

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 55, Chapter 27

There's something about a sea story that has captivated listeners and readers since there were ships to challenge the awesome power and mystery of the great deep, and survivors to tell their harrowing tales. People who have never been on a boat nor even seen the ocean are riveted and enthralled when hearing of gigantic waves and gale force winds determined to reduce the wooden planks and beams of even the mightiest sailing vessels of ancient times to kindling. Some of our greatest fictional and real heroes are intrepid sailors and fearless ship's captains who have faced nature's fury with steely nerves and seamanship skills learned from harsh experience and instincts. I think that is why so many Bible readers are intrigued by the Acts 27 story of Paul's struggle and near tragedy at sea on his way to face the Emperor in Rome.

Great writers have often compared human life to a journey across stormy seas, and some of our greatest Christian hymns use that theme. That is probably why many Bible expositors, and why the sermons of countless Pastors, find an allegory of the experience of the human soul to be at the heart of the meaning of Acts 27. Truth be known, however, too often this sort of approach to Luke's record of the treacherous journey from Caesarea to Rome winds up doing little more than finding some clever ways to inject the speakers' personal theological biases and I think this draws attention away from what is being communicated to us.

What we have here is a true story, verifiable in its authenticity. A story which all too many sailors of the Mediterranean used to face during the thousands of years when wind power was the primary means of propulsion across its vast and often dangerous expanse. So I don't want to diminish from both the actual historical event that this is, nor to take away from the Lord's stated goal that Paul would go to Rome and speak God's truth to the Emperor, by allegorizing. What we are meant to learn is that not even the seeming limitless and untamable power of the oceans and our atmosphere could defeat God's will in this regard. This ought to give us great comfort; for I know that my time to depart this world and go to my heavenly home will happen only when the Lord determines it. No danger and no force... manmade, spiritual or in nature....can derail the Lord's plan for my life or for the lives of any and all who trust in Him. I suspect that what we'll read in Acts 27 had much to do with the inspiring thoughts that we read from Paul in the Book of Romans after he has successfully made it to Rome despite all the danger and tribulation he faced along the way:

Romans 8:38-39 CJB

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers, neither what exists nor what is coming,

³⁹ neither powers above nor powers below, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God which comes to us through the Messiah Yeshua, our

Lord.

Outside of Luke's goal to accurately portray Paul's narrow escape from death on his voyage to Rome, this passage from the Book of Romans is the message we need to take away from Acts chapter 27. Open your Bibles to Acts chapter 27.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 27 all

Perhaps the key word of verse 1 is "we". "We" tells us that Luke was on board this ship and so he shared this experience with Paul. It explains the wonderful level of detail that we receive. But it also tells us something interesting about how prisoners were transported to their destinations; in this case Rome, Italy. It seems that it was not unusual to have friends and family accompany them.

We learn that Paul along with some other prisoners (who must have been Roman citizens because since they were all on their way to Rome it must have been that they had appealed to the Emperor) were given over to the custody of a fellow named Julius. Julius was a Centurion and part of the Augustus regiment. There was nothing particularly special about Julius (so far as we know), except that he along with some troops under his command happened to be on his way to Rome so Festus had him escort Paul there.

The ship that Julius was on was a cargo carrier; all ships were for cargo, not passengers. It was the norm especially for grain carriers to have a Roman officer on board as it was considered an issue of utmost national security for Rome to always have a reliable supply of grain so that the people were kept fed. The system for carrying vast amounts of grain from the outlying areas of the Empire to Rome for distribution involved hiring private ships; in general Rome's navy was designed for war, not cargo transport. However the Roman government had well-defined standards for the size, construction, and operation of these private cargo ships, and especially for the grain carriers, so critical were they to Rome's national interests.

We're not told exactly where Paul and his fellow prisoners embarked from; only that the ship they boarded was an Adramyttian ship whose destination was the coast of Asia. Adramyttian is not a type of a ship, but rather it designates the port from which the vessel was flagged. It is modern day Karatash that is on the western coast of Mysia near the Greek island of Lesbos. It wouldn't have been a large ship, but rather it was designed to sail along the coast. The goal would have been to take this ship to a port where a larger ship, a grain carrier suitable for the open waters of the Mediterranean, could be hired to complete the journey to Rome.

