

God is (still) in Charge

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Thank you, Julia, for reading for us, and Brendan as well. Please keep your Bibles open back there at Acts chapter 27.

So I'll outline as well for you to follow along if you'd like. Well, I'm sure that many of you enjoy watching those gangster or kung fu movies.

Yep. And often in the fight scenes, there's always, you know, there's this bold guy, bad guy, sorry, bold as well, maybe like me.

And he turns up surrounded by his henchmen. And so initially, we would think that he's the one in charge. You know, he orders the men around him to attack the hero.

But while all the henchmen have, you know, the basic sort of stick or club, he's the one with the special sword or spear. And for a while, we think he's the mastermind.

[1 : 05] Until the fight ends. Poor hero, for now at least, is on the ground, face pushed into the dirt. When out from the dust-filled air, as the gang parts, the real mastermind is revealed.

Now, he too has a group of elite henchmen, you know, well-dressed, groomed, never get their hands dirty, no blood. He has fancy jewellery around his neck, on his fingers.

And then we realise, and probably the dark shades as well. And then we realise, he's the one that has been giving the orders all along. Well, in tonight's passage, as we near the end of Acts, I want to pose a similar question to you all.

In the twist and turns of Paul's journey to Rome, who do you think is actually in charge? Who is the mastermind? Well, to begin with, we may think it's Julius, the Roman centurion.

So in verse 1, we read that it was decided that we would sail for Italy. That was probably the decision of Governor Festus from the last chapter. But Paul and some other prisoners were headed over to a centurion named Julius, who belongs to the imperial regiment.

[2 : 24] So Julius is the one responsible, isn't it, to get everyone to Rome. He's in charge. He finds a ship, and they put out to sea, leaving from Andromitium. I found a map of Paul's journey to Rome on the next slide, the red line.

Andromitium is in itself marked. We're down on the right-hand bottom side at the moment. But we can assume it's near Caesarea. And from what we can read, the ship hugs the coast going up north, and then heads west, north of the island of Cyprus, eventually landing at Myra, which is sort of, you can see that little dot there in the middle.

Along the way, they had stopped in Sidon, where the Roman centurion gives permission for Paul's friends to come care for him. So, so far, so good, right?

All seems to be under this centurion's control. In fact, when we read in verse 6, what happens in Myra is that, Myra is that the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board.

So we see, don't we, Julius making the decisions, taking the initiative, being in charge. But then things slowly get out of hand and run out of his control, doesn't it?

[3 : 46] For, we read further on, Now, I think Fairhaven is a very ironic name, because I don't think it's a haven at all, and there was no fair weather at that city.

So we can see, therefore, that things are not going to plan, are they, for the centurion? They had to sail south to Crete, even though they wanted to keep going along the main coastline.

They are now exposed to the Mediterranean Sea by being south of Crete. And we read further on that much time had been lost. Sailing had already become dangerous, because by now it was the day, it was after the Day of Atonement.

That's about late September, and they were heading into winter. So Paul warned them, Man, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous, and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our

own lives also.

But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot, and of the owner of the ship. Since the harbour was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix, and winter there.

[5 : 21] This was a harbour in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest. Now often in life, we like to think we're the master of our own destiny. We're calling the shots as we go.

And we would like everything to go to our plan. Until, of course, things start to go awry. And for a while, we might try and maintain some semblance of control.

You know, we adapt to the circumstances as we go, hoping to still achieve our targeted outcome. Then we come to a roadblock, when actually none of the options in front of us are actually palatable.

Which is the case here for Julius, isn't it? The harbour wasn't suitable to wintering. But Paul's warning that if they pressed on, that they would be met with lots of disaster, leading to loss of life and property, was filled with great risks.

At the same time, we find that there were time pressures. They had already lost much time, and could lose more. And for the owner of the ship, time was money, wasn't it?

[6 : 33] He was only going to get paid when he delivers his cargo. Not to mention, the longer he had the crew on his ship, the more costs he would incur to feed them. So in the end, they ignore Paul's warning, and they take a chance to try to get to Phoenix, where at least it was safer to harbour.

Now we don't know where Phoenix is on Crete, but I've got another map here, this time a close-up of Crete itself. And it really helps us to appreciate, doesn't it, the geography of the Lough Island. And I would like to keep this slide on the screen, as we read through the passage. So look in your Bible now instead, or just listen along. And you'll be able to follow, I think, just where they are on this map as we go.

So verse 13. When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity, so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. But before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island.

You see that big arrow there. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind, so we gave way to it and were driven along. As we passed on the lee of a small island called Kauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure, so the men hoisted it aboard.

[7 : 49] Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together, because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Saitus. They lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along.

We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their very own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved. So everything now that we read gives us a sense, doesn't it, that Julius and the pilot have lost control of the situation.

And so if you look at your outline, maybe it's Mother Nature that is in charge. The ship is at the mercy of its wind and waves. And if you look at the map, it's clear how far off course the ship is. Instead of hugging the coast, the strong northeaster has pushed them out into the open sea toward that island, that little green dot there, which is called Kauda. But even there they were unable to use their lifeboats to get to the safety of the island.

