

Through Many Dangers, Shipwrecks and Snakebites

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[0 : 00] Right, okay, let's get back to business and open our Bibles. Acts chapter 27. And we're going to read this very dramatic story.

It takes us right through chapter 27 and into about halfway through chapter 28. Remember, we've been listening to Paul defending himself against Roman authorities, King Agrippa, Festus, all the rest.

And now he has, having appealed to Caesar, is being sent by Festus to stand trial in Rome.

And chapter 27 begins. 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 on a ship of Adramitium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.

[1 : 10] Next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. Putting out to sea from there, we sailed under the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us.

And when we'd sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lysia. There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria, sailing for Italy, and put us aboard. We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Canidus. And as the wind did not allow us to go further, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmona.

Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lysia. Since much time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous because 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 of our lives.

But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to 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.

[2 : 36] 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 Northeasterner struck down from the land, and when the ship was caught and couldn't face the wind, we gave way to it and we were driven along.

Running under the lee of a small island called Cowda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. After hoisting it up, they used supports to underguard the ship.

And then, fearing that they would run aground on the Cistus, they lowered the gear and thus 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.

But neither sun or stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us. All hope of our being saved was at last abandoned. Since they'd been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, Men, you should have listened to me, and not have set sail 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. 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.

[4 : 04] 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 have been told.

But we must run aground on some island. When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight, the sailors suspected that we were nearing land. So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther 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.

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 for the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.

And the soldiers cut 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 is the fourteenth day that you've continued in suspense without food, having taken nothing.

[5 : 18] Therefore I urge you, take some food. It will give you strength. For not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you. And when he'd said these things, he took bread and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, broke it and began to eat.

Then they were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. We were in all 276 persons on the ship. And when they'd eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea. Now when it was day, they didn't recognize the land, but they noticed the 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, 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 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. 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 on pieces of the ship.

[6 : 36] And so it was that all were brought safely to land. After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta.

I seem to have a rival in the congregation. Wonders of electronics. Can you shut him up, George? It's all right. We've got our breath back after that exciting bit of reading. After we were brought safely through, we then 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 was cold. When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened onto his hand. When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, no doubt this man's a murderer.

Though he's escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live. He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead.

[8 : 07] When they'd waited a long time and saw no misfortune, they changed their minds and said he was a god. Now, 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. Paul visited him and prayed and putting his hands on him, healed him. When this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and they were cured.

They also honored us greatly. When we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed. After three months, we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria with the twin gods as a figurehead.

Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days and from there, we made a circuit and arrived at Regium. After one day, a south wind sprang up and on the second day, we came to Putele and there, we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days and so, we came to Rome.

Amen. And may God bless us his word. Well, please do turn to Acts 27 and if you're like me, you're relieved to reach 27 after many chapters of detailed accounts of trials and tribunals, I was quite glad to get to chapter 27.

[9 : 51] So, please turn there and spend a few minutes together in this chapter. And it makes, doesn't it, for a great read. It is a gripping story.

We are on the edge of our seats for almost 40 verses wondering, is Paul going to make it? The narrative explodes with tension and detail.

It certainly grabs our attention, particularly coming off the back of trial scene after trial scene after trial scene after trial scene after trial scene.

But whilst you might enjoy the story and be swept up in the drama, you might have wondered to yourself as you read it, what is this doing here? Why such extraordinary detail?

Why does Luke devote so much time and space in his account to this voyage? Why all the details about wind directions and all sorts of nautical things I don't really understand?

[10:53] Why such emphasis on this particular journey? Luke has covered many, many decades in his two-volume account.

From Luke chapter 1 through to the end of Acts covers 60-odd years. Many, many miles are covered, many journeys.

Longer journeys than this one are covered in one or two verses. Why a whole chapter on this journey? Why such detail? Luke could have begun with chapter 27 verse 1 and the very next verse he could have said, after a long and difficult journey involving a shipwreck, Paul arrived in Rome.

