

NOT SO SMOOTH SAILING
Series in Acts: Advancing the Gospel
Acts 27:1-44
 Chadron Berean Church

On the Weather Channel there is an old tv series called *Storm Stories*. People tell their story about the storms they survived: tornadoes, hurricanes, that sort of thing. And *Storm Stories: The Next Chapter* celebrates storms that brought out the best in people: bravery, ingenuity, compassion. Well, we all have our own storm stories, don't we? Times when life isn't smooth sailing. If you don't yet, you will. Storms will either bring out the best in you or the worst in you. The question I want to ask this morning is, "*How should we respond to the storms of life? Do a storm in my life determine whether or you're in God's will or not? Or whether or not God is happy with you or mad at you?*" Interesting questions. But that's sort of what we're going to look at today as we return to our study in the book of Acts. If you're new or visiting, we've been making our way through the book of Acts. You've joined us as we come to chapter 27.

Last time we were in the book of Acts, before Christmas, we finished up the trials of Paul at **Caesarea Maritima**. Through a series of unfair trials, he finally exercised his Roman right to appeal to Caesar and is on his way to share the gospel with the most powerful man in the world, but it's a long journey there for him. This chapter we're going to read is one of the most exciting and even, entertaining chapters in all the Bible.

I. PAUL'S JOURNEY TO ROME. (VV. 1-12)

1 When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius. 2 And embarking in an Adramyttian ship, which was about to sail to the regions along the coast of Asia, we put out to sea accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica. 3 The next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul with consideration and allowed him to go to his friends and receive care.

So this is another one of the "**we**" section in Acts. "*...we would sail for Italy.*" The author **Luke** is writing this account as an **eyewitness**. It's likely that while Paul was in prison at Caesarea for those 2 years, Luke hung around the country of Judea and was busy talking to others about Jesus' life and resurrection and the events that unfolded in the days since Pentecost in Act 2 (Luke 1:1). He was collecting eyewitness information and compiling his Gospel and the book of Acts. And this chapter is a fine example of just how well Luke wrote. This chapter reads like an entertaining epic, but it is detailed history that teaches us theology. It's amazing and inspired. And it is the most detailed and accurate report of a shipwreck from the ancient world.¹

With Luke and Paul are **Aristarchus**, a disciple from Thessalonica, who will be mentioned in his Roman prison epistles. Then you notice **other prisoners** also heading to Rome. At this time, when someone was sentenced to death, the Roman Empire might hold them somewhere until they had a large number of prisoners that they could ship all at once to Rome, many who could possibly die in the gladiatorial games. So this is a rough crowd of **soldiers, sailors, and prisoners**, many with nothing to lose.² Their days are numbered. Finally, you have **Julius**, the centurion who oversees this transfer.

They start out on an **Adramyttium** ship. Adramyttium, or modern day Edremit, is a city on the northwest shores of Turkey. This ship was a smaller trading ship that typically hugged the coastlines. In the world of semi-trucks, this is like the day cab model. It's not going on long journeys or deep open waters. You have to remember too that there were no passenger ships at the time. No Princess cruise lines, eating delicacies and touring the Mediterranean. If you wanted to go somewhere, you basically walked down to the harbor, found a ship that was being loaded, inquired about the destination, haggled about a fare, then boarded with your own food and supplies except maybe water. You lived on the deck with no cabin and the sail was your only shade. I came across some comical satire this week by the Greek poet Horace. He said, "*the ship was first conceived by a sadistic degenerate whose mission was to destroy humanity.*"³

Paul's experience at sea may well support this assessment (2 Cor 11:25; Acts 27:39–44). He's suffered 3 shipwrecks already and is about to experience his 4th. In this case, Rome didn't haggle about a fare. They often utilized, or requisitioned, cargo ships. They would basically walk up and flash their badge, demanding use of the ship. And while I imagine some ship owners weren't happy about this, I read that some considered it a good thing because pirates wouldn't attack a ship with Roman soldiers on it. It offered protection and insurance.⁴

Anyway, the first leg of the journey takes them 70 miles north to **Sidon**, where they probably unload and reload. Since this might take several days, or up to a week, Julius let's Paul visit some **friends**, though probably with a soldier chained to him. As a Roman citizen and an innocent one, Paul was treated better than the average prisoner. But this also tells us I think that Julius trusts Paul. Paul was a man of integrity and will have an influence on Julius.

