

“There Will Be No Loss of Life among You” (Acts 27)

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“Life’s a journey, not a destination.” Have you ever heard that? The first time I heard that was in an Aerosmith song.¹ Really. And that’s how I know it’s true.

There is a lot of truth in that statement. Life is a journey. Of course, we are all headed to one destination or another, so the destination is important. But this life is not the destination itself. This life is a road or a path that leads to the destination.

Some of us have traveled through space. We’ve moved from a different country, a different place. All of us are traveling through time. We are all headed somewhere.

I suppose that’s why stories about epic journeys are so popular. Whether it’s Homer’s *Odyssey*, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, or *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, stories of dangerous or adventurous pilgrimages are some of the most important and popular stories ever told. I think that’s because these stories seem to be dramatic metaphors for our lives. We set out on paths unknown, encounter temptations and conflicts, sometimes lose hope, only to press on toward a goal.

In fact, the Bible itself has many stories of travel. In the Old Testament, Abraham traveled from Ur of the Chaldeans—what is now Iraq—all the way to Haran (part of eastern Turkey today) and down to Canaan. He even went down to Egypt before settling in Canaan. His descendants went down to Egypt, where they became slaves, before God redeemed them and brought them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Centuries later, when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, a number of Jews went into exile in Babylon. Decades later, a number of Jews came back to Canaan.

Of course, in the New Testament, we see Joseph and Mary travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and then, after Jesus is born, they move down to Egypt, and back to Nazareth. Jesus makes trips from Galilee to Jerusalem, including one final trip so he could be crucified. And, as we have seen in the book of Acts, his followers, particularly Paul, make many trips throughout the Roman Empire. And, at the end of the book, we see Paul on a journey to Rome.

¹ Aerosmith, “Amazing,” *Get a Grip* (Geffen Records, 1993).

But before we look at that, I think it's important to see that the whole Bible is a story of a journey. The Bible begins with God making the universe and the world and human beings. And God places those first human beings, Adam and Eve, in a very special place, a garden paradise. He gives them a job to perform. They are supposed to represent God and love him and worship him. They are supposed to rule over the world by obeying God's word. But Adam and Eve didn't trust God's word. Instead of listening to God, they listened to another voice. When they rejected God, sin entered into the world and changed the course of all of history. God removed them from this garden paradise and they entered into the wilderness. The rest of the story of the Bible deals with how human beings can get back to paradise. And all the stories of Israel and even the stories of Jesus are microcosms of that one big story. The stories of leaving home and being exiled and returning—whether it's the parable of the prodigal son or the story of Jesus leaving his home in heaven, being crucified, rising from the grave, and ascending to heaven—all reflect the one big story of exile and return that are found in the Bible.

When we turn to the end of the Bible, Revelation 21-22, we see that the story ends with one big homecoming. When Jesus returns, he will recreate and restore the world to be what it should have been, a place without sin and death. It will be a place where God and his people dwell in peace forever. Like the garden of Eden, there will be a tree of life and river of life. It will be a cosmic garden paradise and all will be well.

But we're not there yet, of course. Right now, we're far from home. And that is the reason why all of us have a powerful longing for home, even if we live in the town where we were born and raised. We long for a time and place when and where all things were good. Some of the very best thinkers and writers have commented on that. You can find that idea in the writings of Augustine and C. S. Lewis. We long to be home, to be with our God, whether we realize this or not. As Lewis says, we desire for things, for pleasure and beauty, thinking that these things will make us happy. But when we experience a good meal or sex or a vacation or a movie, we're left unsatisfied, because we thought these things would fulfill us. He writes, "The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. . . . For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a

tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”² All of us long for that country, and the Bible tells us how we can get there.

