

## **ACTS 27 – Paul’s Journey to Rome**

We are going to be in Acts Chapter 27 today talking about Paul’s journey to Rome. Spoiler alert... there is going to be a **shipwreck!** It will be a pretty action-packed lesson. Now, we know from our study earlier in the book of Acts that it has been for a while Paul’s goal (ever since his third missionary journey at least) to go to Rome. We know that because in Acts Chapter 19 it says that “Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, ‘After I have been there, I must also see Rome’” (Acts 19:21). Paul is finally going to get his wish. After two years being held as a prisoner at Caesarea and all kinds of legal wranglings, Paul’s wait is over. His ship, quite literally, has finally come in, arriving in the harbor at Caesarea. He boards the ship and sets sail for Rome – all at the government’s expense.

We know that Paul’s good friend, Doctor Luke, the one that wrote the book of Acts, is with him on the voyage. We know that because throughout Chapters 27 and 28 Luke uses the terms “we” and “us.” There are all kinds of details that he provides. It is a very interesting narrative that we are about to get into. While Paul has been in Roman custody in Caesarea, Luke has maintained contact with him, visiting him as often as he could. Paul has had a lot of visitors during these two years. Now these two friends, Luke and Paul, will travel together as they have previously. If you remember some of Paul’s missionary journeys, Luke was with him on parts of those trips. The one big difference this time is that while Luke is a free man, Paul will be a prisoner.

So, with that brief introduction let’s delve into our text beginning in Acts Chapter 27 and v 1...

READ Acts 27:1-2

Paul is not the only prisoner but is one of many. Paul is well-guarded by the Romans. There have been various attempts on Paul’s life. That has been documented, so they are guarding him closely. Luke gives us a detail

here about this ship. It from a city in western part of Asia Minor called Adramyttium. It is about 100 miles north of Ephesus; it is a real city. Why does Luke tell us that? Well, this particular ship and its crew are apparently on their return voyage home. So, this ship is not going to go all the way to Rome. We know that at some point they are going to have to change ships. So, that is one thing. Then in v 2 it mentions this guy named Aristarchus. He is someone who has been mentioned before in the book of Acts. He is a Christian friend of Paul's from Thessalonica and he has traveled with Paul previously. He is actually named in Chapters 19 and 20. So why does Luke tell us that? Because Luke is not the only friend with Paul on this ship. There is this man Aristarchus also. So, Paul has some friends with him.

READ Acts 27:3

Julius is the Roman commander that is on the ship. Paul's status as a Roman citizen and the fact that he is on his way to meet with the Roman Emperor garner him favorable treatment. Paul and the Roman commander will establish a close relationship throughout the trip.

They set out from the port at Caesarea and they have made it to Sidon. It is a 75-mile trip up the coast to Sidon and they stop there for a few days. That is where Paul is allowed to meet with his friends, his Christian brothers and sisters. It says that he received care. That is in the form of food, clothing and other essential items that he will need for the long voyage to Rome.

READ Acts 27:4-6

They sail from Sidon and around Cyprus to the port city of Myra. I like to imagine as Paul is on this ship and they are going around Cyprus, him gazing over the starboard side of the ship looking at the distant coastlines of Syria and Cilicia. He has to wonder at this point in his life, is he ever going to see his friends in Antioch again? He is from Tarsus. He wonders if he will ever return home again. His future is uncertain at this point. Over on the port side as he looks out are memories of his first missionary

journey with Barnabas and John Mark on the island of Cyprus. These memories are all coming back to him. Anyway, I like to think that these are his thoughts sailing toward Myra.

These verses give us an idea as to the time of year this voyage takes place – it is in the early fall. We know this because the prevailing headwinds in the Mediterranean Sea during the fall are from the northwest. This makes travel in the open ocean very difficult. This is the reason the ship's crew takes a route near the coastline and around Cyprus.

At Myra the Roman commander learns there is a cargo ship headed for Rome. Remember I said they were going to have to change ships. It is larger merchant ship loaded with grain from Egypt. It is well suited for the treacherous voyage across the open ocean (which they will need to cross eventually). So, at Myra Paul and company board ship number two. So, we pick up the story there...

