

An Unstoppable Mission

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[0 : 00] Is God really in control? That's the question I have for you this morning. Life has its ups and downs.! It can feel tough at times, at others mundane.

Sometimes it seems as if it's all too much, and how can life ever be good again? And then there are times when life is great, and how can it ever go wrong?

But it does, and we're back in the cycle again. The ebbs and flows of everyday life, and the great times of trial and pain, can make us wonder, is God really in control?

We wouldn't blame Paul for asking that question as we approach the end of the book of Acts. Is God really in control? Over the last few weeks, we've seen Paul captured and thrown in prison, facing tribunals where the Jews are unable to bring a solid case against him, yet due to corruption and greed, he's left in prison unjustly for years.

Is God really in control? When a new counsellor comes in, it seems maybe things will change. But he just wants to please people too, and he doesn't truly care about justice.

[1 : 12] So even King Agrippa is brought in and can't find fault, but Paul remains in custody and is finally sent to Rome. Is God really in control? Now I want to remind you, friends, that the book of Acts isn't really about Paul.

We're not just following the story of this man and the work that he's done. In fact, it doesn't even end in his death, but rather Luke, who is in today's passage and is travelling with Paul, Luke is writing Acts to show us that the gospel of Jesus Christ is unstoppable, that it must go out from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

He uses seven distinct sections to show us this. I don't have the diagram for you, but if you remember, each of the sections ended with a statement of Jesus being at work to send his gospel out and increase and strengthen his church.

Paul is but a vessel of this message, granted a key vessel, but a vessel nonetheless. And once again, as we come to today's passage, we will see that, in fact, God is in control and the gospel of Jesus is unstoppable in its mission to the ends of the earth.

So this is a long passage, so yeah, Karen's going to read out each section as we come to it. And because it's a long passage, we won't be able to spend a lot of time in all the nitty-gritty details of it, but we will focus in on some sections in particular to help us see how God is in control of this whole journey and how Paul's faith in God is unwavering as he approaches Rome, knowing that he must stand before Caesar to bear witness to Jesus there as well.

[3 : 01] I might just pray before we hear from the Bible to start with. Loving Father, thank you for your word and thank you for today and the time we have to spend in this part of Acts, hearing about how you are in control and your mission is unstoppable.

Please encourage us with this today. Help me to speak clearly and I pray that your truth would be made known to us all the more.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. So we're reading from Acts chapter 27, starting at verse 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.

And embarking in a ship of Adrametium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.

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. And putting out to sea from there, we sailed under the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us.

[4 : 19] And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on

board.

We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Nidus. And as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete, of Salmoni.

Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fairhavens, near which was the city of Lycia. Since much time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous because even 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 harbour 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 harbour of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

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 northeaster, struck down from the land.

[5 : 51] And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. Running under the lee of a small island called Korda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat.

After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then fearing that they would run aground on the scientists, they lowered the gear and thus they 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. 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.

So Paul is finally on his way to Rome. And this has been a long time coming, if you remember. Back in chapter 19, verse 21, Paul resolves in the Spirit to head to Jerusalem, saying, after I have been there, I must also see Rome. And in chapter 23, verse 11, Jesus tells Paul, take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.

[7 : 08] So the Lord Jesus has determined that Paul will testify in Rome. And so we expect Paul, by some means, to come to Rome. So this decision, in verse 1, to set sail for Rome, at least seems to be part of the plan.

But it gets off to a pretty rough start, doesn't it? I mean, already the winds are against them, in verse 4. The winds do not allow them to go further, in verse 7. They achieve small steps of progress with difficulty.

But the time is ticking on until it approaches the time of year that is most dangerous for the voyage. The dangerous time for sailing was from around September 14 to November 11.

And then from November 11 until March, they just didn't sail at all because of the winter. But ships would wait in the port. Now it's the northern hemisphere, remember?

So while this time of year, September, we're moving into summer and the weather's improving, in Crete, it's heading into winter. So in verse 9, not only had the dangerous time begun, meaning we're after September 14, but the fast is already over.

[8 : 21] You may have a footnote there that says, the day of atonement, for the word fast, which helps us understand that we're probably talking mid to late October by this point.