Why am I spending so much time talking about all of this? Because, in Acts 27, we have a whole chapter devoted to Paul’s travel from Caesarea to the island of Malta, on the way to Rome. On the face of it, the story is just about a sailing expedition that went wrong and ended up in a shipwreck. But I think there’s more to the story than that. Luke, the author of Acts, could have written, “Paul got on a ship and sailed toward Rome. But he faced bad weather, the ship got tossed to and fro, and as it was getting torn apart by the weather, it struck a sandbar and the passengers swam to safety.” That would tell us all that we need to know if Luke’s point was simply to track Paul’s movements. But Luke was not only writing history. Luke was writing theology. And I think there’s a profound theological message in this passage.

So, here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to read through Acts 27 and explain what’s happening. And then, after that, I’m going to explain the theological meaning of this passage.

With all that said, let’s begin. Before we read Acts 27, I want to quickly remind you that Paul had been taken into Roman custody in Jerusalem because non-believing Jews wanted to silence his message. They claimed that he was stirring up mobs against the Roman Empire and that he had profaned the temple, neither of which was true. In order to get a fair hearing and to get away from his enemies, Paul demanded a trial in front of Caesar, or the Roman emperor, who at that time was Nero. So now he is traveling from Caesarea to Rome, across the Mediterranean Sea, on board a ship.

Let’s read Acts 27:1-8:

¹ 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. ² And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. ³ The 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. ⁴ And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. ⁵ And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. ⁶ There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board. ⁷ We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. ⁸ Coasting along it with

² C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Originally published 1949; New York: HarperOne, 2001), 30-31.

difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.³

Paul is put under the care of a Roman soldier named Julius, who will transport him to Rome. The fastest way to get to Rome in the days before trains, cars, and airplanes was to go across the Mediterranean on ship. So they, along with some prisoners, and some others, including Luke, get on a commercial ship. (There were no passenger ships in those days.) The ship they get on was one from Adramyttium, a city in Asia, or what is now western Turkey. The ship was returning back to its home port. A ship like this would hug the coastline. It stops in Sidon, almost seventy miles north of Caesarea. Julius lets Paul visit some Christians there, probably under the supervision of another soldier. Then they get back on board the ship and set out on the sea.

They sail east of the island of Cyprus, on the lee side. “Lee” just means the side sheltered from the winds, which were not favorable. They sail along the coast of Cilicia, the province that Paul was from, and they stop at Myra, part of Lycia, another province. Again, this is part of what is today known as Turkey. There, they get on a grain ship that went from Alexandria in Egypt to Rome. Egypt was the bread basket of the Roman Empire. Ships that carried wheat from Egypt to Italy were crucial to the Empire’s economy and wellbeing. They were large and able to sail across the open seas.

Once they get on the new ship, they have trouble sailing because the wind is still against them. They manage to land on the south side of the island of Crete, at a port ironically called Fair Havens.

As you’ve noticed, the sailing was already difficult. A decision had to be made. Were they going to sail on or would they stop in Fair Havens for the winter? Let’s find out in verses 9-12:

⁹ Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. ¹² And because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there,

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

The Fast that Luke writes about in verse 9 is the Day of Atonement. In the year 59, this was on October 5. It was considered dangerous to sail between mid-September and mid-November. After that, all sailing on the open sea was shut down for about three months. Paul, an experienced traveler, knew how dangerous the trip was, and he advises them to stay put until the winter was over. He says that “the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.” In other words, if we keep going, we’re probably going to die.

But the owner of the ship and the pilot want to get to Rome as fast as they can. There might have been some economic pressures in this case to get the ship to Rome. The faster the grain got there, the sooner someone could make money. Also, Fair Havens wasn’t as fair as Phoenix, a city further west on the island of Crete. The majority of the ship’s crew decide to try to sail there, since it was a better place to spend the winter. No one pays attention to Paul’s warning.

In the next several verses, we see that this was a bad idea. Let’s read verses 13-20:

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. ¹⁵ And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. ¹⁶ Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship’s boat. ¹⁷ After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. ¹⁸ Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. ¹⁹ And on the third day they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. ²⁰ 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.

