

June 22, 2025—“A Guiding Voice”

I hope you brought a Bible along, or have access to a Bible app on your phone, because today we're looking at a really interesting passage in the book of Acts. After covering six chapters last week that accounted for four trials and speeches of the Apostle Paul, the author of Acts named Luke switches gears entirely in this section to provide a travel narrative. Today's passage is the story of Paul travelling by ship from Caesarea towards Rome, to gain an audience with Caesar. And it reads like an epic narrative like Homer's *Odyssey*—with storms and shipwrecks—and some scholars believe Luke may have patterned his account after a literary work like that. Regardless, commentators agree that these couple chapters are a literary classic, providing as graphic narrative detail as anything in the Bible. This passage is made-for-movie-level!

So, turn with me to Acts chapter 27, where things begin this way in verse 1:

When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment.

The story begins with Luke accompanying the Apostle Paul on their way to Rome, boarding a ship that was overseen by a guy named Julius, referred to as a centurion.

This detail is important because it clarifies who's in charge. Private ship owners supplied corn and wheat to the Roman government, so government officials had the final authority. And Julius, as a centurion, served as a liaison officer between the emperor and the provinces, in this case, as a courier. Julius would have had a body of soldiers under his command on this voyage that Luke and Paul were a part of.

Now, in those days, ships in that area tended to cling along the coastline and avoided winter travel—which became difficult as they began to experience headwinds on their journey. The plot begins to thicken in verse 8 of chapter 27, where we read:

We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement.

They landed at Fair Havens—which, ironically, was not a fair haven for them to winter!

Geographically, Fair Havens was an open bay. And Luke mentioning the Day of Atonement indicates how late things had gotten for this trip. In that day, sailing was doubtful after September and impossible by November, and the Day of Atonement took place on or around the 5th of October. So things were starting to get tense on this ship.

At this point, something rather strange happened: the Apostle Paul provided Julius the centurion with a travel warning. Verse 10 describes what happened next:

Paul warned them, “Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.” But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. Since the harbour was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbour in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest.

If you can enter into the story, the only thing that should surprise us at this point is that Paul attempted to say something. Remember, Paul was a tent-maker by trade, not a seafarer, and in this case, he was a prisoner! His advice isn't necessarily surprising either, since the weather was bad as winter approached, stuck in a poor harbour.

But it turns out, there were louder voices that prevailed. The text says they hoped to reach Phoenix, which was a far superior harbour and only a few hours of sailing further. And while Julius, as a centurion of the Roman government, had the final say, there was a ship owner as well as a captain on board who brought some expertise to the conversation. So, not surprisingly, Julius heeded the advice of the ship's officials and ignored Paul's appeal. To an original reader, this would have made perfect sense.

Unfortunately, that advice proved costly. Remember that, in those days, ships had no rudder to stabilize them. And they only had a centre mast with one foresail, so they couldn't sail directly into the wind. Those are relevant details because, no sooner had they left Fair Havens—gunning for Phoenix—when the wind changed, and a sudden headwind called a “Northeaster” threatened to drive the ship out towards the quicksands of the African coast. So late into the travel season, during such a desperate time, the ship had lost control and was leaking badly. Luke summarizes things this way:

We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

There are additional details that Luke includes, to only intensify the desperation of their situation—they pulled the lifeboat on board, they tied ropes around the hull of the ship to try and hold it together, and they dropped anchor as a last resort to stabilize their drift. The film version of this story would have had the music coming to a grand crescendo, as the weather blinded them from any daylight or sense of navigation from the stars. Things literally had become dark for Luke, Paul, and the rest of their travel companions.

Yet it's at this point where Paul, a prisoner on his way to be tried by Caesar himself, who's already been ignored once, takes a second attempt at saying something:

After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island."

This is one of those moments where I hope we can connect with the humanness of Paul, who—like me at least—can't resist the impulse to provide a good, "Told ya so!"

More to the point though, Paul once again attempts to provide the officials of the crew with some instructions. Only this time, he articulates the rationale behind his advice. It could be assumed that, the first time Paul spoke, he was also attempting to speak prophetically, but as a prisoner, that was likely not obvious to those hearing his message. This time though, Paul is explicit that he's not just making a suggestion; he's passing on the very voice of God. His assertiveness is not rooted in some unfounded arrogance of expertise; his confidence is divine, based on his own encounter with God.