4 From there we put out to sea and sailed under the shelter of Cyprus because the winds were contrary. 5 When we had sailed through the sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. 6 There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy, and he put us aboard it.

So setting sail again, they head north and Luke describes the conditions. The **wind is contrary**. They had to use the island of **Cyprus** as a **windbreak**. It takes longer than usual but they finally make it to **Myra** (interesting side note: known as the home of St. Nicholas). But it was also known for its large **granaries** and that's why they find an **Alexandrian ship** there sailing for Italy. The delta region of Egypt near Alexandria was a breadbasket of Rome.⁵ And they hop on this grain freighter because these huge Alexandrian ships could fit a lot of people and handle the

open seas better. They were 180 feet long, 50 feet wide, and 44 feet from deck to the bottom of the hold.⁶ There are **276 people aboard** (v. 37). Historian Josephus records a trip he took with 600 men on board.

7 When we had sailed slowly for a good many days, and with difficulty had arrived off Cnidus, since the wind did not permit us to go farther, we sailed under the shelter of Crete, off Salmone; 8 and with difficulty sailing past it we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

Notice the descriptions: they sailed *slowly* for *a good many days* and *with difficulty*. Rather than sailing straight west, the wind forces them down under the shelter of **Crete** and doesn't allow them to go any further. One commentator calculated that this should have taken 2 days at the average speed of 6mph, but this journey took many days, and they were likely traveling around 2mph or 1.7 knots.⁷ Being curious, I decided to see what Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps averages and it's 3.7 knots. He can swim twice as fast as this ship is moving. The question we'll wrestle with is, "*If it's God's will to get Paul to Rome, and we know it is. God promised Paul. Why is it so difficult? Why doesn't God allow for smooth sailing?*"⁸

9 When considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul began to admonish them, 10 and said to them, "Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." 11 But the centurion was more persuaded by the pilot and the captain of the ship than by what was being said by Paul. 12 Because the harbor was not suitable for wintering, the majority reached a decision to put out to sea from there, if somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

So when the wind and weather don't let up for a **considerable amount of time** [sounds like a blizzard we endured recently], Paul speaks up and suggests that they winter at Crete and not risk it. Luke mentions the "**fast**" was over by now. This is a reference to the Jewish day Yom Kippur, the **Day of Atonement**. If this is the year **A.D. 59**, that fast took place on **October 5th**. Now some of this depends on where you were at in the Mediterranean – the stormy northwest or the more moderate southeast – but it widely known that between **September 15th and November 11th**, **travel was dangerous**. No travel was advised from November 11th to March 10th in these seas they're in except for a few military or merchant vessels pushing the limits.⁹ Winter brought less daylight, longer nights, more cloud cover, poor visibility, higher winds, and rain or snow.¹⁰

Paul warns them, possibly by revelation from God and definitely from experience that they should just stay where they are. This isn't his first rodeo. Paul wants to stay but the captain wants to make what is normally a half day trek, 50 miles, to a better harbor on the west coast of Crete, **Pheonix**. Everybody wants to go to Pheonix for the winter, right? But all they need is one good day and **the centurion is persuaded by the owner and captain to keep going** who probably had personal and economic reasons to keep moving. And it's not like the centurion wants to babysit these prisoners all winter. But hey, if they don't make it in time they may not get paid.

Also, emperors were known to offering a bounty to shipowners willing to sail in the dangerous season and recompense for any loss or damaged ships.¹¹

II. SHIPWRECK AT MALTA. (VV. 13-44)

13 When a moderate south wind came up, supposing that they had attained their purpose, they weighed anchor and began sailing along Crete, close inshore. 14 But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo; 15 and when the ship was caught in it and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and let ourselves be driven along. 16 Running under the shelter of a small island called Clauda, we were scarcely able to get the ship's boat under control. 17 After they had hoisted it up, they used supporting cables in undergirding the ship; and fearing that they might run aground on the shallows of Syrtis, they let down the sea anchor and in this way let themselves be driven along. 18 The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo; 19 and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. 20 Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.