When they sail away from Phoenix, a strong wind—literally, a typhoon—overpowers the ship. So the crew takes measures. First, they take aboard the boat, or dinghy. Then, they tie ropes around the hull of the ship, to help keep it from splitting open. We have to keep in mind that ships back then were probably not as strong as they would be centuries later. They fear being blown all the way to Syrtis, which was an area of shoals or sandbars located about four hundred miles away, off the north coast of Africa. Then, they lower the “gear,” which might have been a

sail or an anchor of some kind. Finally, they start throwing some of ship's cargo overboard, to lighten the weight of the ship. Since that wheat was worth money, this is obviously a desperate measure. After this, they spent many days at sea without sun or stars, in the midst of "no small tempest." They were lost at sea, without hope of being saved.

Then Paul, who already warned them, gives them a word of hope. He tells them that an angel of God has given him a message. No one on the ship is going to die. Let's read verses 21-26:

²¹ Since they had 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. ²² Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' ²⁵ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ But we must run aground on some island."

Earlier, Paul had said that if they continued sailing, there would be loss of life. But now he changes his tune. Though they are in the midst of a storm, in the dark, without hope and now without food, Paul says that not all is lost. Well, first, he says, "I told you so." Then he says, "There actually won't be any loss of life among you. Only the ship will be lost. An angel told me not to be afraid. He told me I would get to Rome and stand before the Emperor. But before we get to Rome, we're going to run aground on some island."

And that's what happens. After being at sea for two weeks, they start to approach an island. Let's read verses 27-32:

²⁷ 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. ²⁸ So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. ²⁹ And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. ³⁰ 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, ³¹ Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." ³² Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go.

The crew believe they are nearing land, so they start figuring out how deep the water is. A fathom is six feet, so when they first measure, they realize the water is one hundred twenty feet

deep, and then ninety feet. They realize they're approaching land quickly and it's night, when they can't see. So they drop anchors and wait for daylight.

When this happens, some sailors figure they can take the dingy while they pretend to throw anchors off the bow. But Paul stops them by saying to the soldiers, "Unless the sailors are on board, you cannot be saved." So the soldiers cut the ropes of the dingy so no one can escape.

They haven't made it to safety yet, but Paul tells them they should eat. Let's read verses 33-38:

³³ As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. ³⁴ 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." ³⁵ And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. ³⁶ Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. ³⁷ (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) ³⁸ And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

The reason they hadn't eaten is possibly because they were seasick, or the storm made it hard to cook. For whatever reason, they hadn't been eating, and Paul says they will need their strength for what comes next. So he takes bread and breaks it. The language reminds us of when Jesus took bread, gave thanks, and broke it at the last supper (Luke 22:19). After everyone eats, they throw more wheat off the ship to lighten the load. Again, this was a desperate measure.

Finally, let's read verses 39-44:

³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ So they cast off the anchors and left 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. ⁴¹ 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. ⁴² The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. ⁴³ 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, ⁴⁴ and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

Finally, they approach a bay. The plan is to let the ship run ashore, so they cut the ropes to the anchors and they hoist a sail. But they strike something. It was probably a sandbar (as the NIV

says), not a “reef,” as the ESV says.⁴ As they are stuck, the water starts pounding on the boat, which starts to break. The soldiers on the ship are worried what will happen if the prisoners get away. According to Roman law, soldiers who let prisoners go free would be punished, possibly with the death penalty. So they plan on killing all the soldiers. But the centurion, Julius, steps in and tells them not to kill the soldiers because he wanted to protect Paul. He tells those who can swim to swim to land, and those who can’t swim can hang on to pieces of the broken up ship until they arrive safely on shore. The island they land on is Malta, which we find out next week (Acts 28:1).

So that’s what happens in this passage. Let’s first think about this in broad theological terms. The owner of the boat, the pilot, the soldiers, the prisoners, and others like Luke get on board the ship during a dangerous time to sail. At one point, Paul warns them that if they continue, they will die. And what do they do? They ignore Paul. That’s kind of what happened to Adam and Eve, and what happens to all of us. Except, it’s God, not Paul, who warns us not to do things. And we, being foolish, ignore God and do what we want. God would be right to give us over to our foolishness, just as the men on the ship couldn’t blame Paul if the storm or the shipwreck killed them. But God, in his grace, doesn’t let those people die. He makes sure they reach the shore. The same is true for everyone who trusts in Jesus. Those who cling to Jesus make it safely to the other side, even though we had once ignored God and even though we deserve death.