[8 : 59] And being a remote island, there was probably no safe harbour there anyway. And so in desperation, you can see what they're trying to do to survive. They're putting ropes around the ship to girdle it, to stop it breaking apart.

Then they lower an anchor to create a drag, so that's to slow the ship from, you know, continuing to drift out to sea. And then finally, they toss the cargo to lighten the weight of the ship.

But so fierce and unrelenting were the storms that everyone gives up hope of being saved. And that's when we hear Paul's voice again in verse 21.

After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said, Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete. Then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss.

But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost. Only the ship will be destroyed. Last night, an angel of the God whom I serve, or I belong, and whom I serve, stood beside me and said, Do not be afraid, Paul.

[10:04] You must stand trial before Caesar, and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you. So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.

Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island. Now this might come across initially as an I told you moment from Paul. But I think Paul was more trying to encourage them, to tell them, Look, you didn't listen to me before, but now listen to me, because you don't have to be afraid.

I have a direct word from God. That for the sake of Paul, God was going to spare everyone's life. In fact, here's I think a little picture, just like Jesus, where everyone that was with Jesus is saved.

Now there's a picture that everyone that is with Paul, God will save for the sake of Paul. And previously, the advice from Paul not to sail was based on his experience, human's experience.

What we have now here is Paul's direct word from God. And God is saying, Everyone will survive, even though they will run aground.

[11:16] And so from here on in, you actually see the dynamics of the relationship change, don't you? Even though Paul was the prisoner, he is the one now directing others, making decisions for them.

And so maybe, third option, Paul is in charge. Verse 27, On the 14th day, we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight, the sailors sensed they were approaching land.

They took soundings and found out the water was 120 feet deep. A short time later, they took soundings again and found it was 90 feet deep. Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight.

In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.

So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away. Again, another ironic moment where instead of the prisoners trying to escape, it's the soldiers that are trying to escape.

[12:24] But Paul here is taking charge, isn't it? He is instructing the centurions and saying, Do not allow the soldiers to do this because only if they all stayed with Paul, that was God's promise to them, will they be saved.

And so, actually, in a bit of a courageous move, they actually did listen to Paul. And what's more, they cut the ropes so as to cast the lifeboats adrift.

But next, verse 33, we see Paul again continuing to take charge, this time caring for all on board. So verse 33, Just before dawn, Paul urged them all to eat.

For the last 14 days you have been in constant suspense and gone without food. You haven't eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.

After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether, there were 276 of us on board.

[13:29] When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea. It's an amazing turnaround, isn't it? At the start, Julius was the one allowing Paul to be cared for and now here, what do we have?

We actually have Paul as the one caring for them. Paul's saying, don't worry, God's going to keep you alive. But what you need to do if you want to survive is you better eat.

God will save you but you need to eat otherwise you will not be able to stay strong. And notice how many there are on the ship. 276.

And that's a very precise number, don't you think? It's not around 270. It's exactly 276. Every single person is accounted for because each and every one of them, God promised, will be saved.

Not about 270 that will be saved. No, exactly. 276 of them will all be saved. And so, although we can see Paul giving directions, we know what the real answer is, isn't it?

[14:45] That it's actually God who is actually in charge. He's the mastermind behind the scene, isn't it? But he takes charge, not like the gangster to do evil, but he takes charge to do good.

And we see this now in the final scene as well, verse 39. When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach where they decided to run the ship aground if they could.

Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground.

The bow stuck fast and would not move and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the stern. The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from escaping, swimming away, but the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. Now, we're not told until the next chapter, but where they have landed is Malta. And if you look on the next slide, you'll see just how far they've drifted.

[15:57] Alright, from Crete all the way to Malta is longer than the distance from Caesarea to Crete. And here in this final scene, it may seem again that Mother Nature has the upper hand.

Paul and his travelers were again at the mercy of the high seas. But how do we actually tell that God is in control? Well, first, because what the angel of God said to Paul comes to pass.

They do run aground on some island. It's not just land, it's an island, isn't it? And Malta is an island. And here again, we see that actually Paul is no longer in command, is he?

Because humanly speaking, the centurion has taken over. He's the one who commands the soldier not to kill the prisoners, which they were going to. And the reason for this is that if the prisoners escaped and the soldiers went back to the king or whatever, the emperor, they themselves could be punished by death because they had failed in their mission.

But actually now, the centurion does exactly what God intends. Now, we don't know whether he's now a God-fearer, but even if he's not, he spares Paul's life so that Paul will get to Rome alive.

[17:10] We see that God is using his actions to fulfill his promise to Paul so that Paul will make it to Rome and testify before Caesar just as God has promised.

And if you look finally at verse 44, it might seem like such an insignificant statement, isn't it? It just says there that the rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship.

In this way, everyone reached land safely. And yet, that is the most significant sentence at the end, isn't it? Everyone reached land safely.

Even though everyone gets there by the skin of their teeth, with nothing else except maybe their wet clothes, no one was lost. God makes good on his promise.