Along with Luke a fellow named Aristarchus accompanied Paul. We're told that he was from Thessalonica, where Paul had visited and created a group of Believers. While we hear of him on this part of the voyage, we don't hear anymore of him after they transfer to a larger ship and head to Italy (but that doesn't mean he didn't remain on the ship). Very probably he was the same Aristarchus that we read about in Colossians 4 and Philemon 1 who is described as a "fellow prisoner" with Paul.

Verse 3 explains that after departing from the Holy Land the first port of call was Sidon. If they

had departed from the port of Caesarea Maritima (and it would seem likely) then it was only about 70 miles up the coast to Sidon; this fits with the story as it was no more than 1 day's sailing to get to Sidon. We shouldn't read too much into the route taken; the ships were commercial vessels delivering goods, and picking up other goods along the way, and so that would dictate where and when they stopped and for how long. But the other factor was weather; there was a sailing season, and there was a season that ships virtually quit sailing because of the dangerous conditions and because the winds changed direction and made sailing nearly impossible. Our story takes place at a time when the sailing season was right at its end.

We're told that the Roman centurion treated Paul with consideration; why he had such a positive attitude towards Paul, or if it was not only towards Paul but also with the other prisoners, we're not told. The entire Roman world was a status-conscious world. If you were well heeled and had means, prisoner or not, this made you more important and you were shown deference. Those voluntarily traveling with Paul would have done so at their own expense, so perhaps this small entourage influenced Julius's thinking about Paul. But the entire story paints Julius as a decent man who cared about the lives of others. In addition to allowing traveling companions with Paul, Julius allowed Paul to visit friends at the ports of call and let them take care of his needs. Once again we should not assume that this was an exception to the rule, but more likely it was typical. Probably Paul was one of the fortunate few prisoners who might have had friends at the various ports. There indeed was a Believing community in Sidon at this time, so no doubt that is who received Paul upon his arrival there. The harsh reality is that aboard a ship paying passengers were required to bring their own food; this applied to prisoners as well so the transport experience could be very different depending upon your level of wealth and whether you had people to care for your needs or not.

From Sidon the ship continues on east and north of Cyprus, which would have been the leeward side of the island nation. This route was followed due to the westerly winds that blew throughout the summer months, but changed direction come fall. I want to pause here to mention that an experienced sailor and able scholar named James Smith undertook this same voyage to test the voracity of Luke's reporting in Acts. James Smith published his findings in a book called ***The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul***. The bottom line is that Luke's report accurately portrays what the route, weather, wind direction, currents, etc. that we find in Acts 27 would have been like at this time of year.

But now the ship had to cross a significant area of open ocean between Cyprus and the south coast of Asia Minor. First they sailed along the coast of Cyprus because the winds further out to sea would have slowed their progress. But these same winds and currents naturally aided a ship as it crossed the larger expanse to reach Lycia. It was there in Lycia that Julius found a larger ship more suitable for continuing on to Rome. This ship is called an Alexandrian ship. Once again, the reason for its designation is that it was flagged in the port of Alexandria, Egypt. What was a ship all the way from Egypt doing in Lycia? At this time in history Egypt was the bread basket for Rome providing a major portion of its vast grain needs. This would have been a much larger ship than Paul had just got off of; a sort of super tanker of grain carriers. It is believed that Rome needed 400,000 tons of grain per year to feed its people and Josephus

claims that Egypt supplied fully one-third of that need.