This story also reminds me of some things in the Bible. It reminds me of the story of Jonah. Jonah was a prophet of Israel in the eighth century BC. God told him to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, the superpower of the world that threatened Israel. God told him to tell the people of Nineveh to repent. Instead of listening to God, Jonah heads in the opposite direction. He goes to Tarshish, perhaps in Spain. Of course, he got on a boat in Joppa, not terribly far from Caesarea, and he sailed across the Mediterranean, like Paul. Like Paul’s ship, Jonah’s ship was in the midst of a tempest and his ship threatened to break up (cf. Jon. 1:4 with Acts 27:14, 20, 41). Like the crew on Paul’s ship, the crew on Jonah’s ship started to throw cargo into the sea (Jon. 1:5). But unlike Paul, Jonah gets off the boat. In fact, the crew realize the storm is Jonah’s fault, and Jonah agrees to be thrown off the ship so that God’s wrath will be satisfied. When he is thrown off, the storm stops, the sailors on the ship praise God, and Jonah is

⁴ Literally, the Greek words behind ESV’s “reef” mean “the place of two seas,” τόπον διθάλασσον.

swallowed up by a great fish in the depths of the sea, where he stays for three days. Then he rises from out of the fish and goes to tell the people of Nineveh to repent.

Jonah was caught in a storm because he disobeyed God. He didn't go to tell people to turn to God. Paul was on a ship in a storm because he obeyed God. He faithfully told people to turn to Jesus. The people on the ship were saved in Jonah's day because Jonah was sacrificed. The people on Paul's ship were saved because Paul was on board and he had to go to Rome. It's as if Paul's story is a reversal of the Jonah story.

But the story of Jonah and this story in Acts also remind me of Jesus. In the Jonah story, a preacher of repentance sacrifices himself so others can live. He is thrown into the heart of a storm, is swallowed up, and then emerges after three days. That story foreshadows what happened to Jesus, which is why Jesus refers to the "sign of Jonah" (Matt. 12:38-41). The connection between Jonah and Jesus is pretty obvious because Jesus says, in Matthew 12:41, "something greater than Jonah is here."

The connection between Acts 27 and Jesus is less clear, but I can still see it. I think the key is verse 22, where Paul says, "there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship." Why mention the ship? Well, in this story, the ship is broken up while the passengers on the ship are saved.

Think about this: The crew of the ship deserved death because they were sailing at a dangerous time of year and they ignored Paul's warnings. They were lost in the midst of a dark storm. Yet they reach an island by God's grace. If they didn't land at Malta, they would have been taken out further to sea. They wouldn't make it. But because God is generous, he protected them. He brought them safely to their destination.

This reminds me also of the story of Noah and the ark. God was going to judge the world with a flood. Noah probably warned others in his day about the coming judgment, because he is called a "herald of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5). But only Noah and his family got on board the ark and they were saved.

Jesus is our Jonah. Jesus is our ark. Jesus is the ship that gets tossed into dark tempest of God's wrath so that we don't have to be destroyed by it. When Jesus died on the cross, he didn't die for his own sins. He didn't have any. But he died for the sins of everyone who would turn from their foolishness, from their sin, their rejection of God, and turn to him. All who turn to

Jesus don't have to fear God's judgment after they die, because Jesus experienced that judgment when he died on an instrument of torture and death almost two thousand years ago.

Paul and the men on his ship experienced darkness during the tempest. When Jesus was crucified, it was the middle of the day, and the sky turned black for three hours (Matt. 27:45). That darkness was a sign of God's wrath being poured on Jesus. Jesus was thrown into the greatest tempest at that time. Though it lasted three hours, it must have felt like an eternity. Jesus experienced that righteous punishment for sin. He experienced hell on earth. He was forsaken. He did this so that we don't have to experience punishment, so that we don't have to experience hell, so that we're not forsaken by God. Just as the ship was broken so that Paul didn't have to be, Jesus offered up his own body to be broken so that we don't have to be broken forever. Later, we'll take the Lord's Supper, when we remember what Jesus said, "This is my body, which is [broken] for you" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24).

