

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #58

ACTS
Shipwrecked
Acts 27:1-44

Acts 27 will be one of the most interesting chapters in the Book of Acts for true sailors and lovers of the sea. It is a very instructive document on ancient seamanship. It is a classic in its own right, for more detail of the ancient methods of sailing on the Mediterranean Sea in the first century are set forth in this chapter than in any other ancient manuscripts in existence.

Some years back, a group of men in Scotland decided to disprove the Scriptures. These men were scholars. One was a famous archeologist, Sir William Ramsay. He was assigned by the group to go to Asia Minor to check out the travels of St. Paul as described in Acts and to show where there were historical errors. He undertook the mission with great zeal but as he began to carefully check out such things as the description of this voyage, he became a Christian. He concluded that this chapter in Acts was a masterpiece and the most accurate description of a sea voyage in the ancient world that is on record today. He declared that Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect to its trustworthiness.

In Acts 27, we have a record of Paul's voyage to Rome as a prisoner and it almost reads like a page out of a ship's log. This chapter is filled with danger, suspense and excitement. There are only a few verses in this chapter which give us some devotional material to live better Christian lives, but these few verses are packed full of meaning. The two overriding concepts in this chapter are the providence of God in preserving and keeping Paul and the whole crew of the ship, and the personal faith of Paul. Whenever there were troubles or trials, this man Paul was in the center of it all, and he always stood out among men as a great man of faith who truly affected people around him for good.

You remember that Paul appealed his case to Caesar because he found it impossible to get justice in the courts of the Roman governors in Judea. He is on his way to Rome to appear before Nero. He is still a prisoner, still in the custody of the military and still chained much of the time to a Roman guard. Acts 27 records for us the happenings on this voyage from Caesarea to Rome, and it would be difficult to find a more exciting travel log anywhere.

SAILING FOR ROME - Acts 27:1-8

Deliverance to the Centurion (27:1)

“And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, . . .” -- The “we” in this context refers to Dr. Luke and Paul and it also includes Aristarchus. Luke traveled with Paul as his personal physician, and some have concluded that Paul was suffering from some physical ailment and needed the personal attention of a doctor. Aristarchus was a young man whom Paul had met in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. The only way the Romans would allow Aristarchus to travel with Paul was if he was Paul's slave. So great was Aristarchus' love for Paul and so strong were his desires to minister to his need that he volunteered to be Paul's slave. That is true Christian love.

“. . . they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius.” -- Paul was probably the only prisoner on the voyage who was a Roman citizen. The others were criminals who were sent to Rome for execution. Many of them would become gladiators and would be fed to the wild beasts. These prisoners would be men whose future was one of despair and hopelessness. Yet, this gave Paul an excellent opportunity to share Christ with these men so as to give them an eternal hope. Paul and the prisoners were delivered to Julius who apparently was a very kind- hearted man who treated Paul with courtesy and respect throughout the whole voyage. Julius was a very important soldier; he belonged to the Augustan Cohort of the Roman military establishment which was a very prestigious outfit, a hand-picked body of soldiers responsible directly to the emperor himself. We have every reason to believe that Paul shared Christ with Julius on a personal level many times.

Description of the Voyage (27:2-8)

“And embarking in an Adramyttian ship, which was about to sail to the regions along the coast area, we put out to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica. And the next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul with consideration and allowed him to go to his friends and receive care.” -- They boarded a little vessel which was beating its way up the coast of Palestine towards what we would call Asia Minor or Turkey. They put into port at Sidon and Julius permitted Paul to get off the ship and visit some Christian friends in that city who cared for his needs.

“And from there we put out to sea and sailed under the shelter of Cyprus because the winds were contrary.” -- They encountered a small gale from the northwest, blowing the exact opposite direction from the way they wanted to go. The wind from the northwest caused them to duck behind the island of Cyprus and they hugged the Asian coast, tacking against the wind.

“And when we had sailed through the sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed in Lycia. And there the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy, and put us aboard it.” -- At the Lycian port of Myra, they found a much larger vessel, probably about 120 feet long. This was a grain ship carrying wheat from Egypt, the granary of the Roman Empire (Acts 27:38). Apparently, the centurion, as a Roman officer, leased and took charge of the ship, even though he left the sailing of the ship to the captain.

“And when we had sailed slowly for a good many days, and with difficulty had arrived off Cnidus, since the wind did not permit us to go farther, we sailed under the shelter of Crete, off Salmone; and with difficulty sailing past it we came to a certain place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.” -- Once again they ran into contrary winds and made very slow progress. After several days of sailing, they made only a couple of hundred miles and were forced to slide under the lee of the island of Crete in order to make any headway at all.