So a short, half day trip quickly turns into **2 weeks** (v. 27) of misery and **loss of hope** for these men. They set sail on what they think is the perfect day, but it changes rapidly, just like our winter storms. Before every big winter storm it seems is a sunny, balmy day in the 60's. Then the winds and snow hit. Luke describes this wind as a **Euraquilo**, which is a hybrid, Greek-Latin nickname for "**northeaster**." They attempt to shelter behind a small island named **Clauda** but lose complete control of the ship and drop anchor as they are driven along. One thing that they are afraid of is being stranded on some infamous sandbars off the coast of North Africa called **Syrtis**. It was a ship graveyard where they'll likely die of dehydration. But as the storm worsens, they commence **emergency procedures**. They start **frapping** the ship, wrapping cables around the hull or across the deck to hold the ship together. And they begin **throwing cargo and equipment overboard**, hoping to lighten the ship's load so that they ride higher on the water and don't take in so much water.

21 When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, "Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and loss. 22 Yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. 23 For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, 24 saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.' 25 Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. 26 But we must run aground on a certain island."

So Paul basically says, "*I told you so!*" But you have to imagine all of these men are praying to their gods, invoking their deities. Two things determined sea travel: weather and gods. Some might be fasting intentionally. Some unintentionally. They are seasick, filled with anxiety, and

stretching their resources, expecting to be stranded on these sandbars for the winter. So Paul shares the good news. The **God to whom he belongs**, in whose hand is his life, is real, and He has sent an **angel** to inform him of the outcome. Remember Paul had God's promise of going to Rome (23:11). He knew he wouldn't die. But Paul lets these men know that they aren't going to die either. According to God, the trip will be tough, but survivable.¹² Divine protection does not require absence of difficulties, but they can take **courage** and **not be afraid**.

27 But when the fourteenth night came, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors began to surmise that they were approaching some land. 28 They took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found it to be fifteen fathoms. 29 Fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak. 30 But as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship and had let down the ship's boat into the sea, on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors from the bow, 31 Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved." 32 Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it fall away.

So they start sensing land approaching and drop **four anchors**, preparing to run aground. Some desperate soldiers think to themselves, *"If this ship's going down, I'm getting into the lifeboat."* However, Paul is now a trusted voice, giving directions, and they heed his warning that if they do not remain on the ship, they will not be saved. So there's an ironic reversal of roles that the ship is now under a Paul's command and to live you must listen to Paul and Paul's God.

33 Until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing. 34 Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation, for not a hair from the head of any of you will perish." 35 Having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all, and he broke it and began to eat. 36 All of them were encouraged and they themselves also took food. 37 All of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons. 38 When they had eaten enough, they began to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Paul **encourages them to eat**. They need the energy. And he **gives thanks to God** in the presence of all these **soldiers, sailors, and prisoners**. He is like a prophetic witness to this rough crowd. When they had their fill, they start **throwing the wheat into the sea** to further lighten the boat to get as close as possible to shore.

39 When day came, they could not recognize the land; but they did observe a bay with a beach, and they resolved to drive the ship onto it if they could. 40 And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea while at the same time they were loosening the ropes of the rudders; and hoisting the foresail to the wind, they were heading for the beach. 41 But striking a reef where two seas met, they ran the vessel aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern began to be broken up by the force of the waves. 42 The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners,

so that none of them would swim away and escape; 43 but the centurion, wanting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, 44 and the rest should follow, some on planks, and others on various things from the ship. And so it happened that they all were brought safely to land.

You know what I think of over and over in these final chapters of Acts? Providence. Divine providence would have them wreck 467 miles off course at **Malta**, which is like finding a needle in a haystack. Providence is also seen in that the centurion stops the soldiers' protocol plan to kill all the prisoners like Paul so that they don't escape. And all are brought safely to land.