And the real surprising twist wasn't just that Paul attempted to speak again; the shocker was that this time—even as a lowly prisoner—Julius the centurion listened to him. They listened to him that day. When Paul warned of some sailors attempting to abandon ship, they listened to him again. And when Paul encouraged them all to eat something, they listened to him again. The prisoner had suddenly become commander!

Well it turns out, just as Paul had prophesied, that they did run aground on some island. As people started to jump overboard and make their way to shore, the soldiers attempted to kill the prisoners, but Julius intervened and spared Paul and everyone else's life. Eventually, they all made it to shore—all 276 passengers—and collected themselves on an island whose name meant “refuge”. Verse 1 of chapter 28 says:

Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold.

In this little mini-episode—in what seems like an effort by Luke to repeat what happened on the ship—Paul is helping collect firewood when he's bitten by a snake. Assuming that was divine punishment for this prisoner, the islanders expected him to swell up and die, but he shook the snake off and nothing happened—so, instead, they considered him a kind of god! Once viewed as a lowly prisoner, Paul was now heeded as divine.

So they spent the winter on the island of Malta. There, Luke supported Paul with his medical doctor skills to provide care and ministry to the locals. When winter had finally subsided, they boarded another ship and continued on. Verse 14 concludes:

And so we came to Rome. The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged. When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.

Here, the language of the Roman Christians who met Paul refers to him as a kind of king or conqueror. And the allowance of a private dwelling only further reinforced the respect he was now being given, as the hero of this sailing adventure on behalf of God.

What is fascinating about this narrative—what’s referred to as the “we narrative” of Luke and Paul—is that there is zero preaching of the gospel. From the time Paul emerged in the book of Acts, what’s been at the forefront is his preaching, explaining the Good News that Jesus is the promised Jewish Messiah. Notice that there’s none of that here. But what started as an imprisoned, on-trial-for-his-life Paul is now a house arrest Paul who’s able to write letters to first-century churches that have become part of the New Testament of our modern-day scriptures. There was no preaching in this story, and yet the gospel spread to and from what, at that time, was the centre of the universe.

Notice, through the story, how it was able to spread. On the one hand, when Paul attempted to speak into the situation, he was rejected—likely because of outward appearances. But, the second time, when people considered that maybe he was, in fact, stewarding the voice of God, his advice was heeded. **Because the centurion allowed the voice and influence of God to speak, their lives were saved.**

At a marco-level, it’s also fascinating to see what Luke’s done as he nears the end of the book of Acts. In the early chapters of the book of Genesis, it’s a serpent who causes all the chaos of sin to enter the world, and yet, at this point, the snake has no power. And, in Genesis, a ship is required to save humanity from a flood—as the consequence of sin—but now the ship is destroyed as salvation is found in Jesus alone.

Even though there’s no actual preaching in this story, the crux of the narrative is whether or not the voice of God is heard and listened to. When it wasn’t, people’s lives headed all the more toward disaster, but once it was, they were miraculously saved. It’s that message that, I believe, God still wants to speak through Luke into lives like ours, regardless of the storms we face: **are you hearing God’s voice when He speaks?**

Here's the point, applied to us today: God is active, and on the move today, and is eager to be in relationship with you, to guide and support you in a life following Jesus. And, more specifically, God wants to speak to you—directly to you—and doesn't necessarily need a paid preacher to do it. God places people in our lives to share His voice. And He places us in people's lives to share His voice. The question today is: **are you and I hearing God's voice when He speaks, particularly through others?**

Are there people in your life wanting to speak into your identity—to let you know how beloved you are, to them and to God? Are there people in your life trying to show you a better way forward? Are there people in your life seeking to encourage you, and strengthen you to carry on, not give up, and stay faithful? Practically speaking, are the people speaking into your life allowed to register the love, care, affirmation, and value that God has for you into your heart? Or do you tend to dismiss them as Paul was?

Similarly, are there people in your life allowed to challenge you? Do you have people who can ask tough questions or call you on things they see? Are people allowed to speak into your priorities, your spending habits, your dating choices, or your trajectory? Or, when someone tries to enter the delicate space of a more difficult conversation, do you get defensive or deflective and deny hearing the voice of God?

The bottom line today is that God speaks. He speaks through His Word, and He speaks by His Spirit. He wants to speak directly to each of us, but one of the primary ways He chooses to speak is through His people, especially those of His people who care about each of us. You don't need preaching to hear God speak; you do need an openness to heed His influence and encouragement from those He's placed in your life. **How does God want to save your life from "shipwreck"? Are you listening?**