

Acts 27

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[0 : 00] And all this as Paul makes his way to Rome. But you know, as Luke sort of carries us along in this final stage of his great sort of history of the early church, we learn something along the way in this chapter about life in Christ.

And I think the thing we learn is this. In particular, we see how the gospel makes us agents of hope in hopeless situations.

Let's begin by looking at the first 20 verses of chapter 27. Remember here, Paul is under arrest and on trial in Caesarea. He has appealed to Caesar.

And now at last, after trial upon trial, the journey to Rome finally begins. In your bulletin, there's a little map.

The first time I read this chapter, I thought, I have no idea where any of these places are. So there's a little map there to help you along the way as I read along and read for us. So let me read Acts 27 verses 1 through 20.

[1 : 15] And 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. And embarking in a ship of Adramidium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.

The next day we put in at Sidon, and Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go out to his friends and be cared for. And putting out to sea from there, we sailed under the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us.

And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra and Lycia. There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board.

We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Nydas. And as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmonae. Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lycia.

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 our lives.

[2 : 32] But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and 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.

Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete close to the shore. But soon a tempestuous wind called the Northeaster struck down from the land.

And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. Running under the lee of a small island named Kauda, 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 surdices, 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.

[3 : 47] Now I would give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground.

So says Gonzalo in the first scene of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as the play sort of opens with a frightened crew in a deadly storm. I think the closest I personally ever got to that feeling was a number of years ago when Beth and I were riding a ferry to Nantucket in the winter.

Friends of ours invited us to join them at their sort of, I think it was a great aunt's place on the island. It was out of season. So, you know, it was sort of a nice free little getaway. So we all met and boarded the ferry in Rhode Island, I think.

But no sooner had we set out in this big ferry, and the sky turned gray, and the water got rough. And the ship actually started rocking so badly.

I remember being inside sort of laying on one of the chairs, trying to, you know, keep whatever I ate for lunch down. And I remember the sort of ship rocking, and as it rocked this way out the window, we saw nothing but water.

[4 : 57] And then as it rocked this way, we saw nothing but sky. And we pretty much went like that the whole way across the Sound to Nantucket. And thankfully, it didn't get any worse than that.

Maybe you've been in a worse storm than that out on the sea. But, you know, for a land lover like me from the middle of Pennsylvania, that was bad enough. And trust me, in the middle of that, I wasn't quoting Shakespeare.

Now I would give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground. I was pretty much just saying, ah, ready for this one to be over. Let's get to land. Of course, my ferry ride wasn't all that bad.

But for Luke and Paul and their Thessalonian friend Aristarchus, the situation was beyond desperate. All our hope of being saved was at last abandoned, Luke says.

Notice how he uses the first person there. In verse 1, Luke says, we set sail. This is another one of those sections in Acts where Luke was personally accompanying Paul on his journey.

[6 : 04] You might wonder, well, what's Luke been up to since chapter 21 when he came with Paul to Jerusalem? Probably been researching all the things that went into his gospel for the last two years living in Palestine with Paul.

But anyway, here the sort of we section picks up and Luke is on the boat with Paul on this journey. In the 19th century, a Scottish sailor named James Smith wrote a book called *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*, which is all about this chapter of Acts.

And in fact, most of the sort of studies of this chapter of Acts still make reference to that study from 150 plus years ago. And Smith himself was an experienced sailor and he actually lived in the Mediterranean for a number of years.

I don't know what a Scottish sailor was doing living in the Mediterranean, but there you go. He was eccentric, I guess. And he basically spent a whole winter investigating Luke's account here. Basically resailing the route, studying the historicity of shipping and boating and storms at the time.

And his conclusion in that study, having basically lived through it himself, was this. He says, No sailor would have written in a style so little like that of a sailor.

[7 : 15] 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. In other words, what Smith is saying is that, look, on the one hand, Luke's definitely not a sailor.

We know that from his style. But for someone who's not a professional on the water, there's only one way. He could have put it together with such an accurate and consistent account.

He must have been there, Smith concludes, and seen it with his own eyes. And that means that Acts, in this sort of chapter of Acts, doesn't just have some real historical reliability behind it, but it also has real existential reality behind it.

In other words, Luke knew what it was like to be in such a desperate situation that he had abandoned any hope of being saved. Of course, the journey started out well, right?

