

SAILING INTO A STORM

TEXT: ACTS 27:1-44

INTRODUCTION:

1. Acts Chapter 26 concludes with King Agrippa, Bernice, Festus and the others discussing Paul's case (26:31, 32).
2. It was settled—Paul would sail for Rome and take his case to Caesar (Nero).
3. “And when it was determined that we (Luke was traveling with Paul at this time) should sail into Italy...” (27:1).
4. Richard B. Rackham, in his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, wrote, “Historical research and inscriptions have confirmed the facts given in this chapter, while the accuracy of Luke's nautical observations is shown by the great help he has given to our understanding of ancient seamanship. None has impugned the correctness of his phrases; on the contrary, from his description contained in a few sentences, the scene of the wreck has been identified.”
5. In addition to Luke, Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, was also on board the ship (27:2). Aristarchus is mentioned five times in the New Testament.
6. In his epistle to Philemon, verse 24, Paul mentions Aristarchus as one of his "fellowlabourers.”
7. In Acts 19:29 and 20:4, he is referred to as one of “Paul's companions in travel.”
8. In Colossians 4:10, Aristarchus is referred to as Paul's “fellow prisoner.” Though he later became Paul's "fellowprisoner," on this voyage to Rome Aristarchus apparently went, not as a prisoner, but as a voluntary companion.
9. In his commentary on the book of Acts, W. Graham Scroggie, says that Paul's journey by sea is a picture of the Christian's journey through life.
10. He said, “What a variety there is of companionship! What a strange admixture of fellow-travelers, from whose company we cannot altogether disassociate ourselves! Like the *captain*, there are those who have a right to command us; like the *soldiers*, those in whose power we stand; like the *sailors*, those whose duty it is to care for our safety; like *Paul*, those who can enlighten us; like *Luke*, those who can heal us; like *Aristarchus*, those who can refresh us; and like the *prisoners*, those who are our fellow-sufferers. The presence here of

Romans, Macedonians, Alexandrians, Hebrews, and others, reminds us that this is a world of nations, and that we cannot stand clear of one another...We are all on the ship and on the sea.”

I. THE SUDDEN STORM (27:1-9)

1. Things started out well. Paul and the others entered "a ship of Adramyttium" (27:2). Check your map in the back of the Bible!
2. They boarded this ship in Caesarea. The ship was a ship which had either been built in Adramyttium (a seaport in western Asia Minor), or which sailed from that port.
3. Verse 6 indicates that this ship was not expected to sail all the way to Italy, but that Julius the centurion expected to find some other ship at Myra that would take them the rest of the way to Rome.
4. Verse 3 tells us the ship stopped off at Zidon, and there Paul was allowed to fellowship with his friends.
5. When they had launched from Zidon, they sailed under (downwind from) Cyprus, because the winds were contrary (27:4).
6. The Greek word translated “under” in verse 4 means “leeward,” meaning they sailed toward the side of Cyprus sheltered from the wind. By sailing close to the shore, the force of the strong wind was broken.
7. They were sailing on the Mediterranean Sea, along the southern coast of Asia Minor. This brought them up the eastern and northern part of Cyprus, along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, and then on to Myra (27:5).
8. At Myra, the centurion found a ship from Alexandria, on its way to Italy, and he put everyone on the ship (27:6). Alexandria was a large city in Egypt. It was founded by Alexander the Great.
9. It appears, from Acts 27:38, that the ship was laden with wheat. Nevertheless the ship had room for everyone in Paul's group -- he and Luke and Aristarchus, and Julius and his soldiers, as well as some other prisoners (cf. 27:37).
10. They sailed slowly because of the strong winds, and with great difficulty for many days, "and scarce were come over against Cnidus" (27:7). The Greek word translated "scarce" means they barely made it. The same word is translated "hardly" in verse 8, and "much" in verse 16.
11. Cnidus was an ancient city situated on the end of the Anatolian peninsula in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).