STORM - Acts 27:9-20

Danger (27:9, 10)

“And when considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the Fast was already over, Paul began to admonish them, . . .” -- Having reached Fair Haven, the centurion and the captain were faced with a big decision. It was the time of the year when traveling was dangerous by sea. Dr. Luke made mention of the “Fast” which is a reference to the great fast on the Day of Atonement which occurred on October 5 in 59 A.D. We know from ancient navigation records that up to September 14 sailing was fairly safe on the Mediterranean; from September 15 to November 11 sailing was dangerous and during the winter months it was almost impossible. The time was probably mid-October and there was always the possibility of a sudden storm blowing up in the Mediterranean during this season of the year.

“. . . and said to them, ‘Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be attended with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.’” -- Paul, long acquainted with the sea, tells us in the Epistle of II Corinthians (II Cor. 11:25) that he had been shipwrecked three times and spent a day and a night in the deep. Realizing the danger, Paul advised that they hole up or winter in the little port of Fair Haven, for the ship and the persons on the ship were in grave danger.

Decision (27:11-13)

“But the centurion was more persuaded by the pilot and the captain of the ship, than by what was being said by Paul.” -- There was an immediate difference of opinion. The captain and the pilot (owner) and apparently the majority of the crew thought Paul was wrong. Naturally the centurion, being a landlubber took the advice of the captain over Paul's.

“And because the harbor was not suitable for wintering, the majority reached a decision to put out to sea from there, if somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor in Crete, facing northeast and southeast and spend the winter there.” -- The reason the owner, captain and crew did not want to stay in Fair Haven was that they did not want to stay in that dingy little town. They would have been bored there so they wanted to go to a more exciting city to winter. These sailors wanted action and not a winter of humdrum. It is obvious that they were thinking of their own comfort and convenience and not the

safety of the ship or its passengers They persuaded the centurion, who had the last word, to move on to Phoenix.

“And when a moderate south wind came up, supposing that they had gained their purpose, they weighed anchor, and began sailing along Crete, close inshore.” -- As soon as a good day came along, these men of the sea cast all caution to the wind and believed what they wanted to believe--that this fair weather would continue despite all facts to the contrary. If men want something bad enough they will take all kinds of risks to get it.

Disaster (27:14-19)

“But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo (northeaster); and when the ship was caught in it, and could not face the wind, we gave way to it, and let ourselves be driven along.” -- They had no sooner gotten out of the harbor than a tremendous gale struck, a northeaster, blowing away from the land. The storm came up suddenly and the wind was so strong that they could not sail against it, so much so that they could not get back to the island and the port of Fair Haven. They were forced by the elements to let the ship be driven before the wind.

“And running under the shelter of a small island called Clauda, we were scarcely able to get the ship's boat under control.” -- As they drifted by an island, there was a brief letup in the fierceness of the wind because the island provided a degree of protection. They took advantage of this lull to draw on board the dinghy, a small lifeboat, which was normally towed behind the ship. The sea was so choppy that they barely were able to get the lifeboat in the ship.

“And after they had hoisted it up, they used supporting cables in undergirding the ship; . . .” -- They found it necessary to take cables and slide them under the belly of the ship to tie it up like a package in order to hold the wooden timbers together. The weight of the grain shifting from side to side in the rolling ship threatened to tear the vessel apart.

“. . . and fearing that they might run aground on the shallows of Syrtis, they let down the sea anchor, and so let themselves be driven along.” -- The term “sea anchor” may mean “sails.” If so, the crew lowered all the sails so that the wind would have as little power as possible in pushing them along. They were afraid that they would be driven into the great sand banks called the Syrtis which lined the coast North Africa where the ship would be marooned miles out from the shore. This was one of the most feared hazards of sailing on the Mediterranean.

“The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo; and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.” -- As the storm increased in fury, they threw much of the cargo overboard, and even the mainsail and its tackle. They were getting desperate.

Despair (27:20)

“And since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, . . .” -- These experienced sailors, because of the intensity of the storm, did not see the sun nor the stars for days. This was serious since they had no compass nor any other modern navigational equipment. When they could not see the sun or stars, they lost all knowledge of their whereabouts. They were drifting helplessly at a rapid speed before a howling gale in the midst of a massive ocean with no idea where they were headed.

“ . . . from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.” -- The captain, centurion and the crew gave up all hope of surviving this voyage. Perhaps even Paul felt they would sink at sea or run aground, but Paul surely had confidence that he would survive the shipwreck because God had told him he would get to Rome.

STATEMENT OF PAUL - Acts 27:21-26

Reminder of Paul’s Warning (27:21)

“And when they had gone long without food, . . .” -- The whole crew of this ship was under such stress they had not eaten any food on a regular basis. They were so upset and anxious over the outcome of this voyage that the fear had destroyed their appetites. It might also be suggested that the sea was so rough that even the seasoned sailors became seasick to the point where they could not eat.