Luke and Aristarchus, in a real act of friendship, commit to go with Paul on his journey to Rome. They probably paid for their passage themselves in order to accompany him along the way.

[8 : 30] And Paul was even allowed to visit his Christian friends in Sidon. In verse 3 there, the phrase friends, or his friends, or the friends, might even be a technical term that Luke is using for the church.

A sign of the deep bonds that the gospel creates. But then the clouds begin to gather. Twice in verses 4 through 8, Luke says that they sailed along only with great difficulty.

The winds were against us. They had to sail under the lee of Crete and then of Cyprus. That is, they sort of sailed along the island in such a way that the ongoing winds were blocked by the landmass. The trip was increasingly difficult.

And when they made it to Crete, it was already October. The fast that Luke mentions in verse 9 lets us know really what time of year it is because there was only one prescribed fast in the whole Jewish calendar.

And it was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which happens in the fall. And what we know is that sailing in the Mediterranean was notoriously difficult after September.

[9 : 36] That time of year, that period of history. And we also know that shipping and boating and most things on the water essentially stopped from mid-November until mid-March.

So when Paul tells the centurion and the crew to not keep going, to just sort of settle for their place in Fair Havens and not make the one-day trip up the coast of Phoenix, he's using pretty good gut instinct.

Of course, Paul wasn't a professional sailor, right? But over the course of his missionary journey, some scholars estimate that he had sailed over 3,000 miles in three decades.

In 2 Corinthians, a letter written before this trip to Rome, Paul writes that he had been shipwrecked no less than three times. And one of those times, he had spent a day and a night adrift at sea.

Paul knew the water perhaps a little too well for his own liking. But the crew decides to take a risk, right? Phoenix was a better harbor to spend the winter, better sort of protected from the winds that would come along, a better place to sort of shield the ship and the cargo.

[10 : 46] And it was just a day's trip up the coast. So they go for it. And it all goes wrong. A typhoon force drives them out to sea, and they start taking any measures they can to just stay afloat.

They bring in the little boat, tie it to the deck that was used to shuttle back and forth to shore. They undergird the ship with cables to keep it from breaking apart. They're afraid of the Sirtis sandbars that were off the northern coast of Africa that were notorious as a graveyard for ships, so they lower the gear and try to slow down.

And the next day, they jettison the cargo. And the third day, they throw even the ship's cargo overboard, Luke says, with their own hands. In other words, it wasn't the waves that dashed it off.

They were so scared that they themselves threw it over in any attempt to save themselves. And as the storm continues day after day, at last they throw their hope itself overboard.

Luke says, neither sun nor stars appeared for many days. Which isn't just sort of a poetic way of saying that the storm was really bad. In fact, you know, in the ancient world, the sun and the stars were the way in which a ship's crew navigated.

[12 : 03] That was their navigation system. That's how they got their bearings on the water. So, Luke is basically saying, we were totally and utterly lost. And we had no idea where this storm was driving us.

And in the face of all that, Luke says they lose hope. Now, friend, as we think about this storm, I wonder as you look over your life, if you've ever been there.

Not in a boat, per se, but in a storm. A situation so unrelenting, so fierce, that you have no idea where it's driving you.

And you've done everything you think you can think of to stay afloat. And you've taken every bit of advice people have given you. And you've tried every tactic that you've read in all the self-help books.

But still, you're being driven out to sea, as it were. It shows no signs of stopping. And you have no idea where it's taking you. What desperate, seemingly hopeless situation are you in this morning?

[13 : 18] Maybe it's a work situation that seems headed for disaster, and you can do little to stop it. Maybe it's a problem with your spouse that's never resolved, and you feel like you can't even talk about it because it's so raw, and you've been over it so many times.

Maybe it's a health condition that's chronic and won't change. Maybe it's depression that won't lift. Maybe it's loneliness that gnaws away at you like the waves that pound the shore day after day, taking more sand out to sea.

What storm are you in? And if you're not in a situation like this right now, well, friend, what are you going to do when you are? Where do we find the courage to face the storms of life with hope?

Well, let's pick up our passage in verse 21. Luke writes, And 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.

[14 : 53] 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 have been told.

But we must run aground on some island. Twice, Paul tells them and us here to take heart, take courage.