READ Acts 27:7-8

At this point their progress slows way down. Luke says it took "a number of days" to reach Crisus. That is 270 miles from where they were at Myra. With good winds, a different time of year, it might have only taken a couple of days. But it is taking more than that, perhaps a week. Luke twice in this passage mentions that the voyage progressed "with difficulty." This is not easy sailing.

From Myra they sail around the island of Rhodes. The prevailing headwinds are such that the ship cannot continue on its westward course. So, the ship turns south and sails around Crete using that island as a windbreak. On the southern coast of Crete they come to this place called Fair Havens. That is where they put into port. They are going to wait there for favorable weather conditions. The worst part of their trip lies ahead. Believe it or not, even though it has been "with difficulty," the easiest part of the journey is behind them. Now comes the part where they will have to cross the open ocean. They are hoping for better weather for sailing than what they have currently (unfavorable conditions). So, they put into port at

Fair Havens and wait it out. As we pick up the action in v 9 the plan is to take a direct route westward – to go from Fair Havens to the port of Phoenix, about 30 miles away.

READ Acts 27:9

The “Fast” here refers to the Day of Atonement, which is observed in early October. So, it is now mid-October. The ship, its crew and passengers are safely at in the harbor at Fair Haven. At this point that Paul speaks up...

READ Acts 27:10

Paul warns that it would be best to stay put and not risk traveling any further. They just want to go 30 miles down to coast to Phoenix. But Paul is suggesting that they wait until better weather conditions right where they are at (Fair Havens). There is no point in risking going down the coast.

What does this guy Paul know anyway? Who is this guy? Why should we listen to him? He is just a tentmaker. He is an itinerate preacher. What does he know? Well, actually Paul knows quite a bit about what he is talking about. We know that he is a seasoned traveler. From the book of 2 Corinthians (which by the way Paul wrote on his third missionary journey) – it says that by that point in his life, several years before this, Paul had already experienced three shipwrecks (2 Corinthians 11:25). So, Paul knows what he is talking about. He has been through it. He knows a lot from his own personal experience. He knows enough to be able to tell when conditions are favorable for sailing and when they are not. His advice – “WAIT! Don’t go just yet. Let’s stay right where we are at.”

The Roman commander has a tough decision to make. On one hand the so-called sailing experts are saying, “It’s OK, let’s go.” On the other hand, he has this man Paul, who is in touch with God, a smart guy, a seasoned traveler saying, “We better stay put.” So, who should he listen to?

READ Acts 27:11-12

“The majority decided...” As we see here, a democracy does not always get it right!

The crew’s plan is to go from Fair Havens along the southern coast of Crete, close to the shore, toward the harbor of Phoenix. They will be safe there until they can find a window of opportunity to set sail out into the open ocean. But the fact is that they are safe right where they are, at Fair Havens. In their minds Phoenix will be a better place to spend the winter and it is only 30 miles away. The problem is that getting there will be very risky given the current conditions. Against Paul’s advice, they set sail from Fair Havens headed toward Phoenix. But they never make it.

Let’s pick up the action in v 13...

READ Acts 27:13-16

They are going along and everything is going great and then all of a sudden this “northeaster” (strong wind from the north and east) comes and blows them off course. They never make it to Phoenix. It blows them south to this island of Cauda and right on past it. They are trying to control the ship the best they can. Luke refers to this wind that came up as “a tempestuous wind.” This is not good for sailing. The very strong shifting northerly wind pushes the ship away from the safety of the island of Crete southward and past the small island of Cauda, which is some 23 miles from Crete.

READ Acts 27:17

Let me explain what is happening here. They are heading out past Cauda in a southerly direction into the Mediterranean Sea. The crew is doing their best to turn the ship westward because they want to avoid running “aground on the Syrtis.” The Syrtis mentioned here is a series of sandbars along the northern coast of the African continent. These are very dangerous for ship travel because, if you are not careful, you can easily run aground and get stuck on them. They realize that if they keep on going in

a southerly direction, they will surely run aground on one of these sandbars. They need to maneuver the ship heading west away from all that.

So, the winds are carrying the ship farther and farther from Crete and out in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and even though they do not have a whole lot of control they manage to maneuver the ship westward and avoid the dangerous sandbars on the northern coast of Africa. Now they find themselves out in the middle of the rough open sea tossed about by the unforgiving waves.