I mentioned earlier that the Roman government introduced standards for the ships they hired to bring grain to Rome. One of the standards was that the minimum a ship could haul was 68 tons. In the time of Claudius (a few years before our story) that standard was upped to 340 tons. Roman records indicate that cargo ships varied in size from 50 to 100 feet in length. There were also some larger vessels that were 130 feet long. One vessel was reported to have been 180 feet long, with a crew, guards, and passengers totaling 600. Luke says that the ship that they had just transferred to had 276 people aboard; so it was a medium sized ship. To give you something to compare it with, the Mayflower that brought the Pilgrims to America's shore was no more than 100 feet long, and the passengers and crew amounted to about 135 souls. And this was a ship that had some limited accommodations for passengers and of course was a more advanced sailing vessel than in Paul's day. Our ship in Acts had no passenger accommodations, was probably slightly smaller, and yet it carried twice as many people. To say it was crowded and uncomfortable would be an understatement. On the other hand the expected voyage time was perhaps 2 weeks; the Mayflower took over 2 months to cross the Atlantic. That said, bad weather and other conditions were known to have made a voyage across the Mediterranean to Rome to take over 6 weeks. So under the best of circumstances this voyage was not going to be pleasant.

The journey continues on from Lycia but the winds were not co-operating so they made little headway. After several days at sea they finally reached Cnidus and here they faced two alternatives: they could wait for a change to more favorable wind conditions or they could continue immediately along the eastern side of Crete. They took the second choice, no doubt a decision made by the ship's owner for commerce reasons. But they still experienced very rough seas and slow progress and so they put in at a place called Pleasant Harbor, or more accurately, Fair Haven. Not too far from Fair Haven was the city of Lasea, where they could have stayed for the winter if they decided to go no further.

Verse 9 tells us that they were at the season when the shipping lanes were closing. It says they were past the Fast. The Fast was a common expression among Jews that meant Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when every Jew fasted. If this was the year 59 A.D., which many scholars think it was, then Yom Kippur was at the end of the first week of October. Smaller vessels generally ended their sailing season by mid-September and larger vessels by the first part of November. Sailing usually didn't start up again until mid-March. So the reports of winds that weren't favorable and of building seas are to be expected for the time of year of our story. More life and death decisions now had to be made. And Paul, Choleric personality that he is, of course puts forth his opinion on what ought to be done.

Paul was no stranger to the perils of traveling by ship. In 2Corinthians 11 he says that he was shipwrecked 3 times! So his stance on the matter (to pause the voyage and winter in Fair Haven) is understandable. Paul had no official position or authority to affect any kind of outcome; he was a prisoner on his way to a hearing before Nero. However it is known that in such matters the ship's crew, ship's owner and passengers would have a council to at least discuss the options and the consequences of each choice thoroughly. Paul warns that he is certain that catastrophe lies ahead with losses to the cargo and to lives if they continue in this

inclement weather. He is not speaking prophetically; rather he is offering advice based on personal experience and common sense. But, his advice was rejected. The ship's owner and the helmsman thought that there was a good chance that they could continue to a better port since they didn't think that Fair Havens was the optimal choice for spending the next 4 or 5 months! So they departed hoping to make the port of Phoenix, another harbor on the Island of Crete. Interestingly the final decision was left up to the Centurion Julius and he opted to sail on to Phoenix, probably because he had several prisoners that he was responsible for. But, there would have to be a change in the winds for this plan to work, so they had to wait to see what happened.

Sure enough, the winds changed making sailing to Phoenix possible. So they set out and followed the coast of Crete going west. If everything went well it would take only hours to get to Phoenix, less than 50 miles away, and there they would wait out the winter. But suddenly, without warning, a violent gale blew up and the wind direction changed from a gentle southerly to a fierce north wind. This means that the ship would be driven towards the south, away from the shelter of the island. Such winds come off of Crete's Mt. Ida, an 8,000 foot high peak. Because of the geography of the island, winds are funneled together around the mountain to create a cyclonic effect and it makes sailing impossible. For one thing, the bow of the boat cannot be directed into the swirling wind. The ship is now at the sea's mercy and drifting with no means to control it. Phoenix was out of the question; survival anywhere it could be obtained was now the mode.

