

## SAILING FOR ROME

### Acts 27

This morning we are in Acts chapter 27...

To Caesar Paul had appealed and now to Caesar Paul was going.

But the trip from Caesarea to Rome was **hardly just a hop, skip and a jump**. The trip would require some **major sailing** back in a day when every plank, every mast, every piece of rope or sail was made by hand. Compared to today's modern ocean liners, these ships were crude beyond measure. Robert Ballard, the man who found the remains of the sunken ocean liner Titanic, has suggested that upwards of **one million ships** lie at the ocean's bottom. But the vast majority of those ships are like what Paul would board on his way to Rome. Let's read about his journey...

### Acts 27

Verse 37 mentions a detail that is, to me, quite astounding: the fact that there were **276 people aboard** the ship that was wrecked as it was driven aground on the reefs off the coast of Malta. 276 people on one ship constitutes a **very good size ship**.

When Christopher Columbus sailed for what would later be called America, there were 52 aboard the Nina.

When the Pilgrims set sail for Massachusetts in 1619, there were 102 aboard the Mayflower.

Today, one can board the Silver Cloud and go on an excursion to parts of Antarctica. That ship is 514 feet long and 70 feet. It carries a total of 452 crew and passengers - 64% more people than were on Paul's ship. But that ship has seven decks!

Back in Paul's day there was only **one deck** and everyone slept below deck in hammocks or side by side on a floor. Whatever goods were being transported were used as ballast to help keep the ship upright in heavy winds or seas.

So Paul's journey was not akin to going on a cruise aboard a Carnival, Royal Caribbean or Princess ship. There were no staterooms, no onboard pool or movie theater, and no place to play miniature golf. There were likely not even any private toilet facilities.

**This was crude, rough, and dangerous.** But to use a line which is likely just about as old as humanity itself, "You do what you have to do." And so every one of those 276 on board that ill-fated ship were **doing what they had to do** to get from here to there. It is what we humans do.

We started this morning's service with the Navy hymn: Eternal Father, Strong to Save. Listen again to its lyrics (by William Whiting)...

*Eternal Father, strong to save,  
Whose arm doth bond the restless wave,  
Who bids the mighty ocean deep  
Its own appointed limits keep;  
O hear us when we cry to Thee  
For those in peril on the sea*

*O Christ! Whose voice the waters heard  
And hushed their raging at thy word  
Who walkedst on the foaming deep  
And calm amidst its rage didst sleep,  
O hear us when we cry to Thee  
For those in peril on the sea*

*O Trinity of love and pow'r  
Thy children shield in danger's hour  
From rock and tempest, fire, and foe,  
Protect them where-so-e'er they go;  
Thus evermore shall rise to Thee  
Glad hymns of praise from land and sea.*

I was at our son, Jonathan's, graduation from the University of Pittsburgh this past week. At it they sang that school's song – which, most interestingly, was to the tune of the hymn, Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken. But the final line of the school song is "God preserve thee evermore." Indeed, on the last verse they actually repeated that line. And with that I leaned over to Ruth and said, "Looks like there are no atheists at Pitt."

In much the same way it would appear there are no atheists in the U.S. Navy with its appeal to God, our Eternal Father, to watch over those upon the sea.

But if there was or is ever a place of **absolute vulnerability** it has to be with those who are on the open sea – with no land visible anywhere. Be it due to a storm, or as Robert Redford portrayed in the 2013 film All Is Lost, due to running into a floating a steel cargo container – those on the sea are always in a potentially desparate place.

It was in the year 1736, on January 25<sup>th</sup> – a Sunday – that the young John Wesley found himself aboard a ship bound for America that had come into the worst of storms. Listen to Wesley's own account...

*At seven I went to the Germans (the Moravians). I had long before observed the great seriousness of their behavior...(During a time of scripture reading) there was now an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the Spirit of fear, as well as that of pride, anger and revenge. (For) In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the main-sail in pieces, covered the ship and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English (passengers). The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterwards, "Was you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied, mildly, "No, our women and children are not afraid to die."*

God would use that event to soften Wesley's heart towards having a faith like that of his Moravian fellow passengers.