READ Acts 27:18-19

Their original plans have long been abandoned. The crew now does its best damage control. It can barely keep the ship under control. They lower the ship's topsail and its rigging to make the ship more stable in the high winds. The ship is now at the mercy of the wind and waves. All night the wind howls and the seas toss the ship about. The next day the crew lightens the load of the ship by tossing their cargo overboard. They do this probably because the ship is taking on water. So, they are trying to lighten the ship and get it a little higher up out of the water. On the third day the crew lightens the weight of the ship even more by tossing the ship's mainyard overboard. That is the long horizontal pole that runs the length of the ship which you attach the sail to and allows you to steer it. The ship's captain and crew are willing to part with the mainyard (a big heavy piece of equipment) and with their cargo just to keep the ship under control in order to save their lives. That is what you need to see here. There is desperation on the part of the sailors.

READ Acts 27:20

Despite the crew's best efforts, those on board gradually begin to lose all hope of surviving this terrible ordeal. At this point of utter despair that Paul speaks up...

READ Acts 27:21

“I told you so! You should have listened to me! I knew what I was talking about, but no...” He is right, of course. They cannot really argue with him looking back at it. The truth is that when Paul speaks and when he writes his letters, he is conveying God’s message. Paul is not only a godly man, but God has blessed Paul with great insight, with great common sense. If you read Paul’s letters you find not only godly insight but common sense. Paul is that kind of guy. He is the kind of guy you need to listen to. He knows what he is talking about. The problem that the ship’s crew faces and that our world faces today is simply a result of NOT listening to godly voices, which are the voices of reason (in most cases).

But this is a crisis moment, isn’t it? This is not the time to rub salt into an open wound. What this group needs right now is some hope. They do not need a lecture. They are tired. They are seasick. They have no food and very little drinking water. They are far from land. They have little hope of being rescued. So, what Paul does here is he offers them much-needed words of hope and encouragement. Picking it up in v 22, Paul continues. He says...

READ Acts 27:22-26

This is very important – **“I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.”** God’s angel has revealed to Paul (we do not know how, either in a dream or in a vision) what is going to happen. The ship will run aground and be lost, BUT there is good news – the entire crew and all its passengers will survive. Those who remain with Paul will live. And why is that? Because God’s hand of protection is on Paul. Therefore, His hand is also on those traveling with Paul. I call this “God’s mercy by association.”

READ Acts 27:27-28

“A sounding” involves taking a known length of rope with a weight on the end of it and lowering it. When it hits the land (the sea bottom) they can determine how deep it is. They know from these soundings that it is getting shallower. They been out in the open ocean 14 days drifting. They

do not know exactly where they are at. They are just drifting around at the mercy of the wind and the seas. But without sails it is slow going and rough. You can just imagine how horrible these two weeks have been. After drifting for two weeks at sea with no sails there is finally some hope of land. It is around midnight and one of the sailors looks out and sees what appears to be the outline of a landmass. The sailors on board begin sounding the depths. Sure enough, they are getting shallower. They are approaching land! They do not know it, but they are fast approaching this island here (Malta).

READ Acts 27:29

The crew senses that they might run aground on the rocks. That would be bad. They try to slow down their momentum with four anchors. They long for daylight, but unfortunately for them, they are still several hours from that. It is the middle of the night. They fear their weakened wooden vessel is about to crash on the jagged rocks. When it does, it will surely break apart. So, the crew begins to panic.

READ Act 27:30

Basically, they lie about why they are getting off the ship – “under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow.”

It is every man for himself! The sailors are trying to make a break for it. They lower the lifeboat to get away. Paul, however, sees what is going on. Remember, he is a seasoned traveler. He has been through this before. So, he alerts the Roman commander to what the crew is attempting to do.

READ Acts 27:31-32

This time the Roman commander listens to Paul. Lesson learned. This guy knows what he is talking about. His soldiers slash the ropes holding the lifeboat and it falls into the water and drifts away. Paul knows that if the ship and its passengers are going to be saved, it is going to require an experienced crew to guide the ship toward a beach where they can run aground safely there. He knows they need these guys. By the way, this is



the common-sense side of Paul. Yes, he knows God is going to save them. God has already told him. But God will use this crew, this Egyptian cargo ship crew to do that. For several more hours Paul continues to encourage the ill-fated ship's crew and passengers.