By good fortune the ship was pushed into the leeward side of an Island called Cauda, which sheltered it for a short time while the crew (with great difficulty) hoisted the lifeboat onto the ship's deck in order for it not to be smashed to pieces. Lifeboats were dragged along behind the ship and then brought forward if needed. Next in a desperate measure to keep the ship from coming apart at the seams and sinking, they wrapped ropes around the hull, under the ship and back up the other side, like belts. But their biggest fear was getting pushed 400 miles southwest and onto the Syrtis. This was essentially a huge field of underwater quicksands off the coast of present day Libya. They next took the measure of dropping something into the water to slow their drift; I think it must have been something like a sea anchor that creates resistance to the direction of the movement of the vessel and uses the current to steer it to some degree. It is not intended to stop the drift or even change its direction very much; the hope is mostly that it will buy more time for the storm to abate before they hit the dreaded Syrtis.

Verse 18 says that the heavy weather continued and they had to begin jettisoning the cargo. The reason for throwing cargo overboard is to lighten the ship because it is taking on water. At this point the ship's owner has changed tactics from trying to maximize his cargo investment to trying to save his valuable ship. Three days later the storm is still raging; the ship has taken on even more water as the seams of the hull begin to separate, the wave action throws tons of water across the deck, and the hold begins to fill with seawater. The grain down below is absorbing the water and beginning to swell, not only adding tons more of weight but its expansion is trying to push the boat apart from the inside out. The spare tackle and rigging is the next thing to go. Luke continues to speak of "we" because for some time now since the storm erupted it's been all hands on deck as passengers and crew work together to try to save

their own lives.

There were no compasses in those days; all navigating was done by the stars, sun, and by sightings of land. But the storm had gone on for so long that there were no stars, or even sun, to see and gauge where they had been pushed to. They could only guess. Such a thing is disheartening to the best sailors; no doubt terrifying to passengers and soldiers who were not seafarers. This was one of the worst storms in anyone's memory and many on board felt all was lost. Nearly two weeks had passed with the ship constantly rolling and being tossed about. No doubt motion sickness was taking a toll. But also the appetite suppressing emotion of depression was having its effects; strength (emotional and physical) and the will to survive were draining away with it. There was little interest in eating. I'm not even sure how they might have prepared food in those conditions (after all, food didn't come in prepared packets as it does today). It was usual to bring some small livestock along that could be slaughtered and butchered on board.

John Newton, a noted clergyman and hymn writer, records this about one of his many sea adventures:

“We found that the water having floated all our movables in the hold, all the casks of provisions had been beaten to pieces by the violent motion of the ship. On the other hand, our live stock, such as pigs, sheep and poultry, had been washed overboard in the storm. In effect, all the provisions we saved would have subsisted us but a week, at a scanty allowance”.

Everything on board was wet and ruined. But Paul, still managing to keep his head about him, told everyone that they were all suffering from a lack of food. I suspect he noticed that an air of hopelessness hung over the crew and passengers; such a thing causes people to want to give up and passively accept their fate. I guess I can't blame Paul for saying “I told you so!” in verse 21. He reminds them that he was overruled in his estimation that the best course of action was to stay right where they were in Fair Haven for the winter. I have read more than a few commentaries that attempt to excuse Paul for this remark, and even try to find some sort of pious reason for his words, but I find it unconvincing. I'm not criticizing Paul; who wouldn't have this attitude after what they had all needlessly gone through because of poor judgment (and it wasn't nearly over, yet!). I guess I'm OK with it because I would have done the same thing and it's comforting to know that Paul is as human as I.

Paul then says something astounding. He says to cheer up! No one is going to die, even though the ship will be lost. Was he delusional? A message of encouragement and hope when it is clear that all everyone is waiting for is the moment of their death? Had not only days earlier Paul warned them to stay in Fair Haven otherwise people were certain to die? So now he says the opposite (that no one is going to die) and he's supposed to be taken seriously? Paul knows that this is what they are thinking and so explains why his change of view when logically there is no reason to believe they'll survive. It is because he has had a divine visitation that told him all would OK, while a few days earlier he was speaking from his natural human self and his own considerable experience. Verse 23 explains that a messenger of God (an angel) had appeared to him....literally it stood beside him....and told him not to be afraid. Why not?