Why not just say that? He could have saved himself a lot of time and effort. But Luke doesn't give us a brief account, does he? He gives us long, very detailed account of Paul's journey.

Why? Why did Luke do that? What is Luke communicating? What did he communicate to Theophilus, his first reader, and for us today? What's the point?

[12:01] Well, I think Luke is showing us what true gospel witness really involves. You see, we follow Paul, who followed Jesus, and Jesus endured great trials, great suffering, even though he had done no wrong.

And likewise, Paul, although not perfect, he has done no wrong. Trial after trial has seen him innocent of anything deserving death.

But even so, he spent years in prison, and now he's heading off to face Caesar. But again, dangers and suffering would face him on the way. And that is the reality for all who follow Jesus, like Paul himself, and for all who follow in his footsteps.

We are to expect difficulties in this life as we witness to Jesus. It is not often going to be plain sailing, quite the opposite.

Storms will come, real in this case and otherwise. But the encouragement is, as we see in this story, that that is the way of gospel witness.

[13:11] And God, even in the midst of those difficulties, he does not abandon us. He doesn't promise deliverance from suffering and hardship, but rather through it.

He is there with us in the midst, all the way. And in a sense, Luke could have just told us that. And again, we come back to the question, why such detail?

Well, we get something of an insight into what it is to live by faith in God's promises in the midst of life's storms and trials.

We're being shown what it is in that moment to walk by faith. And we get a sense of the real hopelessness, a sense of the real hopelessness of the situation in this chapter.

What does God's servant do in the darkest moments when there is, humanly speaking, no hope? Well, Luke shows us.

[14:15] So let's look more closely at the narrative. Three points. First, the inherent suffering of gospel witness. Look at the first 20 verses of chapter 27. The inherent suffering of gospel witness.

From the off, the storm clouds are gathering on the horizon. The first word in the original is delivered or handed over.

Paul is handed over. And as so often in these last chapters of Acts, Luke is drawing parallels with the sufferings of Jesus, who himself was handed over.

In the same way that Jesus was handed over, Paul was handed over. And that little illusion in itself flags up for us that this could be a challenging journey.

And early in the journey itself, Luke gives us indications that things are not going to be straightforward. Look at verse 7. They arrived with difficulty off, however you pronounce that word, syndus.

[15:23] The wind did not allow us to go further. The next verse, they coasted along with difficulty. And it's clear, even to Paul, not a professional sailor, but he could see that the prospects for the journey weren't good.

Look at verse 9. Since some time had passed, the voyage was now dangerous because even the fast was already over. Paul advised them, saying, Sirs, I perceived that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.

You see, they were coming into the autumn after the fast. And anyone who lived in and around the Mediterranean Sea would have known that that was not a good time to take to sea, end of the autumn, end of the winter.

And it was clear to Paul that that was not a good time to head off. Now, Paul himself was not averse to taking risks, was he?

As we've seen in the past chapters, Paul was prepared to go to Jerusalem, remember, even though he knew that great dangers awaited him. Remember his words to the Ephesian elders back in chapter 20.

[16:39] He said to them, the Holy Spirit testifies to me that in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. Paul knew that as he went to Jerusalem difficulties, prison would await him.

He was not averse to risk, but why the caution now? Why is suddenly Paul saying, I'm not so sure about this? Well, I think Luke is showing us here that although some risks are necessary, there can be no gospel advance without taking risks, as we've seen time and time again, but not all risks are worth taking.

Yes, Paul was prepared to die for the gospel, but not needlessly. Yes, Paul was absolutely set on getting to Rome, but not at any cost.

As David Gooding writes on this little section, he says, faith thrives on taking risks for God's sake, but there comes a point where the risk is unjustified and taking it is not faith, but presumption.

Entering a building project without seeking expertise, no proper financial planning, let's just go for it. That's not faith, that's presumption.

[18:16] Heading overseas, with no consultation with the church leaders, no taking proper precautions, just going. It's not faith, it's presumption.

