

The Acts of the Apostles

“A study of the application of theology to the work of the church as a group”

God Continues in Plan A Paul Sets Sail to Rome

Chapter Twenty-Seven

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Here is a chapter in the development of the church in which great detail is given by Luke for the sea voyage itself. Such detail by a person who was not a sailor shows how important it was for Paul to get to Rome despite the many difficulties of the voyage. The details also demonstrate the power of God over the elements as He accomplishes His goals. An excellent book by J. Smith, “The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul”, was published in 1848 and details the voyage in more contemporary times and from the experience of an accomplished yachtsman. The book shows that the details written by Luke were very accurate.

Acts 27:1 And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius.

Acts 27:2 And embarking in an Adramyttian ship, which was about to sail to the regions along the coast of Asia, we put out to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica.

Acts 27:3 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.

Acts 27:4 And from there we put out to sea and sailed under the shelter of Cyprus because the winds were contrary.

Acts 27:5 And when we had sailed through the sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia.

Luke reverts to using “we” in his writings to show that he was indeed a passenger and therefore a participant of the details of the trip. Two years are missing from Luke’s life before this but he probably spent most of his time around Caesarea where Paul was kept imprisoned. We do not know much about Julius but he probably was an officer in charge of the transfer of grain to Rome. The grain was very important to Rome so he would have been an officer of considerable trust. Adramyttian was a seaport of Mysia in northwest Asia Minor, opposite the island of Lesbos. This ship would have been a coastal ship that sailed near to the coast lines of its journey. Julius would have known that he could appropriate a larger sailing vessel going to Italy later in the journey. We do not know who the other prisoners were but Paul, being a recognized Roman citizen, would have been given preferential treatment during the voyages. We do not know why Luke was allowed to go on the journey except that Julius probably was allowing Paul to have friends with him because of his citizenship. Luke may also have signed on as the ship’s physician.

After landing at Sidon, which is about 69 miles north of Caesarea, Julius showed considerable favor toward Paul and allowed him to go to a nearby Christian community. This community was probably founded after the stoning of Stephen and the scattering of the Christians. Paul probably also had a soldier accompanying him to this community for he would not have been given complete trust in not coming back to the ship. From there they sailed east and north of Cyprus, which would be on the lee side of the island. The prevailing winds are westerly in the summer months so the sailing would have been different from the trip Luke took with Paul two years earlier and Luke made note of the difference. The sailing directions given by Luke are exactly the ones that Smith described would have been necessary due to the prevailing winds at this time of year. It was a perilous journey that required considerable sailing experience by the sailors as they “inched” along toward their destination.

Acts 27:6 And there the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy, and he put us aboard it.

Acts 27:7 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;

Acts 27:8 and with difficulty sailing past it we came to a certain place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

The ship that Julius used now was one that was hauling grain from Egypt to Rome. Egypt was the primary exporter of grain to Rome and formed a basis for the survival of Rome. Thus the arrangement between Egypt and Rome for grain was an important component of the government of Rome. The owners of the shipping vessels were arranged in a corporation that received special recognition by Rome. Smith tells us of the strong westerly wind that prevails in this area that makes sailing toward their destination especially dangerous. Cnidus has two harbors and they had the possibility of choosing between going into one of the harbors and waiting for a more favorable wind or continuing on their journey. The ship’s owner would have preferred to continue since time was money and it seems that the winds were such that sailing into one of the harbors was not a safe choice. So they continued on their journey sailing under the wind shelter of Crete. There is still a small bay marked Fair Havens near Lasea and there they could have been able to find winter quarters. Fair Havens must have been named by the chamber of commerce of the city because it was not a great place to visit. Its reputation was of a place where there was nothing to do and in particular there were no places to indulge sinful urges. It sounds like it may have been Newton!

Acts 27:9 And when considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul began to admonish them, Acts 27:10 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."

Acts 27:11 But the centurion was more persuaded by the pilot and the captain of the ship, than by what was being said by Paul.

Acts 27:12 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 of Crete, facing southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

Paul warned them that considerable danger awaited them if they continued the trip rather than putting into port at Fair Havens but the two factions on board outvoted him (if a prisoner can be considered to have a vote!). The boat owner certainly wanted to try to get closer to his destination and the sailors did not want to winter in Fair Haven! The sailors knew that Phoenix was a much better place in which to winter, from their perspective. The fast was the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) and Luke gives us this information so that we will know when all of this was taking place. In AD 59 it fell on October 5 but on all of the neighboring years from 57 to 62 it fell earlier. This late date for Yom Kippur means that we are dated for this event in AD 59 and it tells us that they wintered in Malta in November, December, and January.

Acts 27:13 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.

Acts 27:14 But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo;

Acts 27:15 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.

Acts 27:16 And running under the shelter of a small island called Clauda, we were scarcely able to get the ship's boat under control.

Acts 27:17 And after they had hoisted it up, they used supporting cables in under girding the ship; 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.

Acts 27:18 The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo;

Acts 27:19 and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.

Acts 27:20 And since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.