Because God had promised Paul that he should appear before Caesar and so that is what is going to happen. God created storms and the seas, and His will can't be defeated by that which He created. God's purpose, stated several times, has been that Paul should take the Gospel to Rome.

Paul uses language that needs to be used among gentiles to describe the messenger; he speaks about the God that he worships. This has to be spoken in this way because the majority of those onboard worship the Roman and Greek gods. But even they knew that the Jews worshipped a different god than they do and Paul wanted to be clear that the storm god, and the god of the sea, and the god of the wind and any other god they worshipped could not overcome the will of the God of Israel. And the God of Israel has determined that all 276 souls should survive. The Lord has granted to Paul the lives of everyone onboard the ship, even the majority who do not worship Him. The suggestion here implies that Paul had been praying for his shipmates. So Paul is not merely trying to sound brave in the face of inevitable death; he has received absolute assurance that all will be well even though the trial is far from over; their ship is going to wreck on land and be lost. I'm not sure there is a better example of what it means for God to lead us THROUGH a fiery trial as opposed to bringing us OUT of it. The trauma was going to continue (for several more days actually). The discomforts would be intense. But God says: trust Me, and in the end it'll be OK.

This also brings up an important point that we must not lose. It is that God is saving Paul and all the people on board NOT just because they of course want to be saved, or deserve to be saved, but because God has a larger purpose in mind: Paul getting to Rome to speak the Good News. The same can work in not such a good outcome. God's purpose may involve us, and others, **not** being saved from catastrophe because that too could be part of God's will to achieve a certain goal. I don't mean to be harsh, but our personal benefit and welfare aren't necessarily behind all of God's decisions. So we shouldn't be surprised or disappointed in God when things don't go our way, just because we're Believers or even among His most devoted worshippers.

Verse 27 begins "It was the 14th night". My goodness! They have been suffering this storm and all of its horrors now for 2 full weeks! Not knowing if they would live or die for most of that time; unable to eat; unable to get dry. They were in a part of the Mediterranean called the Sea of Adria. Despite some commentators claiming that the modern name is the Adriatic Sea that is not the case; that is not where they were.

The sailors begin to sense that they are nearing land....somewhere. Perhaps they hear the faint sound of breakers. The first thing to do was to check the water depth; the shallower the water the closer to land they were likely to be. The first check put the depth at 120 feet. A short time later they dropped a depth line again: 90 feet. This was a good news/bad news deal. Yes, they were nearing land. But land was often surrounded by huge rocks that could dash the ship to pieces in minutes. Since they were still drifting with no control over their direction, yet knowing they were near land, they dropped 4 anchors from the stern (the back) of the ship and then waited for daylight to survey the situation. The anchors served as a brake. Dropping anchors from the rear of the boat was not the usual procedure, but in this case it served a useful purpose. This kept the bow of the ship (the front) pointing towards land. Had they anchored

from the bow, the ship would have swung around from the wind and they would have been pointing towards the sea.

A combination of hope and panic now set in. Some of the hired sailors decided to put the lifeboat that was on the deck into the water and row to the shore, hopefully navigating through the rocks they feared were there; saving themselves first. It was dark and still stormy, so hoping they wouldn't be discovered they pretended that they were going forward to drop additional anchors, this time off the bow. The ever vigilant Paul noticed them immediately, understood what they were doing and went to Julius and told him that unless these men remained on board he (Julius) wouldn't survive. Exactly why the sailors needed to remain on board or it would cause the loss of life to the Centurion (and presumably to others) is not stated. Perhaps it was because skilled sailors would be needed in the coming hours to help beach the ship. By this time Julius had learned that it was best to heed Paul and so he ordered some of his soldiers to cut the ropes that the sailors were using to lower the lifeboat, defeating their plan. The lifeboat, however, was lost. All 276 were now trapped on the battered ship. To their thinking all would drown together or survive together in the next few hours. The storm raged on and no one knew where they were or what morning would bring. I suspect a lot of prayers went up that night.

We'll learn of the miraculous outcome the next time we meet.