For Paul, taking to the Mediterranean in the autumn was an unnecessary risk, and especially as the reason for wanting to move on, was to find a slightly more comfortable place to winter.

Look at verse 12. That's why they wanted to move slightly further west. The place they were wasn't quite good enough for a winter harbour. Not worth it, thinks Paul.

Some risks are worth taking for the gospel, but not everything. However, Paul overrules. He is, at this point, a mere prisoner after all, and so they set sail.

Off they go. Now, things are off to a good start. There's a nice, suddenly, southerly wind, which pushes them along the coast. But before long, the dreaded northeaster wind struck the ship.

[19:25] It seems that Paul was absolutely right in his predictions, wasn't he? Now, to be honest, I am no expert when it comes to sailing. I've got next to no understanding.

But happily, my brother-in-law spent several years in the Navy. And as it happens, he actually sailed this part of the Mediterranean and experienced the northeaster. I was delighted when I was able to hear that.

Now, the northeaster comes on very suddenly. And he and his pals, they are below deck, and over the tunnel comes an announcement from the bridge about the northeaster wind.

If you want to go and experience it, you better head on deck and go and feel what it's like to experience the northeaster wind. And so, off he went with some of his pals. They could barely get the door open, such was the strength of the wind.

And they stepped outside, you could not stand up. They had to get down on their haunches and crawl, and they went to what's called the ski slope. That's the bit where the aircraft take off on the aircraft carrier.

[20:26] And they crept up to the edge and stuck their heads over. They couldn't bear it for more than ten minutes. They couldn't even speak, such was the strength of the wind coming in. Anyway, they scurried back under deck, and my brother, who's got ginger hair, his face was the same color as his hair after ten minutes in that wind.

Now, it's one thing on a huge aircraft carrier. They were fine, they could turn into it. But here, a much, much smaller ship. They couldn't do that. This meant serious trouble for a ship of that size. And they're driven along. They couldn't do anything about it. They were utterly helpless, out of control, violently storm-tossed. For days, this went on. Look at the end of verse 20. All hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

moment. This is a low point, a desperate moment. I don't know if you've ever experienced something like that in your own life.

A moment where hope of rescue seems utterly extinguished. There is just no hope anymore. Death is approaching. There's nothing that can be done.

[21 : 43] That is how Luke describes this moment there on the ship. 276 people on board. All hope of our being saved abandoned.

Not only were they facing physical death, drowning, but the very promises of God themselves were hanging in the balance at this point, weren't they?

Remember, Paul was set for Rome. The Lord had promised him that he would get there and that he would testify at the very heart of the empire. God's God's God's God's God's God's God's promises failed.

It's hard to grasp, surely, for Paul in that moment. What's going on? We feel as if it shouldn't be this way. After all, Paul has endured so much already. He's given up so much, suffered so much, and now this seems unfair.

Why should Paul have to face this now? Perhaps we feel the same way when good Christian folk who sacrifice so much for the gospel just get hit time and again, calamity after calamity, tragedy after tragedy, hardship after hardship.

[23 : 02] Why is it that way? Why does this sort of thing happen? Have God's promises failed? Well, as we'll see in a moment, they haven't.

But don't miss what Luke is teaching us here. Despite the promises of God, Paul would endure suffering and even near death along the way.

God's servants then and today are not promised smooth passage. The inherent suffering of gospel witness is something that we need to be prepared for.

Not only in the form of persecution at the hands of enemies to the gospel. We've seen that time and again, haven't we, through the book. It's not only at human hands, but also it is the reality of living in this fallen world that we need to come to terms with.

We live in a fallen world. We, like everybody else, will experience illness and storms and frustration.

[24 : 09] We're not yet in the New Eden, are we? We are still awaiting the return of Christ when he will at last consummate his eternal kingdom. Only then will we be free from struggle and suffering.

Only then will we be free from the storms of life. And if we don't grasp hold of that reality, that we are going to struggle with all that we experience in this fallen world.