With this favorable wind, they would be in their desired port in only about two hours. But God had other plans. This type of typhonic wind that suddenly rushed on them still occurs in this region and the people have a similar name for it today. Today violent winds whip over the mountains of Colorado into Boulder with a force of over 100 miles per hour. The Colorado winds are very destructive but they are not typhonic as these winds. Usually sailors try to face into a wind to ride it out but this wind was so violent and circular that they could not do so. They had to scud before it and that motion is very difficult to maintain. The ship's boat is the dingy that is towed behind the boat to be used in cases of emergencies. Normally they would have brought it on board before such a fierce wind had put them in this situation. But now it probably was full of water and it

would have been very difficult to bring on board. Luke says “we” as he must have remembered the hard job and his blisters. Next they wrapped the boat with cables to hold the boat together. The cable system was well designed to protect the boat from falling apart in such violent storms. They were designed to be hauled from one side to the other by a cable system rather than having someone swim under the boat to bring the cables to the other side! It was a very good system for saving a boat. The “sea anchor” is best interpreted as “the instrument” since Luke would not have known what it was. This implement was used to float behind the boat with enough rope so that when the ship plunged down the crest of a wave it would offer resistance to keep the ship from going too nose first into the water and be broken.

They would then be sailing on the starboard tack (right side to the wind) with the storm sails set and drifted slowly. Next they had to jettison some of the cargo. Putting overboard the wheat, which was the precious cargo to be delivered to Rome, was a desperate move but one that was necessary. This is a similar move as described in Jonah 1:5. Since the wind was still against them they had to take the desperate move of throwing overboard the ship’s tackle, which would have included a spar that was probably as long as the ship. This final task would have involved everyone on board, hence the “we” stated by Luke. At this point the crew was beginning to be very discouraged of being saved.

Acts 27:21 And when they had gone a long time without food, 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.

Acts 27:22 "And yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there shall be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.

Acts 27:23 "For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me,

Acts 27:24 saying, ' Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.'

Acts 27:25 "Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God, that it will turn out exactly as I have been told.

Acts 27:26 "But we must run aground on a certain island."

The first thing Paul had to say was “I told you so!” Perhaps he said this to give himself some credence with the sailors for then he told them to be brave and he told them that nobody would be lost even though the ship would be destroyed. Paul told them that an angel of God told him that God has granted life to all aboard the ship so that he would finally appear before Caesar. Smith quotes a similar passage stated by John Newton on a voyage. Such an event had also happened before in the life of Paul:

2Cor 11:25 “Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.”

His reference here to “some island” showed that he just trusted God’s statement through the angel for he had no way to know that they would run aground on Malta. If they had missed Malta they would have had 200 miles of sea before another landfall.

Acts 27:27 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.

Acts 27:28 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.

Acts 27:29 And fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak.

The Adriatic Sea is the central Mediterranean sea and was called this name several times in ancient literature. The measurements taken by the sailors correspond to the data taken by Smith in his repeat of the trip and it tells him that the report by Luke was very accurate. The four anchors were dropped from the stern, which is not what was usually done. But if they had been dropped from the bow the ship would have turned around and not been ready to be beached. I would think that Paul and Luke were praying rather than just hoping!

Acts 27:30 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,

Acts 27:31 Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved."

Acts 27:32 Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat, and let it fall away.

The sailors now pretended to also be anchoring the boat from the bow but instead were lowering the dinghy for their escape vehicle. We see here that Paul had great respect from the centurion who believed Paul and had the ropes to the dinghy cut so that the boat fell into the sea and now the sailors had no choice but to do as Paul had told them.

Acts 27:33 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.

Acts 27:34 "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."

Acts 27:35 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.

Acts 27:36 And all of them were encouraged, and they themselves also took food.

Acts 27:37 And all of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons.

Acts 27:38 And when they had eaten enough, they began to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Now in the midst of all of this turmoil that has been described Paul tells everyone to cool it and have some burgers and fries! It is hard for me to imagine that in the dark with so much wind and turmoil for them to take time to eat. But they had a leader in their prisoner who trusted totally in God to deliver them. This reminds me of the time when Jesus was sleeping in a boat when it was being tossed and turned by winds and waves.

Matt 8:23 "And when He got into the boat, His disciples followed Him.

Matt 8:24 And behold, there arose a great storm in the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves; but He Himself was asleep.

Matt 8:25 And they came to Him, and awoke Him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing!"

Matt 8:26 And He said to them, "Why are you timid, you men of little faith?" Then He arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and it became perfectly calm.

Matt 8:27 And the men marveled, saying, "What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?""

This is the God that we worship so there is never any need for us to be anxious about anything (see <http://livingtheology.com/Anxiety.htm> for further information). Paul then did as any good leader would do as he set the example by eating. The way this is told to us by Luke has the setting of a celebration of Eucharist and it may indeed have been such for Paul and Luke. For the other men on board it was just a time to nourish their bodies for the work to come. Numbering the people may have been required for the determination of the food required and the number is not unreasonable. Josephus set sail on a similar journey with about 600 on board two years later. Now that everyone was fed and their strength regained they throw over the rest of the cargo.

Acts 27:39 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.

Acts 27:40 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.

Acts 27:41 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.

They did not know where they were, but they were ready to call it home! Off came the anchors and then they let go of the rudders, which served the purpose of steering the ship. Since they were ready to wreck the boat they had no need for anchors or rudders. They did not make it to the beach but became stuck on a reef where the stern began to be broken apart by the waves. It is a remarkable account of this trip that has also been verified by Smith's book.

Acts 27:42 And the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, that none of them should swim away and escape;

Acts 27:43 but the centurion, wanting 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,

Acts 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.

The soldiers were responsible to Rome for the prisoners so their plan to kill the prisoners so none would escape fit within their game plan. However the centurion was grateful to Paul and knew that he was a citizen of Rome so he stopped the execution. Then the angel's prophecy was indeed fulfilled as nobody died as this voyage was completed to this point. It is indeed a miracle that nobody died in this turmoil and it is a trip that was told in great detail by Luke and verified later by Smith. We need no verification but it is good to have such details by a non-sailor verified.



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