“ . . . then Paul stood up in their midst and said, ‘Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete, and incurred this damage and loss.’” -- Paul was not saying, “I told you so.” He was merely reminding them that what he said was right in Fair Haven and it was urgent that they pay attention to him now.

Reassurance by Paul of Their Safety (27:22)

“And yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, . . .” -- Paul stood up or stood forth in that he stood out among these pagan sailors and prisoners as a different kind of man. He showed his calm and cool head in the midst of the worst kind of crisis and he encouraged these men.

Paul had the same crisis as these other men on the ship. The storm and danger was no less severe for Paul than anyone else. He had the same set of circumstances that these pagans had but he approached them differently. Under pressure, Paul had the loving Christ with him and he had the assurance of victory in death and the promise that all would work out for good. Their pagan gods of Zeus and Jupiter could not help them, but Christ gave Paul the power to be calm and encourage these pagans. They must have been impressed with this man Paul, for they saw he was different.

“ . . . for there shall be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.” -- Paul, who had gained their respect, said, “None of you will be lost but the ship will be lost.” This

was a bold statement to make and Paul's reputation as a Christian was on the line.

Reason Given by Paul (27:23, 24)

“For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, . . .” -- God sent an angel to give Paul assurance that all happenings on this voyage were under the control of God. Notice this great statement by Paul, “God . . . to whom I belong and whom I serve.” Paul belonged to God because God had bought him with the blood of his own Son. He was owned by God and he was not his own master.

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19, 20).

Paul also served God and this word “served” means “to serve by worship.” Paul's service was a religious and spiritual service, and all of his service was thought of as worship. Because he was bought by God, he served God.

Right here Paul gave his testimony publicly to the sailors, soldiers, prisoners and passengers. He was saying, “What I'm about to say to you is all staked on my relationship with my God who bought me and whom I am presently serving.”

“. . . saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.’” -- Apparently, Paul must have been a little frightened himself or the angel would have never appeared to him. Paul was told he must stand before Caesar. He was also told that all on that ship had been granted to Paul. Notice the word “granted,” for Paul must have been praying for his safety and the safety of every person on that ship. One of Paul's secrets to having a different kind and quality of life was that he was a man of prayer. What power is at the disposal of a Christian who learns to pray.

Reaffirmation by Paul (27:25, 26)

“Therefore keep up your courage, men, for I believe God, that it will turn out exactly as I have been told.” -- Paul again staked his whole reputation on God's promise. This is a tremendous definition of faith. Faith is merely taking God at His word and His word is revealed in the commands, promises and principles of the Bible. Faith is the assurance that God will perform His promises to the Christian who truly believes them.

“But we must run aground on a certain island.” -- He assured them that not one person on the ship would lose his life but that the ship itself would run aground and be wrecked.

More than likely, most, if not all, the hardened sailors and soldiers on that ship thought Paul was a little crazy when the voyage first started. Perhaps they gave Paul a bad time. Yet, little did they realize that it was Paul's presence on that ship which had guaranteed

the safety of every person. They owed their very existence to Paul's presence with them. While men revile and persecute those who stand for Christ, it is only due to the presence of Christians in the world that the world is not destroyed. Also remember, in a time of crisis, the non-Christian may listen more intently to a Christian providing the Christian is walking a life of faith in the living Christ.

SHIPWRECK - Acts 27:27-44

Proximity of Land (27:27-29)

“But when the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors began to surmise that they were approaching some land. And they took soundings, and found it to be twenty fathoms; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found it to be fifteen fathoms. And fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak.” -- As they were drifting helplessly, they heard the frightening roar of breakers in the distance. They did not know where they were or what kind of land they were approaching. We know they were approaching the island of Malta but they did not know that (Acts 28:1). It was pitch dark and in the middle of the night which added to their anxiety. They were frightened for their lives because they knew the ship was heading for shallow water where it would be broken to pieces amid the rocks. They threw out four anchors from the stern to slow the drift of the ship and waited anxiously for daybreak when they could see the peril facing them. They had terror in their hearts because they did not know what was going to happen.

Proposed Escape (27:30-32)

“And as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship, and had let down the ship's boat into the sea, on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors from the bow, . . .” -- Some of the sailors panicked and conceived a plot to jump ship and save their own hides, leaving the others to survive if they could. They decided they would get into the lifeboat and under the pretense of letting out more anchors, they would row ashore, leaving the ship and the passengers to their own fate.

“. . . Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, ‘Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved.’ Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat, and let it fall away.” -- Paul knew that the ship could not be beached properly unless the sailors who knew how to do the delicate maneuver were there. Paul made it clear that all had to stay on the boat or none would be saved.