So here is Paul, along with (it seems) Luke, and Aristarchus of Macedonia (we had run across Aristarchus back in chapter 19). There may have been others also with him, but we do not know for sure.

And although Paul has been convinced for sometime now that God was going to have him **go to Rome** and even **appear before Caesar** (v.24), Paul, we learn in this narrative, was also of the conviction that this trip was not going to go well.

v.10

But did anyone listen to Paul? No.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 7 we learn that Paul was **a single man**. And with that we may presume he had **no children**. But here we see how even without having children, Paul learned what it was like to have no one listen to him.

And just like most parents do when what they had warned about – and they were not listened to or heeded by their children – when what they had warned about comes about...well, see what Paul does...

v.21

I don't know about you but I actually find **some humor** in that. It is the old, "I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen to me" kind of statement we have all used on our children. It's the "I told you so" kind of line.

I have spent many hours looking into and learning about the disaster that took place in Centralia, Pennsylvania. You know the story of Centralia, a coal mining town that began using the old mine shafts below the town as the city dump beginning in the late 1950s. But in May of 1962 one of dump fires, unlike as in previous years, proved to be inextinguishable. Eventually this led to the fire spreading throughout the old mine shafts sending up smoke into people's yards. You likely know the rest of the story and how eventually, with an unquenchable fire deep in the ground beneath them the U.S. government paid each homeowner to vacate their home so as to relocate to another town. Today Centralia is a ghost town with nearly every house and structure removed, but with smoke still ascending from the earth.

The part of the story that I have particularly tried to look into is that town council meeting back in the 1950s when someone on the board made the **brilliant suggestion** to just put the city's waste and refuse in the old mine shaft. "Think of the savings!" it was probably proclaimed. Likely the proposal garnered the support of nearly everyone there. But, there was likely...there had to be... **one naysayer** in the group who said, "This could turn out poorly. I don't think we should do it." There just had to be one...that one guy, who years later, could

boast to his dying day, "I tried to tell them...but they wouldn't listen."

Well, that was Paul. For here he is in the midst of a time when things are looking very dyer for the ship and for all 276 aboard, and Paul just had to say, "I tried to tell you...you should have listened to me."

Okay, okay, we get it Paul.

Now a few points here and then some application...

1. For all you none-sailing types (and that includes me), the "lee" of an island (verse 16) is the **non-windy side**. In the narrative of this chapter, there was a northeasterly wind, or what we have come to abbreviate in modern times as a "nor'easter." In Lancaster County we hear of these winds often. Some of our heaviest snowfalls have come with a "nor'easter." So if the wind is blowing from the northeast, the lee or leeward side of an island in that case would be the...you tell me...**the southwest side** of the island. It would be that side of the island in which the island itself acts as a bit of a buffer from the wind.

2. The island of Malta is a GREAT distance – some 500-600 miles from Crete or the smaller island of Cauda. So when we finally learn in chapter 28 that they had found land at Malta, but at that time didn't even know where they were, the explanation for that is that they had been, for literally a couple weeks, in the midst of a storm. Navigation in those days was purely by stars. They didn't have a sextant (those weren't invented until 1759), so if the stars were not visible (and in the storm they were not) they had NO IDEA where they were.

3. It is interesting to note that they had at least one smaller boat on board. It was likely **not** thought of as a lifeboat, but more as a simple means of moving officers or crewmembers to shore when the ship had to be anchored far from shore.

4. A fathom is six feet, roughly the height of a man. So when we read of the water depth being 20 fathoms, that would have been roughly 120 feet. But then to suddenly find it 90 feet deep...well, you can understand how, in the dark, seeing nothing and knowing absolutely nothing as to your whereabouts, how that could be a bit disconcerting.