You know, you can even translate that phrase, cheer up. Now, that sounds a little crazy, right? They've just lost all hope of living.

They've jettisoned all the cargo, thrown the tackle overboard, and now Paul stands up and says, Guys, newsflash, cheer up. Take heart. How can he say such a thing?

Because in the middle of the storm, God reaffirmed his word of promise. Jesus had promised Paul back in chapter 23 that he would testify in Rome. And now God sends an angel into the middle of the storm to remind and reaffirm that promise to Paul.

[15 : 59] He will stand before Caesar. And then God assures him even further that no one on the ship will lose their lives either. Do you see the important principle that's emerging here?

This is how God gives us courage and hope in the face of seemingly hopeless situations. He reminds us of his promises. When we plunge into the darkest night of the storm, when the stars go black, and we have no sense of direction or purpose, God's words of promise are like a ballast that keep our ship from tipping over, that keep our ship from sort of capsizing in the midst of the storm.

Now you might be wondering, well, look, do we today have anything like this promise that God made to Paul back then? I mean, he got an angel and some pretty specific words.

I mean, is that what we get? Should we expect something like that? Are those the kind of promises that God gives us today? Well, in one sense, no.

But in another sense, yes. And here's what I mean. On the one hand, Paul was given a very specific and remarkable promise that he would make it to Rome alive.

[17 : 19] And the reality is that we today have nothing so specific in God's word to us in Scripture. So that's not exactly what we should expect. But that doesn't mean we're without hope.

Because on the other hand, there are promises in the New Testament that are for every believer that give us the same courage and the same hope that Paul had.

For instance, think about the truth of Ephesians 1, 11, that God works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

Here we're told that the circumstances of life, every single one of them, are being so influenced by God that they follow his plan, that he works everything, even raging storms, according to the counsel of his will.

But you might still ask, okay, that's great, but how is that good news for me? God, granted, orchestrates all things, whatever that means, but does he have my best in mind in all of that orchestration?

[18 : 24] Sometimes it doesn't exactly seem so. But it becomes good news when you consider other texts, like Romans 8, 28.

There we're told that God works, he controls, he directs, in all things, every circumstance and event, for the good of those who love him, who have been called, according to his purpose. This is a guarantee that God's plan is for our good, and that nothing can thwart it.

Or think of the promise in 2 Corinthians 4, 16 through 17. Paul writes there, so we do not lose heart. There it is again. Keep heart.

Though our outer self is wasting away, Paul writes, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

When you really grasp how profound and comprehensive those promises are for everyone in Christ, you start to realize that in essence, we have the same thing that Paul had.

[19 : 36] No, we don't have the specificity Paul got. Paul knew he would make it to Rome. I don't know if I'm going to make it to lunch today. But no matter what comes, God promises that it's for my good, and it's preparing for me an eternal weight of glory.

No matter how raging the storm, it's not going to separate me from the good of God for my life. Which is to say, that we can know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God will give us what we ourselves would have asked for if we knew all that He knows.

If we had God's perspective and we were praying in light of that, that is exactly what we would receive. That's exactly what we would ask for.

The American poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote these lines about the providence of God. He writes, Here in the maddening maze of things, when tossed by storm and flood, to one fixed ground my spirit clings.

I know that God is good. But of course, that's the real struggle, isn't it?

[21 : 10] The battle to know and believe in the midst of the storms that God is good. To be able to actually say with Paul in verse 25, I have faith in God.

That is, I trust God that it will be exactly as I have been told. Isn't that our real heart need? To be able to trust Him?

To trust that He's good? To trust that His promises are working out exactly as we've been told? How do we get to that place of trust?

How do we get to the place that even in the midst of your storm, no matter what it may be, you can have the courage and the hope that springs up from a deep trust in God's promises?

Well, think for a second with me. Have you ever considered that the storyline of the Bible is really one long story when it boils down to it of God rescuing His people through storms and seas?

[22 : 22] God rescues Noah through the seas of the flood. God rescues Israel through the waters of the Red Sea. God even rescues Jonah, the bigoted runaway prophet, from a deadly storm at sea.

Maybe not the way He would want to be saved, swallowed by a fish, but still saved. But friends, this history of God with His people is telling us something more than just the fact that God has a really good track record with storms and seas.

