

Sermon 77, A Sea Voyage, Acts 27

Proposition: Luke shows us that Christ reigns even over the sea and the folly of human beings, and that God's purpose will stand even when things look humanly impossible.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to an exciting sea voyage. Why is this here? One reason, of course, is that it happened. As Ajith Fernando comments in his commentary, he had to take a seven-hour boat ride in the Indian Ocean to get to a place in Sri Lanka where he was speaking. The ride home involved fierce winds and was pretty harrowing, to the point that Fernando says it is indelibly imprinted on his memory. Luke was there, and this story stuck out to him so much that he had to share it. More than that, though, he also is tapping into an ancient Biblical theme of promise and fulfillment. Jesus had promised that Paul would reach Rome; that promise is jeopardized time and again by the trip across the Mediterranean in which Paul engaged. Yet though the promise is jeopardized, it wins through, and not only Paul but all 275 others affiliated with him in this trip come safely to land in the end. God keeps His promises. He rules His Kingdom, and He even rules over the chaotic waters of the sea.

I. Paul Sails for Italy, vv. 1-2

Remember, in the previous chapter Paul appealed to Caesar; now, he is being sent to Caesar. Once again, Luke reminds us that ministry is team ministry by saying that he and Aristarchus traveled with Paul. The apostle is not alone, even though he is the only one Luke mentions as actually doing anything on the trip.

II. Travel, vv. 3-8

The very first stage of the trip goes perfectly; of course, it is only a 60-mile jaunt up the coast from Caesarea, where they started. Paul was cared for by his friends in Sidon — once again, in other words, Luke is showing us that love is a kingdom value. Though we have never heard of

Paul going to Sidon before, he has friends there — people who love him and want to see him flourish.

The next stage doesn't go so well. The winds are against them, practically from the beginning. They were headed west, ultimately desiring to travel to Italy, but the winds were blowing toward the east, back toward the Holy Land.

It's basic foreshadowing, but nothing too astonishing. The season of the year is getting late. But as it is, they get to a port in Lycia where the grain ships traveling from Egypt to Rome often put in. These could be huge ships, close to 200 feet long. Rome imported huge amounts of grain from Egypt — sad that now Egypt imports huge amounts of grain from Ukraine. In the days of Paul, Egypt was the breadbasket of the Mediterranean. Anyway, they board this grain ship which was also something of a passenger liner, what with 276 people aboard. They get to Crete, and there Paul speaks for the first time in the chapter.

III. Paul's Warning Against Further Travel, vv. 9-11

In Crete, he tells the sailors and soldiers that he would not recommend going any further. This is coming from a man who had traveled around 3500 known miles by ship. That is a lot of traveling. Paul knew what he was talking about. And so, looking at the ship, looking at the calendar, he simply says "Some of us are going to die if we strike out into the ocean at this time of year. Plus we'll lose the cargo and the ship."

Now, in our era of pleasure boating, we sometimes forget that in this era most ships were a workplace rather than a playplace. You didn't get on a ship to relax. You got on a ship to work. You were there because you could make money by being there.

Paul is saying, then, that the monetary aspect alone is a reason not to embark. Health and safety are two more crucial reasons not to embark. The ship is a death trap, and it's going to be a total loss.

Here, then, Luke shows us the practical wisdom of Paul. The man who could write 1 Corinthians 13 was not so lost in his head that he didn't even notice the risk of winter storms in the Med. Clearly, a sub-theme throughout this chapter is that following Christ makes you a wise man, not a fool, and that in the very intense storms of life, trusting in Jesus and acting practically for the deliverance of yourself and your companions is the Christian thing to do.

IV. Storm, vv. 12-20

Well, it's not more than a few hours before Paul's words come true. The ship tries to get down the coast to Phenix, hopefully just a few hours' trip. Instead, the worst expectations of Paul come true. A huge wind, the Northeaster, comes sweeping down and blows them inexorably toward Africa and the deadly Syrtis sands. The Med is 2400 miles long, but it's only 990 miles wide at its widest point, and you can't just run before the wind indefinitely in it. It's not like the Pacific, where you can be pretty sure the storm will blow itself out long before you ever run aground. In the Mediterranean, death is close during these winter storms.

Luke records many details — the few moments under the lee of Cauda when they are able to haul in the boat, the ropes tied around the body of the ship to keep it from breaking apart in the heavy seas, and even the jettisoning of the cargo. The storm just kept going, though.

I guarantee you that on land, a storm that lasted for two weeks would be known as an absolute disaster. We would still be talking about it. But at sea? That same storm means that you are a goner for sure. Forget still talking about it. It will be taking you to Davy Jones' locker.