Our expectations will be off kilter. We need to be clear on the inherent suffering of gospel witness in this world, even for the Apostle Paul.

even he had to endure this terrible, fearful journey. And so it is for all who follow in his footsteps, seeking to be gospel witnesses.

We will have to endure the reality of living in this fallen world. That's the first thing that Luke is showing us here, with all this detail about the storm and all hope being lost.

[25 : 15] But alongside that reality, we have the great encouragement of the next section. Despite the depths of despair there in verse 20, we see as we look on to verse 21 to 44, the encouraging sovereignty of God and gospel witness.

God in his great mercy and kindness speaks words of huge comfort and encouragement to Paul.

Look at verse 23. For this very night, there stood before me an angel of the Lord, 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 and all who sail with you safety. See, this personal revelation to Paul, well, it was unusual even for him.

A few times you get little moments like this in Paul's life, but only a few over many decades. But what a comfort it was. The Lord himself reassuring him of the promises he's already given.

You will stand before Caesar. You will get to Rome. It was at this moment of utter despair that the Lord spoke to Paul and comforted him.

[26 : 37] This moment in verse 20, that is when the Lord came and reassured him. When all other hope of being saved was gone. You see, the Lord's promises to Paul would not fall to the ground.

He would do just as he said he would. He has promised that his gospel will go to the ends of the earth. And he's particularly promised Paul that he will get to Rome and witness there.

Nothing was going to bring that from happening. Nothing could stop that. Not even fierce storms like this. God's weather cannot hinder God's work.

As David Gooding wrote. God's plans and his purposes. We've seen the efforts of men to hinder Paul.

But God is sovereign over that. And here we're seeing that even nature itself cannot derail God's plans and his purposes. And so we can take great courage. Nature will never be allowed to overwhelm us until God has attained the goal he had in mind when he gave us our tasks.

[27 : 52] Again, David Gooding. Nature will never be allowed to overwhelm us. Nor anything else. Until the tasks we've been given are complete.

Now that's not to say that we won't face hardship and difficulty. It's not to say that we won't face real storms. Metaphorical storms.

But we do know that nothing, nothing can or will prevent us from doing the work that God has called us to. And it may be that the Lord delivers us from the storms of life.

That may be the case, but more likely it will be in the midst and through the storms of life that God will work his purposes. We're given no promises of escaping the storms and sufferings of this world. We are not promised that. How could that ever be the case? Jesus' ministry was cross-shaped, as was Paul's.

[29 : 00] And we're called to follow in that same path. We are servants of a crucified Savior. And that is our pattern. that is who we follow.

We are afflicted in every way, Paul writes to the Corinthians. Afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken.

Struck down, but not destroyed. Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always been given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

So death is at work in us, but life in you. That is our pattern. That is our privilege as those who follow Jesus.

But God gives great reassurance here to Paul, doesn't he? He reminds him that he is sovereign. That he will keep Paul and the whole ship safe.

[30 : 17] And Paul conveys this news to the desperate sailors on the ship. Take heart, he says. Take heart. I have had a message from God.

We will be saved. I have faith in God. Trust me. But you see, the promises of God, amazing and wonderful as they are here, this great reassurance that they will be saved, it didn't rule out human responsibility in the midst of that storm.

God's promises still required great skill and judgment on behalf of those sailors. God's promises required real leadership from Paul as well. There would be no miracle.

The ship wouldn't somehow be transported from the middle of the storm safely to harbor. That's not how it happened. No, Paul is clear, isn't he? Yes, God will save us. But look at verse 26.

We will need to run aground on some island. You see, Paul's faith in the promises of God didn't lead to passivity on his part.

[31 : 29] Quite the opposite. Paul's faith meant that he took responsibility. He was proactive. It's quite interesting as you read through the story how the centurion who is in charge of the prisoners and Paul he sort of slips into the background as the story goes on and as that happens Paul steps to the fore.

He takes charge. Paul is the one taking responsibility. It's Paul who gives courage to the sailors. It's Paul who points out the attempted mutiny in verse 30.