5. Finally, when it became daylight, the storm still raging, and the ship having been lightened as much as possible, and seeing land and a beach ahead, the text tells us that they headed in for shore. Hitting a reef, the ship was ripped open and all went into the sea. It is unlikely that all 276 could swim, but by grabbing hold of various floating items, all made it to shore alive. And as the centurion had befriended Paul and wanted to see him remain alive, the soldiers were ordered to not kill any of the prisoners.

And so **they all arrived safely on shore**. Beaten, drenched, tired, and weak...but they all made it.

It doesn't tell us that anyone kissed the land, or that they then all grabbed hands and formed a circle with Paul leading them in prayer. That's what we might think SHOULD have happened. But they made it. And each, in his own way, likely expressed thanks to the God of heaven, or to Poseidon, the Greek mythological "god of the sea." Or maybe they just thanked their "lucky stars."

But they made it.

Now, there is something to be said about a life of adventure.

All too many of us lead what Henry David Thoreau described as "quiet lives of desperation." That is, we tend to be **nobodies who do nothing**. And come the end of our lives we have **few adventures** to speak about, and nothing that would make for a Hollywood movie or someone's book.

I find it hard to believe that this was or is God's plan for us. We were made in the image and likeness of God. We are God's children. Our Father is Almighty God, and our brother (so to speak) was and is the One who died to save the world.

Paul's life, as a first-century missionary, was marked by all kinds of troubles. He was arrested numerous times, beaten up numerous times, he spent **years in various prison cells**, he was shipwrecked not just this one time that we read of here in Acts 27 but 3 different times. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-27 Paul lists his many adventures, terrible as many of them were.

But he DID something.

Look, you're not going to save the world. Nor am I. But

it seems to me that we can each do SOMETHING. The **default** in life is **to do nothing**.

When I was with Lloyd, Jeff and Lenny a week or so ago up in Brooklyn, NY...working HARD to try and make an old church building more presentable, I said to someone (I forget who) at the end of the day, "We didn't HAVE to come here. We each could have been home the whole time. But we DID something. It is always easier to do nothing. But at least we DID SOMETHING.

Doing something always requires something from you.

- If you go on a mission trip, it will likely **cost you** financially.
- If you go on a mission trip it will definitely **cost you** in terms of time: time away from a job, away from family, away from the security and peace of Lancaster County, and so forth
- If you teach a Sunday School class it will **cost you** in terms of time – time to prepare, time in the class, and time in getting to know those students.

**Everything worth doing costs us in one way or another.**

The other option is do nothing: sit around and watch movies, read books, sleep. Nothing. You can live a life of doing nothing and likely make it safely to death's door. And when you die people will say how you were a nice person, and never bothered anyone. And maybe you can even leave some money to your children, your grandchildren, to the church or help fund a Save the Whales effort.

But what have you really done?

Then again, consider the challenge of a life of adventure. You're going to die, so why not bring some adventure into life?

C.T. Studd had been raised in a wealthy English home. He was well educated, considered one of the top cricket players in all of England and due, upon his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday to inherit approximately 29 thousand pounds...roughly a million dollars in today's U.S. money. But he gave all of that wealth away and became, instead, a missionary to Africa.

A few months before his death, C.T. Studd was bidding farewell to his daughter, Pauline Grubb, and her husband. They were leaving the Congo (Zaire) for England to begin World Evangelization Crusades' first sending base. As they were about to part, the old man said, "Pauline, I would like to give you something before you go." He looked about him as if to find a suitable parting gift. His table held some gadgets. A few boxes, placed on poles to keep them from termites, held his clothes and a few small possessions. He looked up at the grass roof. There hung various articles – banjos for leading the singing and some pans and kettles for cooking. Then he quietly said, "But really, I have nothing to give you, because I gave it all to Jesus long ago."

It was C.T. Studd who wrote,

"Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell;  
I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell."

That's VISION.

That's from a man with a vision to DO SOMETHING with his life.

No matter your age,

No matter your health,

No matter your circumstances,

May God give you a vision to DO SOMETHING with your life.