm what the Christian life actually looks like. I mean, think about grace and peace. We've got a plan.

It may not look like it some days, but we've got a plan. We've got a plan to be used by God to be a place where people would discover God's grace and His peace in their own lives.

You know, we want to be a place where people can come to find, that we want to be a church that brings positive impact in our community. We want to be a place that warmly welcomes people to Christ.

[20 : 32] We want to be a place where, that can be a place of hope and restoration for those who are broken and hurting. We've got a plan. But we're also going to have difficulty.

Things are not going to go according to plan. They're just not. You know, things, we're going to have unexpected situations. We might have a worldwide pandemic. I don't know.

We might. There might be a tornado that blows through our area. We have no idea about the things that are coming right around the corner. And yet, what God calls us to, day by day, week by week, is to keep our heads.

Keep our heads in the game. To keep praying. To keep working. To keep believing. Don't stop believing. Hold on to that feeling. We've got to keep our heads in the middle of all of this because God's presence is with us.

This is what we do every week. week. We're reminded that God has not left us alone. Sure, it's not going according to plan. But God has not left us in the middle of that.

[21 : 41] And as we keep with Him, we will see His ultimate purposes prevail for us as a church. It's the exact same thing in your life.

You know, you've got plans for your life. God has plans for your life. You know, your plans for family and marriage or children, career, your plans for retirement.

You know, you've got all kinds of plans, but there's going to be unexpected things. And yet, God is with you personally. He's with us, but He's also with you.

You've got to keep your head. You've got to see God's purposes laid out. And here's the thing. All of that sounds really good in the abstract. contract. It's when those actual difficult circumstances show up that we get completely undone.

You know, something happens and we get totally triggered. I love that word because it's exactly right. We get totally triggered by things. And it's all kinds of different things, right? I mean, sometimes it's just the normal challenges of life.

[22 : 47] You know, you get sick. Sometimes it's personal failures. You know, you do something wrong. Maybe even unintentionally you do something wrong and you have consequences. Sometimes somebody does something unjustly to you.

Whatever it is, those unexpected circumstances are the things that undo us. You know, it's the things that touch those particularly high expectation areas of our lives.

And it's different for all of us. You know, for some of you, you're totally cool as a cucumber until your children's health is at risk. And then you freak out like you've never seen anybody freak out before.

For some of you, it's your financial security. For some of you, it's relationships. You know, you don't want somebody to be angry with you. If somebody thinks badly of you, you're undone.

For some of you, it's being in control with your plans. You know? For some of you, it's all kinds of things. The reality is, is that when those unexpected difficulties come and you get triggered, here's what happens.

[24 : 00] You begin to doubt that God had a plan in the first place. Whatever your plan was, you're like, well, that obviously wasn't good enough. You certainly doubt that God is not with you in the middle of that, that His presence has gone from you, and you have little belief that He will fulfill His purposes ultimately.

And so you freak out, and this is the origin of all of our various sin patterns. You know, fill in the blank on your particular sin pattern. Whatever it is that you dislike least about yourself, or dislike most about yourself, it's probably rooted in one of these things.

Unbelief about what God has said is true. It's where we get angry and desperate and fearful and controlling, where we run to our addictions, we numb out.

This is why. Because we stop believing. And I know I won't go back to that song. I ran across this blog post this week.

I don't know who this woman is. I put a link to it on the website that you can get to through that QR code. She is apparently a young woman, and her life has just, I mean, it's completely fallen apart.

[25 : 21] And the thing that struck me about this person, this writer, is that she's holding on to faith in a really raw way. The best that I can tell is she was diagnosed with cancer for the third time back last year in kind of winter of 2020.

And in the midst of her treatment and COVID lockdowns, her husband walked out on her. And so she found herself, she ended up across the country in some sort of experimental cancer trials, all alone, desperate, sick, broken, overwhelmed.

Here's one of the things she writes. She says, I don't remember most of last autumn because I lost my mind late in the summer. And for a long time after that, I don't think I was even in my body.

And so she wrote this blog post, and it's titled, God is on the bathroom floor. I just want to read some of this to you because I thought it was beautiful. She says this, I've had cancer three times now, and I've barely passed 30.

There are times when I wonder what I must have done to deserve such a story. I fear sometimes that when I die and meet with God, He'll just say I disappointed Him or offended Him or failed Him.

[26 : 42] Maybe He'll say I just never learned my lesson or that I wasn't grateful enough. But one thing I know for sure is this, He can never say that He did not know me. I am God's downstairs neighbor, banging on the ceiling with a broomstick.