It's all meant to help us see that there's a greater storm that threatens us. And you won't really be able to trust God in a deep, vital, personal, life-changing way until you see that this greater storm isn't your circumstances.

And this greater storm isn't your job problems. And it's not your relationships. And it's not your physical health. No, the greatest storm that we face is a storm of our own sin and God's just anger and opposition against it.

And you have to see that in this storm, we are truly helpless in ourselves. No matter how much cargo you throw overboard, that storm remains.

[24 : 03] But here's the shocking thing. The Bible, after so many stories about God rescuing His people through the storm, comes to its very climax with one who Himself sails into that greatest storm.

But instead of being rescued, He's abandoned in darkness. The sun goes out and He's crushed beneath the waves.

What's happening? Has God somehow lost the plot of the great story that He was telling? No, friends. No, friends. On the cross, Jesus Christ took the full storm of God's wrath as our substitute.

so that now in Him, no matter what other storm we face, even if our ship is dashed on the rocks, even if we go down into death itself, we won't be lost.

Jesus stood in the greatest storm for us, in our place, bearing the penalty we deserved so that we can know God's love and peace no matter what winds and no matter what waves might come.

[25 : 27] His was the ultimate rescue from the deadliest storm. And God demonstrated all of this by raising Him from the dead on the third day.

And friends, when you see Christ's sacrificial death for you, when you see Him triumphing over your sin and your death and God's wrath and the resurrection, when you see that, then your heart will begin to trust God's promises.

Then you'll be able to face any storm with courage. Then you'll be able to lose the ship and know that God hasn't lost you. Paul says in verse 23, the God to whom I belong and whom I worship.

Do you know that you belong to God in Christ? That the same special care that God showed to Paul throughout all of his years and all of his journeys and all of his mishaps, God shows to everyone who turns and trusts in His Son.

He knows every wind that blows. He knows every wave that breaks. He knows every word and each one He's using to make you fit for glory and nothing will break His promise.

[26 : 53] If He has given His Son for you, if He has put His Spirit into you, then friends, His promise will not fail. One writer describes how several years ago, some boards and veneers cut from an oak beam of an 80-year-old ship were exhibited at a fashionable furniture store on Broadway in New York City.

They attracted attention, he says, because of their elegant coloring and beautiful grain. Equally striking were some mahogany beams taken from a ship that shelled the seas 60 years ago.

The years of travel had contracted the pores of the wood and deepened its colors so that they were as magnificent and bright as those of an antique Chinese vase. The wood has since been used to make a cabinet, the writer says, that sits in a place of honor in the living room of a wealthy New York family.

There's also a great difference, he goes on to say, between the quality of people who have lived listless, self-indulgent, and useless lives and the quality of those who have sailed through rough seas, carrying cargo and burdens as servants of God and as helpers of others.

In the latter group, not only have the stress and strain of life seeped into their lives, but the aroma of the sweetness of their cargo has also been absorbed into the very pores of every fiber of their character.

[28 : 31] Lewis Albert Banks. Do you see what he's saying, friends? The storms of life, though they rack you and try you, they're actually making you into something beautiful in a way that nothing else can.

like the wood of a ship that's been weathered and cured through the weight of a thousand journeys, so God is making you into something of worth and beauty with each wave that crashes against your deck.

Do you want to face storms with courage and hope? Friend, go to this God. trust his word of promise. Throw yourself upon the gospel itself, Jesus' death and resurrection for you, and there you will find more than enough courage and hope no matter what the seas throw at you.

And what's more is that this trust of God and his promises won't just give you hope, but it will actually change you and make you into an agent of hope, a minister of hope to those who are seemingly in hopeless situation themselves.

We see this in the rest of the passage starting in verse 27. Let's pick up Luke's narrative there. When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight, the sailors suspected that they were nearing land.

[30 : 00] So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little further on, they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. 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 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, 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. As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, Today's the fourteenth day that you've continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing.

Therefore, 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. And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat.

Then they were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. There were in all two hundred and seventy-six persons in the ship, and when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the weed into the sea.

[31 : 01] 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 let 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.

But 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 soldier's 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 pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

Notice how the day progressively breaks in this section. In verse 27, it's midnight. In verse 33, it's about dawn. And in verse 39, it's day.