READ Acts 27:33-35

Paul continues to encourage them. He knows that everyone aboard will need their strength when the ship finally does run aground. So, he is encouraging them all to eat what few rations they have left. Once again, he offers practical advice. He reminds them that God has promised that none of them will perish. They needed to hear that. Even in the midst of all the chaos, Paul finds time to bless the food and acknowledge God's goodness, provision and care.

READ Acts 27:36

They listened to Paul and they ate. After they get some food in their stomachs there is this newfound strength and optimism on board the ship. Their despair and hopelessness begin to vanish. God uses Paul to keep the spirits of the men on board up.

READ Acts 27:37

Now we learn how many people are on board this ship. Does it surprise you that there are that many? When I first read this and studied this it surprised me that there were 276 people on this ship. That is a lot of people! God has promised Paul that every one of these 276 people are going to survive!

Well, it is starting to get light and the men have finish eating when we pick it up in v 38...

READ Acts 27:38-40

So, they hoist up a small sail to give them some control of the ship. They are going to try and guide it toward that beach. They lighten the load some more. They locate a suitable spot where they can run aground – this

beach that they can see. They head toward it as best they can. Now comes the moment of truth...

READ Acts 27:41

They run aground on a shoal and the ship begins to break up. The bow, the front end, sticks firmly in the clay while the stern, the back end, of the ship is pounded by the waves. Remember, Paul never said that the ship itself would be saved. He only said that all the passengers and crew would survive. Now, as the ship breaks up, it is a matter of a short swim to the beach.

READ Acts 27:42-44a

Why would the Roman soldiers plan to kill the prisoners? That does not seem very nice. Why would they do that? Because, if a prisoner under their watch escapes, the penalty for the one guarding that prisoner is death. But Paul is too valuable of a prisoner. He is a special prisoner that must appear before Caesar. So, the Roman commander cannot let his soldiers kill Paul and intervenes. He is committed to bringing Paul safely to Rome. The other prisoners benefit from this.

He orders those who can swim – soldiers, prisoners and crew alike, to jump overboard and swim for shore. The rest are to grab onto a plank of wood or whatever they can find from the ship that floated and paddle to shore. And that is what they do.

READ Acts 27:44b

All 276 survive, just as Paul said it would happen. That is what God had told him and it happened.

So, where in the world are they? The very first verse of the next chapter says, "After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta" (Acts 28:1).

The island of Malta is a very picturesque place. In fact, if you go on a cruise today in that part of the world you will likely stop at Malta. There is

a port there and it is very scenic. That is where we are going to pick it up next time as we wrap up our study in Acts.

In a lesson like this and you may wonder, "Why is that there? Why is this story included in the Bible?" Well, there is a lot we can learn from Acts Chapter 27. There are some applications for us.

- Be careful what you ask for. Paul requested to go to Rome and he eventually would get there. But the way to Rome was long and it was rough!
- So often we think we have everything under control in our lives. We make plans. Then suddenly there is a shift in the winds of our life. All of our best laid plans are wrecked. We must learn to rely on God to guide us through the uncertainties that lie ahead. Maybe God is trying to get us where He wants us to be – relying on Him.
- In times of crisis, like the ship's crew in the storm, we cling to what is really important and ditch the rest. Isn't that true?
- We sometimes fail to heed the voice of truth found in God's word. Instead, like the world and like the ship's crew in this lesson, we follow our own desire based on limited human reasoning. What a mess we can make of things when we do that!
- God guided Paul's ship to the island of Malta using the seemingly random forces of nature, the wind and the waves. God's hand was in the wind and in waves. This was not just randomness. This was God's hand. He is sovereign even in the winds and the waves. His hand was taking that ship toward this island of Malta. God's hand is in wind and in the forces that impact our lives as well. From our perspective it may all seem random, like it just happens. No, God is purposeful, even if it does not seem like He is.
- God keeps His promises. He brought Paul and company to safety – all 276 – just as He said He would.