When Paul advises them here, he's drawing on his experience as a traveller, on his human wisdom. He knows this is a dangerous time of year and that sailing now is not a good idea.

He's more cautious than the ship's owner and pilot, who both think that they can risk the short journey to a better port. No one is trying to sail all the way to Rome at this point.

They're just trying to do a short hop along the coast of Crete to a bigger port that's more suitable to spend the winter, the three or so months of winter in. Paul is saying, we should stay here, don't risk going any further.

And have a look at how Luke draws attention to the silliness of the ship's owner and pilot. In verse 12, he says, the majority decided to put out to sea from there on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, the harbour of Crete, facing both southwest west and northwest and spend the winter there.

[9 : 37] I mean, it already sounds sketchy, doesn't it? The chance that somehow we might make it. It's like making a dash from the beach back to the car on hot sand with no shoes. It's only a short

distance, she'll be right.

Or maybe like trying to cross a six-lane highway without a pedestrian crossing. It leaves you scratching your head and thinking, who's actually in control here? Is God in control?

This seems like a bad decision. Why don't they listen to Paul? Why doesn't God intervene? In verse 13, when the south wind blew gently, supposing they had attained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Creek close to the shore.

That pesky wind, it's at it again. This time, it seems to be in their favour. It's gentle and from the best direction in order to make their short little journey across to Phoenix. But it doesn't take long for the wind to once again turn against them.

And this storm has a name, the Northeaster. So it must have been an infamous and predictable storm. Which further begs the question of why anyone thought it was a good idea to set out now.

[10:50] And the wind is from the opposite direction, which pushes them out to sea and away from Crete. This part of the journey is the most difficult yet.

Rather than reaching a safe port to spend the winter in, they are storm-tossed, driven by the wind and at its mercy. The sailors start throwing things overboard!

In an attempt to simply survive. Day and night have blowed into one because of the thick cloud, wind and rain constantly around them. And they lose all hope.

They are in the pits of despair. What hope of survival is there now? Alright, let's hear the next section. Thanks, Karen. So Acts 27, starting at verse 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.

[11:56] 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. 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 they 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.

And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under the pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.

[13:11] Then the soldiers cut away 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 have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing.

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. 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.

Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. We were in all two hundred and seventy-six persons in the ship. And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Now when it was day, they did not recognise the land, but noticed a 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, at 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.

[14:30] 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 aboard first and make for the land, and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

So when all hope seems lost and indeed is abandoned in verse 20, Paul is given a message from God.

Paul was in part right about not leaving Fair Havens and how terrible the journey would be, but he was also wrong since he perceived that the voyage would be at a cost of their lives also.

But God has promised to save every person who is in the ship with him. By his angel, God has promised to save Paul and all who are with him from this storm. And he reinstates the purpose of this journey.

[15 : 32] You must stand before Caesar. In this section, we get three imperatives. Take heart, do not be afraid, and take heart. Paul has faith in God that there is nothing to fear, all will be as God has said.

They will all survive this. Paul will reach Rome. Those things are certain. But it won't be without difficulty, verse 26, but we must run aground on some island.

So despite how the journey has gone so far, despite the years of prison and tribunals and back and forth that Paul has been put through, despite various attempts on his life by the Jews, and despite the difficulty that lies ahead, God is still in control and what he said will come to pass and Paul trusts him at his word.

In verse 27, we're told they've been lost at sea for two weeks and now they seem to be approaching land. The sailors take a sounding to see how deep it is.

They do this twice and find it shallower the second time, indicating that they're approaching land.

And so they drop anchors afraid of running aground. But Paul just told them that they must run aground, but the sailors, they're not trusting God.

[16 : 52] They're trying to escape the ship. They prayed for day to come, but clearly not to the true and living God, because they aren't trusting him and his promises to save them.

Instead, they're taking matters into their own hands and turning to their own gods. And deceptively, they're telling the others that they need to get into the little boat to go and lay out anchors from the front.

But in reality, they're trying to get away. Now Paul warns the centurion and now we see that the centurion starts to trust Paul instead of the sailors.