Everyone, without exception, reaches land safely. And conversely, even though everyone reaches land safely, nothing else survives.

[18:17] Did you notice? Not the cargo, not the lifeboat, not even the ship. That's totally destroyed because all they have were just some planks or other pieces that they'd have to clamber on to get to land.

Everything is destroyed except for God's promise that not one single life, 276 of them will be lost.

Now friends, I'm not sure if you like stories like this. You know, it makes for a good movie, doesn't it? But those of us who follow Jesus, I think, are able to learn two very important lessons tonight.

The first, as it says in your outline, is that God is always in charge. Even when it looks like other people or Mother Nature or life circumstances may be conspiring against you or God's plan, God is still in charge.

And in the case of Paul, God was in charge even when Julius ignored his advice and decided to sail on. God was still in charge even when Mother Nature blew the ship off course.

[19:27] And you know, sometimes when we look at our boss at work or those in authority and we don't like what's going on, what's being done to us, or against the church, we do get angry, don't we?

Or even dejected. And we wonder if God is in control. Well, the answer is that He is. And He uses even those people that don't agree with us to bring His purposes to pass.

At other times, we may feel like the circumstances and situations in our life might be really getting us down. Maybe it's sickness, maybe it's economic circumstances, maybe it's a series of unfortunate events.

But again, let us remember that it is God, not Mother Nature, not life circumstances, that is in charge. The events in our lives may appear random and unfair, but God is using even those to bring

about His purpose in our lives.

And while we may not know the exact details of what God is trying to do, we ought to be confident that He knows what's best. In the reading that Brendan gave to us in Isaiah, we were reminded today, wouldn't we?

[20 : 44] Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord or instruct the Lord as His counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten Him and who taught Him the right way? Who was it that taught Him knowledge and showed Him the path of understanding?

God's wisdom is without peer, isn't it? He doesn't need our advice or anyone else's and He knows exactly everything that is going on in our lives and in this world.

And that should give us great comfort because He is in charge. But not only that, He uses His sovereignty, the fact of Him being in charge, to then care for us as His flock, which is the promise that was earlier in Isaiah 40 in verse 11.

He tends His flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lamb in His arms and carries them close to His heart. He gently leads those that have young. God is in charge but God is also caring for us using His control and sovereignty in all the world to shepherd us like His flock.

And that was the case with Paul, wasn't it? God made good on His promise to him to bring him safely to Rome. He's not in Rome yet but he will get to Rome and Paul will get a chance to testify in Rome before Caesar.

[22 : 09] So likewise, God's promise to us is not that we'll be disease-free, trouble-free, we'll have a life of luxury without aging or heartache. But He has promised us in Christ Jesus that He will bring us to eternal safety.

not the land of Malta, not the city of Rome but to the new Jerusalem. When we follow Jesus, when we believe in Him, we have the promise that we will get to that land, that eternal land of safety. Now, of course, the second lesson that flows from the first is this, that if God is in charge, then we're not. And I know, friends, that we often know this in our heads but I think we struggle with this in reality, don't we?

We struggle to think that we are not in charge of our own lives. Just take a look at sometimes how we pray for we often ask God to answer our prayers but in a very specific way, isn't it?

That we ask God to answer it in a way that suits us. We desire for God to do things our way. We're happy for God to be in charge but provided He makes things happen as we would like it.

[23 : 27] But that cannot be the case, can it? If God is in charge, then we need to recognize that we're not. We can't have it both ways.

If God is in charge, then actually we need to learn to live life letting go of our urge to be the masters of our own destiny. That we need to be in control of our lives all the time.

And the stress and anxiety that that brings when we often feel like we need to be in control. And when we're not in control, we feel like, oh, life is going to end.

No, we don't need to do that because God is in charge and we're not. And so like Paul, we need to trust God in all the twists and turns, even when people ignore us and our advice or warnings, even when circumstances are working against us, we need to focus on what God has promised us in His Word.

That His plan and His purpose in Christ Jesus, yes, the big gospel plan that He has for the world, will still be played out in our lives and the church. and we can trust Him even if we don't know all the details of how our individual lives would fit into God's big purpose for this world.

[24 : 48] We need to learn to live life without needing to be in control because we know that the God that we love and we serve, He's the one that is in charge.

And He's not just in charge, He's also our shepherd. He's given us as our master, Jesus, our good shepherd, who laid down His life for us and then now is leading us along the right paths to our eternal land of safety.

Let's trust Jesus. Let's let go of that urge for control in our lives and put our trust in Jesus instead. Let's pray. Father, help us to know that whatever happens in life, whatever the twists and turns and whether we are bossed around by others or tossed around by life's challenges, that You stand above it all in charge of the affairs of this world and in charge of the affairs of our own lives.

Help us not to fret when things, events, people conspire against us for You are sovereign and You will bring Your will to pass. us, strengthen our faith in You and Your Son.

Help us to look to Him as our shepherd, the one who laid down His life for us, the one who leads us, the one who provides for us and the one who will bring us safely to our eternal home.
[26 : 18] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.