Now let's ask our question again: "*How do you know you're in the will of God or not?*" I'm guessing the apostle Paul would not have answered that by saying, "*If things are falling into place and there's smooth sailing, you know it's God's will.*" Yet that's so often what we here. That's the assumption. I'm not saying that God won't open doors as part of our calling and some things will line up in His timing, but to determine whether we are in God's will or not, or if God is mad or pleased with us or not, *based on the circumstances* doesn't make any sense biblically. If it is true that smooth sailing in life is a sign of God's will or satisfaction with you, then Paul was clearly not in God's will or God happy with him most of his ministry. In 2 Corinthians 11 Paul said he'd been imprisoned, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. "*Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times shipwrecked [now 4!], a night and a day I have spent in the deep.*" He said his life was in danger *frequently*. He faced *many hardships*, including thirst, hunger, cold, and exposure. On top of it, churches were not perfect. They were messy and that weighed on him.

So without even to bringing up Jesus' life and warnings to His disciples who follow Him, this idea that "*if my life is smooth sailing then I am in God's will,*" clearly needs to go. Sometimes we think like that even as Christ-followers. We don't serve a pagan god that is that simple that many men on board might have. And I tried to summarize into one principle this morning how to avoid those false expectations that life is a playground and you'll live your best life now.

Be anchored in God's Word in the storms.

If you're anchored in God's Word, you'll be **anchored in your completeness in Christ** (His sufficiency, your freedom from condemnation, forgiveness, identity) because when you go through storms, sometimes you question your position before God. You'll be **anchored in God's sovereignty** (a major theme in Acts and in this chapter). Spurgeon said every storm has a bit in its mouth and God is at the reigns. But you'll be **anchored in God's mission, God's purpose**. That's what I really want to drive home: God uses storms as part of His mission and our calling. **Storm Purpose #1:** The first reason or purpose of God **in the storms is to mature us in Christ**, developing our character, faith, and hope (Rom. 5:3-4). I'll be honest, I watched some of the *Storm Stories* episodes this week in preparation for this. You know stood out? People were reminded of what really matters in life. It's not material possessions. It's not the grain or the

paycheck. They throw the Corvette's overboard. It's family that matters. It's knowing each day is a gift and to live for something greater than themselves. And being a virtuous person.

Storm Purpose #2: To advance the gospel through people of hope. There is an evangelistic, element to trials as we influence others through our faith and hope in God despite the trial. When Paul said, "*I believe that it will turn out exactly as I have been told,*" he displayed faith before these men that he trusts God's Word. And God put Paul's faith on display before all these men who needed Christ who probably would not recognize or admit their need of Him without the storm. How many of you or people you know came to Christ because of a storm in their life? They were forced to think about eternity. I guess you could say there were *276 reasons why God allowed this storm* – to be influenced by Paul, a man of faith and an agent of hope.

Lastly, I think there is a subtle message in this chapter for everyone who doesn't know Christ here this morning and doesn't know where they'll be spending eternity. I think Luke writes this in such a way that we – and some of the critics of the apostle Paul back in the day – will recognize that God is with Paul. Not to make much of Paul, but to draw men to his gospel message so that they would listen to him and experience deliverance. Just as these men had to listen carefully and believe what Paul said to be saved physically, so we have to listen carefully and believe the gospel message he preached to be saved spiritually and reach heaven's shores. The greatest deliverance we need is not from physical death, but spiritual death for our sins. But unless you **believe the gospel** Paul preached – that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ – you cannot be saved. Like the soldiers, you must cut away the life rafts you are depending on to get you to heaven that are not Christ. We cling to Christ and Christ alone.

¹ John A. Beck, *The Baker Illustrated Guide to Everyday Life in Bible Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 239.

² Bryan Clark, *Storms Are Part of the Calling*.

³ Laney, J. C. (2019). "Paul's Journey to Rome (Acts 27:1–28:15)," In B. J. Beitzel, J. Parks, & D. Mangum (Eds.), *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation* (p. 413). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 732.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 502

⁶ Laney, 414.

⁷ Bock 733.

⁸ Clark, *Storms*.

⁹ Laney, 412.

¹⁰ Bock, 734.

¹¹ Peterson, 686.

¹² Bock, 738.