That is the gospel. Jesus dies in our place. He bears the punishment we deserve for all the wrong we've ever done so that we don't have to be punished eternally. He experienced exile on the cross so that we don't have to be cast out forever. He was forsaken so that we don't have to be. His body was shattered on the rocks of the cross so that we can make it safely to shore.

But Jesus' death pays for the sins of only people who believe in him. And what does that look like?

Let me shift metaphors, from a boat to a plane. Imagine you want to go Europe. Perhaps you've always wanted to go to London. That's the destination you desire. Then you find out that the only realistic way of getting to London is getting on a plane. But say you've never been on a plane before. You're afraid. You've heard of plane crashes.

But you really want to go to London, so you start to do some research on planes. You find out that it's actually safer to fly on a plane than it is to get in a car. You decide to research the airlines that fly from Boston to London, and you're impressed by their safety records. Imagine you picked an airline and you could know which pilot would fly your plane to London. You find out he's never crashed an airplane, and he has significant experience.

Still, you have to get on the plane to get to your destination. It won't do you any good to believe in the idea of planes flying to London. It won't do you any good to think that a certain plane flown operated by a certain airline flown by a certain pilot can get you to your destination.

You can believe that all you want. But if you don't actually buy a ticket and get on the plane, you won't get to London. You have to take some steps to make that happen.

Once you're on the plane, you may not like it. You may be afraid. You may grab the armrests and have a five-hour white-knuckle ride. But you had enough faith in the airline and the pilot to get on the plane. And you did that without knowing everything about the plane and the pilot. You didn't know exactly which engines the plane uses, or how it operates. You didn't know everything about the pilot's history and what he did that morning. But you knew enough to get on the plane, and, wouldn't you know it, you arrived at your destination.

That's not a perfect analogy for having faith in Jesus, but it's a pretty good one. One problem with it are that we have seen planes take off and land frequently. Most of us have probably been on planes before. But no one has landed on the flight to the new creation yet. However, there is someone who has died and come back from the grave and has told us what happens. The other problem with the plane analogy is that with Jesus, we don't have to buy a ticket. He purchased it for us. We simply have to take the ticket and get on the plane. Believing in Jesus isn't believing in the existence of Jesus. You can believe in the existence of Jesus. Even Satan does that. But that doesn't mean you trust Jesus. And the word "faith" really means "trust." Trusting in Jesus means trusting that he's God, that he's good, that his way is best, that he is the only way to get to the destination of eternal life in paradise. Trusting Jesus means loving him, and Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey my commandments" (John 14:15, 21, 23-24). So trusting Jesus means obeying him, even imperfectly. It means following him, even if you have some doubts and some fear. It means trusting that Jesus is the only way to get to where you want to go even though you don't know everything, even if you haven't yet read the whole Bible, even if you still have some questions that haven't been answered.

Following Jesus means doing simple things like loving God and loving others. It means be generous to God and others. It means reading your Bible and praying and being involved in your local church. It means serving, not just being served. It means getting baptized, as a sign to everyone that you now belong to Jesus, your life has been changed, you have been cleansed from your sins, and there's no going back. It means clinging to Jesus through the storms of life, even when it feels like there's no hope.

As I said at the beginning, we all long for "home." We long for a better place, a better world. We want more. The only way to get there, the only ship that is sailing to that far off

country, is Jesus. He is the only one who can sacrifice himself for all the wrong you've done, for the ways you've ignored God.

If you're here today and don't know Jesus, can you be certain of what will happen to you when you die? All of us will die. The journey of every human goes to that dark place. Do you know what happens next? Perhaps you should listen to the words of a man—the God-man—who went to that place and came back alive. Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live . . . Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). There's still time to follow Jesus. That ship hasn't sailed yet.