So much so that he orders the ropes be cut, leaving the small boat behind. So now, other than swimming, there is no way of escaping the ship.

The centurion is showing that he trusts God. He trusts what Paul says, that they will all be safe. We come then to the dawn of the 14th day at sea and Paul encourages them all again, urging them to eat.

[17 : 56] Now, Paul, a prisoner, and the prisoner at the center of this whole journey to Rome, is now standing and encouraging the crew and the soldiers and telling them to eat while they're lost at sea and food is in high demand.

He has been exalted to a position of trust among the soldiers and the sailors. The centurion trusts him and it's all because Paul has remained steadfast in trusting God and the only trustworthy one and his purposes in everything.

And here again, we see Paul giving thanks to God in the presence of them all. He is unashamed of God and his faith in him. And here we learn just how many are on the ship, 276 persons, including Paul and Luke.

Now, day comes, the clouds clear, they can see the land but they don't recognize it, but they spot a nice beach inlet where they could possibly run the ship ashore.

So that's what they try to do. They cast off the anchors, don't need those anymore, they release the rudders and hoist the sail, but they hit a reef on the way in and get stuck.

[19 : 09] The surf is clearly still tumultuous because the surf is breaking up the stern of the ship and the soldiers want to kill all the prisoners, otherwise they might escape and they'll be disciplined for letting that happen.

But the centurion, well, he trusts God now, he trusts Paul, he wants to save Paul and so he prevents the soldiers from doing this. And so God's promise that no one who sails with Paul will perish stands true.

By jumping overboard and swimming or floating in on planks, they all arrive safely to shore. It's such a crazy image, isn't it? After two weeks lost at sea, having not eaten until the night before, they're now clinging to broken pieces of the ship and floating in safely to shore.

It's incredible no one was lost overboard in the storm or died on board the wave-tossed ship or drowned on the final stretch to the beach. No, God's promise is true.

They are all safely brought to shore. God is in control. Paul must stand before Caesar and so it will happen. Okay, our final reading.

[20 : 23] Thanks, Karen. So Acts 28, starting at verse 1. After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta.

The native people showed an 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 on his hand.

When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, no doubt this man is a murderer. Though he is 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. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

Now in the neighbourhood 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.

[21 : 38] It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.

They also honoured us greatly, and 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. and after one day, a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Petuli.

There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the forum of Appius and three taverns to meet us.

On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself with the soldier who guarded him. So, back at the start of that reading, just in case you missed it, Paul repeats after we were brought safely through, which just drills home the fact that God is in control and is faithful to his promises.

[23 : 07] They discover they're on Malta, a small island south of Italy, and although the locals are considered barbarians, that means they're not Jewish and they're not Greek speakers, but they showed unusual kindness in welcoming the shipwrecked travelers.

Remember that there were 276 of them, that's no small feat. When Paul is bitten by a snake, they assume he is a murderer, and the reason they were shipwrecked.

But because he didn't die in the shipwreck, that snake has come to get him so that justice is satisfied. And this is ironic, isn't it? Because, well, as we know, Paul, before he met the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, was murdering Christians.

He spent his days pursuing them, trying to get them to blaspheme and casting his vote against them when they were sentenced to death. But it's also God who has saved him from that life, from living in rebellion of Jesus the King, and who has sent him out to bear witness to King Jesus, even in Rome, the very reason for this journey.

And it is God who saved him from the storm and shipwreck. And the snake. When the snake does no harm to Paul, the locals change their minds completely. They're now saying he's a God.

[24 : 24] And again, that's ironic, because they've attributed his survival to divine power, but it's not Paul who is divine, it's God, who has promised Paul will arrive safely in Rome, to stand before Caesar and bear witness to Jesus there, and is powerfully in control to bring that about.

God is caring for Paul and exalting him as he helps the chief man of the island, Publius. Now, Publius shows the same generosity and kindness of his people in receiving and entertaining Paul and the travellers for three days.

And then Paul is given the opportunity to help Publius by healing his father. Now, if Paul hadn't clarified that he wasn't a god, these acts of healings would have only confirmed the rumour, wouldn't they?