This is a most interesting verse, for back in Acts 27:24, God promised Paul that all who were on the ship would be spared, not a single one of them would lose his life. This was God's sovereign promise and it could not be broken. Yet, in this verse all had to stay on the ship to be saved. This is a perfect illustration of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Both are taught in Scripture. We call this a mystery or antinomy. God's sovereignty includes man's responsibility. Man's actions are the means whereby

God works out His plans. God's announced purpose never cancels out man's responsibility and activity.

Provision of Food (27:33-38)

“And until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, ‘Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing. Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation; for not a hair from the head of any of you shall perish.’” -- This probably means that they had so much anxiety and danger that they did not have time to eat a square meal. Whatever food they ate was on the run and was a scanty amount. They were weak and needed food badly, for they were going to need all their strength to survive.

“And having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all; and he broke it and began to eat. And all of them were encouraged, and they themselves also took food. And all of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons.” -- It was Paul, the man of faith, who encouraged these non-Christians to continue on. Paul was operating on faith in the living Christ and this encouraged others who were not saved but all were discouraged and despondent. Paul, because of his faith, was able to change the attitudes of 275 people so they could eat and be prepared for the rigors ahead of them.

“And when they had eaten enough, they began to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea.” -- They began to lighten the ship so it could go as far into the shore as possible.

The last thing to be thrown overboard was the wheat cargo, for it was worth large sums of money. Yet, these people got their values straight quickly, for when the choice was between money and their lives, there was no choice. They tossed the wheat overboard.

Propulsion Toward Land (27:39-41)

“And when day came, they could not recognize the land; but they did observe a certain bay with a beach, and they resolved to drive the ship onto it if they could.” -- The next morning they saw at a distance a bay and determined to beach the ship there. Today this bay is called St. Paul's Bay.

“And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea while at the same time they were loosening the ropes of the rudders, and hoisting the foresail to the wind, they were heading for the beach.” -- In the storm the rudders had been raised from the water. Now they were let back down. The foresail was hoisted to the wind and they made for the beach with as many knots as possible.

“But striking a reef where two seas met, they ran the vessel aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable but the stern began to be broken up by the force of the

waves.” -- The ship struck a reef and began to break up on the surf. The bow stayed intact but the stern was broken up. The ship was lost.

Plan To Kill the Prisoners (27:42, 43)

“And the soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners that none of them should swim away and escape; . . .” -- The Roman soldiers decided to kill all the prisoners before they could leave the ship. This was understandable because the Roman law said that any soldier who allowed a prisoner to escape was himself subject to the same penalty the prisoner would have received--death!

“. . . but the centurion, waiting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, . . .” -- Julius, the centurion, apparently had grown to respect Paul highly and commanded the soldiers to kill no prisoners in order to spare Paul's life.

Some have thought that perhaps Julius had become a Christian on this voyage, for he would not let the prisoners be killed because he believed God's promise given to Paul that no one on this voyage would lose his life. Julius, if he became a Christian, did so by believing in Christ but he evidenced his belief by trusting the promises God made to Paul.

Providential Delivery of All (27:44)

“. . . and the rest should follow, some on planks, and others on various things from the ship. And thus it happened that they all were brought safely to land.” -- Notice carefully that God's plan for the ship, crew and passengers was carried out in every detail. God had said that everyone on the ship would make it to shore. Yet, they were told to swim and hang onto boards and other things so they could stay afloat. Suppose they had said, “Well, God has said we are to make it safely, so I'm not going to swim or hang onto a board. It is God's responsibility to get me to shore!” Suppose they had done nothing. They would have died. This teaches means as well as ends. God committed Himself that all on board the ship should get to land safely but they were to use the means God provided--swimming or hanging onto boards--in order to make it safely to shore.

CONCLUSION

For those who are not Christians, you should understand that the mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is just as real in your spiritual salvation as it was for the sailors on that ship for their physical salvation.

The Bible says that those who trust Christ as Savior and Lord were already chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). There is a group which no man can number called the elect. The identity and number of the elect are known only to God, but all the elect will come to Christ. This is the doctrine of sovereign election and it is a biblical truth.

The Bible also teaches every man's responsibility to trust Christ as personal Lord and Savior. The Bible makes a universal offer to all men and says, "Whosoever will may come." This is the doctrine of human responsibility and it is a biblical truth.

You will never be able to harmonize these two truths in your own thinking, for you do not have to reconcile friends. Yes, divine election and human responsibility are friends for faith in Christ is the means to experiencing God's election to salvation. People who reason, "Well, if there is a group called the elect then I will just sit around and wait for God to awaken me someday if He wants to. If I'm not among the elect, I can't do anything about it." Not so, the Bible calls upon each man individually and personally to respond to Christ. The Bible makes all men responsible without denying the doctrine of sovereign election.

If you will respond to Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, then the question of your election to salvation is settled. If you will receive Christ, then by your action of faith in Christ, you have confirmed God's choice of you in eternity past. You will not and cannot be saved until you respond to Jesus Christ by faith.