12. Luke says "the wind not suffering us, we sailed under Crete, over against (near) Salmone" (27:7). Crete is an island that forms a bridge between Greece and Asia Minor. Salmone is on the eastern tip of the island.
13. The Fair Havens and Lasea (27:8) are on the south side of the island. "And, hardly passing it" (27:8) means because of the strong winds they passed Salome with great difficulty. The ship could have easily been wrecked. It was stormy weather.
14. Acts 27:9 says, "sailing was now dangerous, because the fast was now already past." The fast refers to the Day of Atonement. This means it was already October, which was the most dangerous and tempestuous time of the year for sailing.
15. Much time had been spent fighting the wind, and soon it would be very dangerous to proceed any further, so Paul advised them to stop until the time of dangerous navigation was past (27:9, 10). The "lading" (vs. 10) refers to the cargo.
16. Albert Barnes said Paul, "was somewhat accustomed to the navigation of that sea; and endeavoured to persuade them not to risk the danger of sailing at that season of the year."
17. Furthermore, Paul was guided by the Lord (cf. Acts 27:22-25).
18. In any event, "the master" (the captain) and the "owner of the ship" disagreed with Paul, and the centurion believed them more than Paul (27:11). A lesson: the worldly crowd seldom listen to believers.
19. Because the harbor at the Fair Havens was too exposed, and not safe or suitable to spend the winter in, the "more part" (the majority of the crew) advised the captain to depart from there (27:12).
20. They were hoping to make it to Phenice, on the coast of Crete, which had a good harbor on (27:12). There they hoped to spend the winter.
21. Acts 27:12 says the harbor "lieth toward the south west and north west." *Barnes' Notes* says, "The entrance of the harbor was in a southwest direction...It then turned so as to lie in a direction toward the northwest. It was thus rendered perfectly safe from the winds and heavy seas; and in that harbor they might pass the winter in security."
22. When the south wind blew softly, they thought their plan would work so they left the fair havens and "sailed close by Crete," i.e. they sailed along the coastline of Crete, close to the shore (27:13).
23. But as they sailed along the coast "a tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon" (possibly a hurricane) hit the ship (27:14).
24. Herman Melville referred to Paul and "that tempestuous wind Euroclydon" in his novel *Moby Dick*.

25. "We let her drive" (27:15), i.e., they let the ship run with the wind. The captain could not direct the ship. "It was seized by the wind, and driven with such violence, that it became unmanageable" (Barnes).
26. They allowed the ship to be borne along by the wind without making an attempt to control it. Clauda is a small island about 20 miles southwest from Crete (27:16).
27. The Greek word translated "much" in verse 16 means they had great difficulty lifting the lifeboat into the ship and securing it. This same word is translated "scarce" in verse 7 and "hardly" in verse 8.
28. When they had taken the boat on board, they used "helps" (ropes or cables) to undergird the ship; and fearing they might fall into the quicksands, they struck sail (they lowered the mast) and so were driven along (27:17).
29. Albert Barnes said, "They were at the mercy of the wind and waves, and their only hope was by taking away their sails...The ship was unmanageable, and they suffered it to be driven before the wind."
30. Next they started throwing out some of their cargo -- "they lightened the ship" (27:18).
31. Next they cast out the tackling (sails, cables, rigging, baggage, equipment, etc.) of the ship (27:19). Later on they cast out the wheat (27: 38).

II. THE SPIRIT'S MESSAGE

1. Hebrews 1:14 says angels are "ministering spirits," and one of these ministering spirits came to Paul with a message of encouragement (27:20-25).
2. Before Paul's announcement, things looked hopeless. They could see neither sun nor stars, so they could make no observations. There were no compasses back then.
3. Luke says, "all hope that we should be saved was then taken away" (27:20).
4. But after long abstinence (from food) Paul spoke up (27:21). Because of their continual struggle with the violent storm, as well as their apprehension of danger, they had not eaten in many days.
5. Paul told them they should have listened to him, and not have sailed from Crete (27:21; cf. 27:10).
6. If they would have listened to Paul they would not have incurred harm and loss. But rather than dwell on their mistake, Paul encouraged them "to be of good cheer," for there would be no loss of any man's life (27:22). Only the ship would be lost (27:22b).