I show up at His door every day, sometimes with songs, sometimes with curses, sometimes apologies, gifts, questions, demands. Sometimes I use my key under the mat to let myself in.

Other times I sulk outside until He opens the door to me Himself. These are the prayers I repeat, night and day, sunrise, sunset. Call me bitter if you want.

That's fair. Count me among the angry, the cynical, the offended, the hardened. But also count me among the friends of God.

For I have seen Him in rare form. I have felt His exhale laid in His shadow. Squinted to read the message He wrote for me in the grout on the ground.

[27 : 47] I'm sad too. I remind myself that I'm praying to the God who let the Israelites stay lost for decades. They begged to arrive in the promised land, but instead He let them wander, answered prayers they didn't even pray.

For forty years their shoes didn't wear out, lit fire in their path each night, each morning. He sent them mercy bread from heaven. I look hard for the answers to the prayers that I didn't pray.

I look for the mercy bread that He promised to bake fresh for me each morning. The Israelites called it manna, which means what is it? That's the same question I'm asking again and again.

There's mercy here somewhere. But what is it? What is it? What is it? Call me cursed. Call me lost.

Call me scorned. But that's not all. Call me chosen, blessed, sought after. Call me the one who God whispers His secrets to.

[28 : 57] I am the one whose belly is filled with loaves of mercy that were hidden for me. Even on days when I'm not sick, sometimes I go and lay on the mat in the bathroom in the afternoon light to listen for Him.

I know it sounds crazy and I can't really explain it, but God is in there even now. I've heard it said that some people can't see God because they won't look low enough.

And it's true. Look lower because God is on the bathroom floor. You know, I think that's glorious.

Her name is Nightbird. I suspect that few of you have clung to the deck of a wooden ship because you've just been rolled around seasick for two weeks, thrown up everything that you could possibly thrown up from seasickness, wanting just to be thrown overboard.

Maybe some of you have laid on the bathroom floor sick from cancer. Maybe you've wept until you don't have any more tears because of a child that has fled from you.

[30 : 19] Maybe you've felt the sting, the wound of betrayal. Or maybe you just feel the very normal and mundane failures of your own sin, your own weak character, your own lack of discipline, the wounds of people who didn't even mean to do something.

What she's writing is the same thing we see in Acts, is that in the midst of these difficult circumstances that are bound to come for all of us, what we find is that God's presence is in the very middle of them.

That's where we find the Lord to be most powerfully at work in the lives of His people. None of us want to go to those places, but every one of us will find ourselves there.

You cannot avoid it. The more you try to wish it away, the further you find yourself from God's presence. You see, the Christian life is not this kind of life of triumph like some sleazy TV preacher.

You know? It's not. God's tender and true presence is discovered in the unexpected and the undesired realities of the life that we live.

[31 : 49] life. That's where the power of God is. If you want to find God, look lower. I think that's exactly right.

See, one of the amazing things about this passage is the fact that Paul was able to keep his head in the middle of all of this. Everything swirling around, Paul was able to keep his head in the middle of it.

He was consistently pointing people to the God of heaven and earth, the God of the storms and the seas. He celebrated communion on the ship or what looks a lot like communion on the ship.

That doesn't fit into our, you know, categories theologically. But Paul was reminding people that Jesus had already come for them and that they could find Jesus in the middle of that place.

That's where Jesus had come. Paul knew where to find him because Paul knew where Jesus was. Jesus was lower than we think. Paul even tells us this, he humbled himself to death, even the death of a cross.

[33 : 00] You see, it's when Jesus went low, when he humbled himself to the ground that he found glory, that he found redemption, that he found resurrection. And for you and me, the only way for us to move forward is to seek Jesus where we will find him.

And that is in the place of repentance, the place of our weakness, in the place of our failures, the place of honesty.

Not trying to get away from those things, but leaning into where Jesus is in those moments. See, that's what I love about this passage. You know, it doesn't have the sea shanties that I would like, but what it has is a very realistic picture of the way this life goes.

We've got plans. You've got plans. They're not going to work. What are you going to do then? What are you going to do then?

Where will you find God's presence then? You'll find him here. You'll always find him here. If you look to the cross and to the death of Jesus, what you will find is exactly what you're looking for.

[34 : 18] Life in him. Okay. I'm going to pray for us and we're going to move to the Lord's table where we can actually taste and see his death for us.

Father, we ask that you would show us Christ. that we would see him and trust him and know him. Help us to look lower than we want to look because that's where we'll find him.

Show us that today in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.