V. Paul's Prophetic Promise of Life, vv. 21-26

That's how everyone felt. Luke seems to suggest that even he, along with the rest, had completely given up hope. Salvation is no longer in the picture. It's at this point that Paul's Christian faith comes into play. He stands up and says forthrightly, "If you'd listened to me we wouldn't be in this mess."

Paul was explaining why they should trust him. He had been right that things would be bad. "Now," he says, "I'm still right — except this time, I'm right to say that no one will die."

That's a hard message to believe. But Paul backs it up by stating that he was told it by an angel of the God he served.

This, brothers and sisters, is an excellent example of the kingdom's certainty. When almost 300 people have given themselves up for lost, Paul is not afraid to stand up and say "Don't do that, because I am a servant of God and He will take care of us all."

Do your coworkers know that you're a Christian? If you are caught in a two-week storm and everyone believes the ship is going down, will you let them know that you're still a Christian? Paul's faith was not shaken in the slightest. Like Stonewall Jackson, who felt "as safe in battle as in bed," so the Apostle to the Gentiles testified freely to the Gentiles that he was not nervous or afraid of dying because his God was going to take care of him.

Brothers and sisters, Paul was certain of the Kingdom. Even a storm of this size could not shake him. How certain of the kingdom are you? How much faith do you have in the ability and willingness of God to lead you exactly where you need to be?

Paul's faith withstood the perils from the Jews. Now, it has the chance to withstand the perils of the sea too.

VI. Night, vv. 27-29

Finally, after 13 agonizing nights and days of drifting in the storm came the longest night of all. They could hear breakers, and rightly figured that unless they were able to arrest the ship's progress, it would be cast on the rocks and everyone on board would be lost. But in the darkness, with no charts and no radar and no lighthouses and no idea where they even were, they simply lowered four anchors and prayed for daylight.

Luke records it laconically, but again, it throws the certainty of the Kingdom into stark relief. There are no atheists on sailing ships that are desperately clawing away from rocky coasts into the teeth of the gale. But how many of the sailors on such boats are able to trust God implicitly? Trusting God in the darkness is a major theme in Scripture, and it crops up again here. God's promise is under threat, and I'm sure Luke was praying as hard as anyone else aboard, or harder.

VII. Paul's Warning Against the Sailors' Perfidy, vv. 30-31

Well, the sailors decide that they've had enough. They determine to take the ship's boat and flee. Paul spots their dirty plan and notifies the soldiers, who slice the ropes and set the boat adrift.

VIII. Soldiers, v. 32

I'm sure that the sailors were none too pleased by this action. But again, Luke is showing us the presence of mind and Christian faith of Paul, who insists that God's promises will come to pass through the most human of means. God promises that your children will be holy and have a special place in His covenant — but that will come to pass in large part through your diligent parenting, loving them and treating them well no matter what. The same goes for God's promise that Paul will arrive in Rome. It's a true promise, but it will come to pass, on this stormy morning, only through the professional skill of the sailors directing the ship toward as safe a landing as possible.

IX. Paul Offers Food and Hope, vv. 33-37

Paul, however, is not content to enjoy the certainty of the kingdom in private. Though he does not preach a long evangelistic message, he continues to show by his demeanor that he believes the Kingdom is certain. To that end, he urges everyone to eat food. It's true: Often we can show our love for Christ and for people by the simple things. Just giving people food, and permission to eat it when they're too busy, or seasick, to have noticed that they hadn't eaten for days; just giving that cup of cold water, or offering someone a coat or a place to sleep, can be a huge testimony to the ways of Jesus and our own certainty that He reigns. Again, Paul is up front about his faith without shoving it down anyone's throat. He stood up and prayed, assuming leadership over all 300 people aboard.

X. Shipwreck, vv. 38-41

Then they tried to lighten the ship by throwing out the cargo, knowing that it was certainly a total loss anyway. Then they tried to get the ship to the sandy beach area, as opposed to jagged rocks or back out to sea. But it stuck fast on some kind of underwater obstacle or rock, and the pounding surf quickly tore its stern to pieces.

XI. Salvation, vv. 42-44

The soldiers, perhaps knowing that their lives were forfeited if they lost any prisoners, sought to kill the prisoners. But the centurion saved Paul, and with him the other prisoners. Then they all floated in to the land on planks and pieces of the ship.

Salvation. Yes, this is an earthly salvation, not the full version that Paul preached in so many places. But it's still a salvation, still evidence that Jesus reigns over nature as well as over man.

Get familiar with this story of shipwreck, because it provides further evidence that Jesus is king. His kingship is not shown by always delivering His people from everything bad. It's shown by how His people conduct themselves in times of stress and trial and pain. Do you know Jesus as Lord? Do you trust Him in the storm? His Kingdom is certain; He brought Paul through, and He will bring you through too. Trust Him. Amen.