And it would be out of character for Paul to be on this island for three months and not share the gospel with the people. From history, we can know that he did because it's pretty much undisputed that the gospel arrived on Malta when Paul was shipwrecked there.

Many sources attribute Malta's knowledge of the gospel of Jesus to the arrival of Paul and even that Publius becomes a leader of the church there.

[25 : 49] But what's curious is why Luke doesn't mention any of that. He doesn't mention that Paul corrected their misplaced belief that he was a god or that he shared the gospel with them.

Why is that? I mean, honestly, I don't know a good answer, but I think it's because Luke is focusing on the journey to Rome and how Paul will preach the gospel of Jesus there before finally stating that it will also go to the Gentiles, which includes these Maltese people.

And we'll see that in next week's passage. Instead, Luke focuses on the hospitality of the Maltese people and how when it came time to leave the island, Paul had everything he needed and left with honour.

I think Luke is showing us that God is sovereignly in control and is working out his purposes in this journey to bring Paul to Rome. They set out again in what sounds like a glorious ship of Alexandria, loaded with all the supplies they could need.

And so not only is God going to bring Paul safely to Rome, but he's going to do it in one of their best ships and with a centurion and soldiers who look to Paul for wisdom and decision-making.

[27 : 08] Now we don't know if any of them receive the gospel and are saved. That's the soldiers and the centurion. Luke doesn't tell us, but they do honour Paul even though he is their prisoner.

And notice this time as they set out, the wind is for them. All through this passage, the wind has been a character, a contender, always against them and creating difficulty, and now it is helping them achieve this last leg of their journey.

Now Jesus, who controls the wind, has been in control the whole time, working out his purposes for his gospel. When they reach the Italian mainland, they stop at a few ports and arrive at Ptole in verse 13.

There they find fellow Christians, whom Paul would never have met until now, but they still receive him. And the brothers from Rome, upon simply hearing about Paul and his companions, they travel out to meet them on the way.

If that map's still up, you can see how far out that place is that they journey to see him, the three taverns. And when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage, which is a reminder back to what Jesus said in chapter 23, take courage for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.

[28 : 36] Paul arrives in Rome, supported by his brothers in Christ, having survived years of imprisonment and a journey that lasted many months on three different ships, going weeks without food, shipwrecked on an unknown island and attacked by a snake.

But God has always been in control and has brought Paul safely to Rome, just as he promised. So it's time to wrap up, and we started with the question, is God really in control?

And throughout this journey, it didn't look like it, but Jesus had told Paul to go to Rome, but everything was going wrong. But we see that every step of the way, he was in control, and he was bringing about his purpose.

The book of Acts isn't about Paul, it's not about Peter, or even Luke, the author, it's about Jesus and his gospel. Back in chapter 1, verse 6 to 8, so when they had come together, the disciples, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?

He said to them, it is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father is fixed by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

[29 : 59] The gospel must go out to the ends of the earth. Paul must testify about Jesus in Rome. This mission is unstoppable, because the one who is in control is faithful and will do it.

So when things are hard, when we wonder if God is really in control, we can remember that he is. He is bringing about his purpose of the gospel going to all the nations, and he is gathering his people to himself.

And he includes us in this mission, just like Paul, and how wonderful a mission to be part of, one that we know will succeed, because the one behind it is unstoppable.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Dear loving Father, we thank you that you are sovereignly in control of all things.

We thank you that you sent Jesus, that he lived perfectly under your rule, that he died in our place taking the punishment we deserved. You rose him to life again as ruler and judge of the world.

[31 : 10] Thank you that through him we can have life forever with you. Thank you that you have given us that good news to send out to all nations. Father, we thank you that we know you are in control and that this mission of the gospel, your mission to bring all people back to yourself, to judge the world and to save it, will not be stopped, because you are in control.

Father, help us to take heart and not be afraid when things are going wrong, but to trust you and to trust Jesus. and the gospel of him.

Help us to boldly preach it, knowing that it is by your word that you are saving those who hear your word and accept.

We praise you for saving your elect, for saving us. Please give us courage as we go out into the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.