

34. Off to Rome at Last: Acts 27

At the conclusion of Act 26, King Agrippa and Festus agreed that Paul had done nothing that deserved death or imprisonment. Agrippa went a step further and said, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

In Acts 27, the scene shifts quickly as Paul and his cohorts sail for Italy, after two years of imprisonment on false charges. However, as the Lord had promised, in Acts 23:11, Paul escaped death and was now heading to Rome: "11 The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

The Journey to Fair Havens

Acts 27:1-8

27 When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. 2 We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us.

3 The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. 4 From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. 5 When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. 6 There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board. 7 We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. 8 We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea.



As Paul and his cohorts left, Luke mentions only himself, by using the 1st person pronoun *we*, and Aristarchus. Aristarchus was a companion to Paul, mentioned first in Acts 19:28-29:

28 When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" 29 Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theater.

He would have been no stranger to the imprisonment and abuse inflicted on Paul. Acts 20:3-4 stated that he was from Thessalonica, "Because the Jews made a plot against him just as he

was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. 4 He was accompanied . . ., Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, . . .”

Aristarchus evidently remained with Paul during his Roman imprisonment, being called a fellow-prisoner in Col 4:10-11: “10 My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)” Toward the end of Paul’s life, he called Aristarchus a fellow worker, but not a fellow prisoner such as Epaphras in Philem 23-24: “23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

Whether he was fellow worker or fellow prisoner, Aristarchus served side by side with Paul during their most difficult times. He is no small player in the drama unfolding as Paul and his cohorts sail for Rome.

The Roman centurion Julius extends courtesy to Paul allowing him to visit his friends in Sidon. Whether these friends were Christians was unstated, but they did see to his needs.

As they sailed north, they went to the west of Cyprus, where Paul had converted the proconsul and confronted Elymas the sorcerer. This brought them just to the east of Antioch, from which the church at Antioch had sent him forward on his missionary journeys. Before reaching Myra, they sailed just to the south of Tarsus, Paul’s home city. One can only imagine the memories that flooded through Paul’s mind.

In Myra, the centurion found, and they boarded, an Alexandrian ship headed for Italy. They made slow headway and finally landed at Fair Havens on the southern coast of Crete.

A Storm Rages for Many Days

Acts 27:9-20

9 Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them, 10 "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also." 11 But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. 12 Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest.

Luke alludes to *the Fast* as the reason that the sailing had become so dangerous. The fast here would be the Day of Atonement (now called Yom Kippur), which occurs in late September or early October. As the season changed to autumn so did the weather. Paul warned them that it would be disastrous to leave, making the voyage dangerous and bringing great loss to the ship, cargo, and their very lives. The centurion took the advice of the pilot and the owner of the ship. Their choice was more compelling since the harbor was not suitable to winter in. They set sail for Phoenix and better harbor.

Acts 27:13-20

13 When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. 14 Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the "northeaster," swept down from the island. 15 The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. 16 As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. 17 When the men had hoisted it aboard, they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. 18

We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. 19 On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. 20 When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

This episode shows the depth of their despair, voiced by Luke in verse 20: "We finally gave up all hope of being saved." So many times, we think we are getting what we want, as they did when "a gentle south wind began to blow." Instead of that gentle wind, they got a storm so violent they lost their cargo and ship's tackle and feared for their very lives. One cannot help but think that we are afloat in the storms of life and in danger of losing everything, even our souls. Charles Albert Tindley voiced this sentiment in his 1906 hymn, *Stand By Me*:

1 When the storms of life are raging,
stand by me (stand by me);
when the storms of life are raging,
stand by me (stand by me).
When the world is tossing me
like a ship upon the sea,
thou who rulest wind and water,
Stand by me (stand by me).

2 In the midst of tribulation,
stand by me (stand by me);
in the midst of tribulation,
stand by me (stand by me).
When the hosts of hell assail,
and my strength begins to fail,
thou who never lost a battle,
stand by me (stand by me).

3 In the midst of faults and failures,
stand by me (stand by me);
in the midst of faults and failures,
stand by me (stand by me).
When I do the best I can,
and my friends misunderstand,
thou who knowest all about me,
stand by me (stand by me).

4 In the midst of persecution,
stand by me (stand by me);
in the midst of persecution,
stand by me (stand by me).
When my foes in battle array
undertake to stop my way,
thou who saved Paul and Silas,
stand by me (stand by me).

5 When I'm growing old and feeble,
stand by me (stand by me);
when I'm growing old and feeble,
stand by me (stand by me).
When my life becomes a burden,
and I'm nearing chilly Jordan,
O thou "Lily of the Valley,"
stand by me (stand by me).

God Assures Paul That He Will Stand Trial before Caesar

Acts 27:21-26

21 After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. 22 But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. 23 Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me 24 and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' 25 So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. 26 Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island."

At their point of lowest despair, Paul reminded them that he had advised them not to sail from Crete. Their damage and loss stemmed directly from that decision. Now Paul promises them that they will not be lost. However, the ship will be destroyed. Through his angel, God had assured Paul that he would stand trial before Caesar. God had given Paul their lives, and he charged them to keep courage. Paul held his faith that God would do just what he had promised Paul.

Acts 27:27-32

27 On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. 28 They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep. 29 Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. 30 In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. 31 Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." 32 So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it fall away.

During this episode, while they are approaching land, some of the sailors, ignoring God's word sought to escape in the lifeboat. Paul warned the centurion and the soldiers that they would be lost if these men left the ship. For those on the ship to reach safety, they all had to do what God commanded through Paul. The soldiers cut the ropes holding the lifeboat and let it fall away.

Everyone Reached Dry Land in Safety

Acts 27:33-38

33 Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food – you haven't eaten anything. 34 Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." 35 After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. 36 They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. 37 Altogether there were 276 of us on board. 38 When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea.

By this time, they are all doing what Paul told them to do. Paul told them to eat food in order to survive and promised them that not one would lose a single hair from his head. No matter the trial and no matter the eminent danger, Paul gave thanks to God for the food. Evidently, they now believed Paul's word received from God and took food and were encouraged. Luke gives the number of people on the ship as 276, a large number, and not one would be lost.

Acts 27:39-44

39 When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could. 40 Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. 41 But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf.

42 The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. 43 But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. 44 The rest were to get there on planks or on pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land in safety.

Acts 17 ends with everyone reaching land in safety, just as Paul had promised. Their final success was, in no small, way due to the intervention of the centurion who kept the soldiers from killing the prisoners, including Paul, whose life he wanted to spare. Yet it was the power and certainty of God's word that saved all these people, fulfilling the will of the Lord that the apostle would appear and testify before Caesar. The same power that allowed Paul to escape the threat of death at the hands of Jews now saved him from this terrible storm, and that power will save us from the storms of this life.

One can only imagine this ordeal in Paul's life. However, there were certainly many more. In 2 Cor 11:21-29, written during Paul's third missionary journey, several years before this ship wreck, Paul cataloged his persecutions up until that time:

What anyone else dares to boast about – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast about. 22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. 23 Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, **three times I was shipwrecked**, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. 28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?