And by way of application, I think we see two things that are true of those who hold fast to God's promises in the storm. First, Paul's trust in God carries others in the face of crisis.

[32 : 15] One commentator writes, buoyed by his belief in God's sovereignty, Paul acted with calm at a time when others were panicking. In the rest of the chapter, right, Paul steps forward as a leader who can be trusted and the crew follows him.

Which helps us to see, by the way, that in verse 21, Paul isn't saying, by the way, I told you so. Did you wonder that when we read it? No, Paul's saying, look, trust me.

And we see that Paul's able to do much good in the face of a seemingly hopeless situation. He's able to keep his head and act wisely because he's richly rooted in what God has promised.

And when the sailors want to run, Paul makes sure they stay. After all, who's going to steer the ship to shore if all the sailors have cut and run? That's why, by the way, everyone's life depends on them staying in the ship.

And when the crew is too tired to eat, Paul gives them something to eat. And when the soldiers are ready to kill the prisoners for fear that they themselves will be punished if the prisoners escape, it's for Paul's sake that the centurion keeps them alive.

[33 : 26] Through it all, Paul becomes an agent of hope. I think especially of verses 33 through 38, breaking the bread, getting the men to eat, you know, it wasn't just a practical move, though of course it wasn't less than that.

One person observed, Paul knew that hungry men are not efficient men. Fair enough. But more than that, Paul taking the bread on the deck of that ship and feeding those men was a symbol of hope.

Despairing people don't eat a meal and they don't give thanks. And yet Paul leads them in both. His hope, his courage, it carried the rest of them.

And so too, friends, the church is meant to do the same thing today. We too are meant to be agents of hope, knowing that God has not abandoned us or his world.

Knowing that no matter how difficult or chaotic or unjust life becomes, God's promises still stand. God's kingdom is still advancing. And what's ahead for creation is not ultimately darkness, but daylight.

[34 : 44] New life after the storm. The world healed and made right. God's kingdom and we, the church, are placed in the middle of this story to bear witness through our words and our deeds of the hope of the gospel that the Lord Jesus reigns and creation one day will rejoice, liberated from its bondage to decay, as Paul will say.

So we see that holding to God's promises makes us agents of hope in a hopeless world, but it also gives us courage for mission. Isn't that the second thing we see? At the end of this chapter, they lose the ship, but they keep their lives.

And so it is for those in Christ. Friend, you can lose everything, earthly speaking, but you won't lose what really matters. You won't lose the one thing that's truly life to you.

In other words, no storm will ultimately wreck you because even in death, you won't lose Christ, the one who died and rose again so that you might live.

And even more than that, don't we see here that they lose the ship in order to keep their lives? They have to lose everything to stand safely on shore.

[36 : 16] In other words, God uses a shipwreck for their salvation. Jesus said to his disciples, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Friends, following God on mission is costly through many dangers, toils, and snares, as the hymn puts it. And this journey to Rome in chapters 27 and 28 is emblematic for Luke of the fact that taking the gospel to the ends of the earth is a dangerous undertaking.

Don't be confused. But the way of the cross is also the way of life. The way of the cross is the way of resurrection.

And anything we lose is nothing compared to what we gain. The great 19th century missionary David Livingston once said to a crowd of Cambridge students, for my own part, I've never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office.

People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blessed reward and healthful activity in the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter?

[37 : 40] Away with the word in such a view and with such a thought. It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say, rather it is a privilege, anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger now and then.

With the foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, they may make us pause and cause the spirit to waver and the soul to sink, but let this only be for a moment.

All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us and for us. I never made a sacrifice. There's someone who knew God's promises, who knew what it meant to lose the ship, to gain his life.

So, friend, if you're in the storm this morning, trust God. Hold fast to him and his promises. Hold fast to Jesus Christ, the one in whom all God's promises find their yes, find their fulfillment.

And not only will God fill you with courage and hope, but he'll make you a fearless agent of hope in the world. Let's pray.

[38 : 59] Lord Jesus, we ask that you would fill us with the confidence and the courage that this passage speaks of.

Lord, send your spirit, we pray, to help us see that our hope is immovable, that it stands fast, that in every storm you are bringing us towards the harbor of your goodness, of your grace, and of your glorious future.

Amen. Amen. Amen.