It's Paul who makes them all eat something in preparation for their swim ashore. See, that is real faith in the midst of real difficulties. We don't sit back and somehow expect the Lord to work things out as we just sit back and enjoy the watch.

Rather, real faith is active. Real faith takes responsibility, takes the initiative. Real faith realizes that to have the best chance of making it alive they've got to run the ship aground.

You need the sailors to stay on the ship if that's going to happen. Faith realizes that if 276 people are going to make it successfully ashore, they need food in their bellies.

[32 : 48] Real faith in the face of a crisis maintains a steadiness which all around have abandoned. Real faith trusts God's promises and clings to His sovereign purposes.

Real faith is proactive, not passive. And even though Paul has had these specific words, you will be saved, you and all the ship, they still had to run aground, verse 26.

So we've seen the inherent suffering of gospel witness. We've seen also the encouraging sovereignty of God's purposes in all this alongside that human responsibility. reality. But here's the big picture. Here's the significance of the narrative in the book of Acts. Indeed, this is the significance of the narrative for world history.

Without the events of this chapter, you and I would not be here this evening. If Paul never made it to Rome, then you and I may not be here.

[33 : 56] Here's the third thing that Luke is teaching us. we are seeing the unstoppable spread of gospel witness. Paul and all those on the ship, they make it safely to shore, verse 44.

They run the ship aground, they all get off, all are saved. And they have, as it turns out, landed on Malta. And a few verses later, Paul, verse 14, makes it to Rome.

Now, this has been Paul's goal for so long. Right the way back in chapter 19, Paul sets his sights on Rome. Obstacle after obstacle has stood in his way.

Trial after trial. Years in prison. In these two chapters alone, chapter 27 and 28, he has faced shipwreck, sailors who wanted to kill him, and snakes.

Everyone a real threat to his life. And yet, through all of those, the Lord has kept and guarded him. The Lord has kept the promise in verse 11 of chapter 23, where the Lord said, you will testify in Rome.

[35 : 11] You will. And here at last, in the very epicenter of the most powerful empire on the earth, due to appear before Caesar himself, the most powerful man in the known universe, Paul is there.

And Luke is showing us that nothing, nothing is going to stop the spread of gospel witness. Nothing is going to stop the gospel going to the very heart of the empire and going to the ends of the earth. See, now that Paul was in Rome, now that real gospel witness would take place in Rome itself, well, the gospel from there would speed along the tributaries of the empire, the massive road network of Rome, to the ends of the earth.

This is why we're here today. The gospel, just as Jesus said it would, beginning in Jerusalem, spreading on and on to the ends of the earth.

God's gospel, Luke is showing us, is unstoppable. Human opposition cannot stop it. Not even the elements, not even storms, not even the natural world, not even snakes can stop the march of gospel witness to the ends of the earth.

[36 : 32] And that must encourage us, mustn't it? It's not that we won't encounter struggles. This story teaches us the opposite, doesn't it?

We will. We will encounter many struggles. But even when we do face struggles and suffering and perplexity, we can know with absolute certainty that nothing is going to stand in the way of gospel progress.

God's gospel is going to the ends of the earth. Jesus said to his disciples, in the world, you shall have tribulation.

But be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world. And as Jane Phillips writes, no more apt word could be written over this wonderful chapter than that.

In this world, you shall have tribulation, but I have overcome the world. Be of good cheer. Let's pray.

[37 : 49] Father God, we thank you that you have purpose that this chapter should be in our Bibles. We are sometimes perplexed at the details.

why so much time given to this. But Lord, please send us from this place encouraged. Encouraged that you are sovereign over all things.

Over human affairs. Sovereign over the natural world. And help us to go confident of good cheer because your gospel is unstoppable.

Your church will continue to grow and that not even the gates of hell shall prevail. So encourage our hearts even in the midst of dark, dangerous, storm-filled days.

Encourage us for we ask it. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.