7. Since Paul was right about the shipwreck, they were now more willing to listen to him. Paul told them that the angel of God stood by him on the ship and the angel had assured him that he would arrive safely in Rome (27:23-25).
8. "Whose I am, and whom I serve" (27:23) -- Paul belonged to God and was devoted to God, and this Paul told everyone on the ship.
9. The angel had told Paul, "Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee" (27:24). "All" would be saved (cf. verse 31, 34b; physically, not necessarily spiritually). Verse 37 tells us there were 276 men on the ship.
10. They later found out that this "certain island" was Melita (27:26; 28:1), i.e., Malta, south of Italy.
11. "But when the fourteenth night (from the time when the tempest began) was come, as we were driven up and down in Adria (the Adriatic Sea), about midnight the shipmen deemed (apprehended) that they drew near to some country..." (27:27).
12. Adria (the Adriatic Sea) is part of the Mediterranean Sea, and it separates Italy and the Balkan Peninsula. My wife and I saw it when we visited Venice a number of years ago.
13. Back in Paul's day, the name was given not only to that gulf, but to the whole sea lying between Greece, Italy, and Africa (*Barnes' Notes*).
14. They sounded, i.e., they dropped a line and plummet, and found it twenty fathoms (27:28) -- over 120 feet deep. They sounded again, and found it fifteen fathoms. A fathom is about six feet, so that would be about 90 feet deep. They were getting closer to the shore.
15. Fearful of running onto the rocks, they let down four anchors out of the stern "and wished for the day" (27:29) -- waited for daylight.

III. THE SHIPWRECK AND THE SCRAMBLE TO SHORE

1. The sailors were about to flee out of the ship (27:30). They let down the lifeboat into the sea, under colour (pretense) as though they would have cast anchors out of the foreship (the prow or forward part of the ship).
2. As they were attempting to flee, Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Except these (sailors) abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved" (27:31).
3. The centurion and his soldiers were unqualified to manage the ship. They needed the experienced sailors to remain on board (cf. vs. 40).

4. There is an important lesson here. The Lord had already assured Paul that all their lives would be safe, but this did not prevent Paul from speaking out about the fleeing sailors.
5. Matthew Henry said, "God, who appointed the end, that they should be saved, appointed the means, that they should be saved by the help of these seamen; though, if they had gone off, no doubt God would have made his word good some other way."
6. Scroggie said, "Life's providences mysteriously and marvelously interlock, but the mind and hand behind them all are God's" (*Acts*).
7. Then the soldiers cut off the ropes of the lifeboat, and let her fall off (27:32). Now the sailors were forced to stay in the ship.
8. As daybreak appeared, Paul urged them to take some "meat" (food), saying, "This day is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing" (27:33-38).
9. This was their first full meal since the storm began.
10. When it was day, they did not recognize the land; but they saw a creek with a shore, so they attempted to thrust in the ship (27:39, 40).
11. Ancient ships had two great broad-bladed oars for rudders. These, when not in use, were lifted out of the water and bound or tied up.
12. When required for use, these bands were loosed and the rudders allowed to drop into the water. They hoisted up the mainsail to the wind, and made toward shore. (27:40).
13. They struck a place where two seas met, and ran the ship aground. The forepart (the prow or forward part of the ship) stuck fast and remained unmovable, but the hinder part (the stern) was broken up by the violence of the waves (27:41).
14. The soldiers planned on killing the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape (27:42). This reminds us of the cruelty of the Romans. Roman military discipline was very strict, and if the prisoners escaped their escape would be blamed on the negligence of the soldiers.
15. Daniel 1:9 says, "Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs." We see similar verses regarding Joseph in Egypt. And we see it again here in the case of Paul and the centurion (27:43; cf. verse 3).
16. According to God's promise to Paul, they all escaped safely to land (27:43, 44; cf. vs. 22).

CONCLUSION:

1. Acts 27 is one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship.
2. However, the spiritual lessons are far more important than the nautical lessons and the geography lessons and the history lessons, etc.
3. We see here the hand of God guiding Paul and 275 other men.
4. According to God's promise to Paul, they all escaped safely to land (27:43, 44; cf. vs. 22).
5. Albert Barnes said, "This was done by the special providence of God. It was a remarkable instance of divine interposition to save so many through so long-continued dangers; and it shows that God can defend in any perils, and can accomplish all his purposes. On the ocean or the land we are safe in his keeping, and he can devise ways that shall fulfill all his purposes, and that can protect his people from danger."