

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday August 20, 2023

Lesson 18: The Journey to Rome

Reference: Acts 27-28; Swindoll – Chapter 20: How to Handle a Shipwreck

When we last saw Paul, he was sent to Caesarea by the Roman Commander Lysias both for his protection and also to face trials for allegedly committed crimes punishable by death. In Caesarea, he was tried before procurators Felix and Festus; then he evangelized to King Agrippa. In the trial before Festus, Paul appealed to Rome's authority, prompting Festus to send him to Rome to appeal his case. The year is AD 58.



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Timeline – Paul's Journey to Rome

The twenty-seventh chapter of the book of Acts was written by Luke in such a manner that it can effectively be called "Luke's Journal for the journey to Rome." The chapter can be broken down by focusing on the drama between stops:

- **Setting sail (27:1-4)** – Luke noted how the journey began with all the expectations of a smooth voyage, casually citing both the people and the shipment cargo embarking on this journey. At their first stop, Luke noted that Roman Centurion extended grace to Paul, allowing Paul to visit with his friends to provide for his needs. Presumably the same grace was not extended to other prisoners.
- **Changing ship (27:4-8)** – The crew arrived in Myra and boarded an Alexandrian ship that was on its way to Italy (Rome). Alexandrian Ships (Grain Vessel) were merchant ships commonly used to transport grains and other cargoes. The vessel is shaped more like barges than sail boats, ranging in sizes as long as 180 feet and as wide as 45 feet; giving it limited maneuverability as it was designed more for cargo transport.

Luke noted that the weather conditions made the journey difficult. Westward voyages in the Mediterranean are normally more difficult than eastward travels since the ship will be sailing against the wind. This is even more the case when sailing in the winter. Luke detailed the ship's struggle over many days just to make it to the South side of Crete, to a place called Fair Heavens (27:7-8).

- **Warning not heeded (27:9-13)** – Paul has frequented these waters in his various missionary journeys, meaning that he is likely aware of the weather conditions during that time of the year (Luke's mentioning of "after the Day of Atonement" means the time would be in mid to late October; "day of Atonement" would be in early October). Paul warned against sailing on, but his warning was not heeded as the Roman centurion opted to listen to the expertise of the ship's captain. The ship's captain evidently either consulted others or personally believed that they can reach a better harbor to hunker down for the winter by sailing / floating along the Island of Crete (27:12-13).
- **Lost at sea (27:14-20)** – *Euraquilo* (27:14) is similar to what we would refer today as a "perfect storm" weather pattern, where multiple storm fronts converge in the same area. Though it is unlikely that Paul or any other shipmates foresaw this event, many of the crew did seem to be aware of the turbulent weather conditions in the region at that time of the year (27:12-13). Nonetheless, the storm pushed the ship away from shore and into the open sea (27:15-16). Not only were they pushed out into the open seas, the ship and its crew were in constant battle against the weather conditions (27:18-19). This evidently went on for multiple days (27:20). Navigation in those days relied heavily on the positions of the stars at night and the sun during the day. Since the sky was constantly darkened by the storm clouds over many days, the captain and the crew lost track of their whereabouts, and hope of being saved was gradually abandoned (27:20).
- **Paul providing hope to the battle-weary crew (27:21-26)** – Paul knew something that the crew did not know, which is that God had already told Paul that he will be witnessing in Rome (23:11). This knowledge assured Paul that he would not die at sea. He used this knowledge as the means to encourage the crew, assuring them that there would be no loss of life (27:23), to not be afraid (27:24). Paul then proposed the strategy to steer the ship to run aground on any island (27:26).
- **Approaching land but still losing faith (27:27- 32)** – After fourteen days drifting on the sea, the crew determined that the ship's location should be close to the Adriatic Sea. Since it was midnight (27:27) and fearing that the ship would drift too fast and crash into a land mass unexpectedly, they cast four anchors at the stern of the ship to slow the drift. During this act of dropping the anchors, some of the crew members opted to try to survive on their own on lifeboats, leading Paul to issue the warning that those who leave the ship will not survive (27:31).
- **Paul witnessing to the crew (27:33-38)** – By the end of the next day, Paul issued another word of encouragement to the crew, assuring them of their survival, and that rationing was no longer necessary. Paul then led the crew of 276 in worship (27:35). After everyone had eaten enough, the crew dumped excess wheat cargo to lighten the ship.
- **Landfall at Malta (27:39-28:1)** – By daybreak the next day, the crew can see land. As they cut off the anchors and tried to navigate the ship towards the land, the ship struck a reef, causing the ship to run aground. The waves of water then began to break the ship apart (27:41). For fear that the prisoners would escape, some Roman soldiers proposed killing them. However, the centurion overruled the soldiers, commanding those who could swim to head for the shores, while others would follow on broken planks. After everyone made it to shore, they then discovered that they had landed on the island of Malta.

- **Paul’s Ministry on the Island of Malta (28:2-10)** – The shipwrecked crew evidently arrived on the island sometime in the early winter, forcing them to stay on the island for three months through the winter before sailing on another Alexandrian vessel that had hunkered down on the island for the winter (28:11). During this time, Paul evidently engaged with the locals in mission work:
 - Bitten by a poisonous snake (28:3-6) – Luke’s account of this incident lacked much detail, but it is safe to assume that Paul was super-naturally protected – possibly even beyond Luke’s understanding. Luke recorded that the locals refer to Paul as a god given how Paul survived the venomous snake bite. It is safe to assume that Paul rejected that title and used that incident to evangelize, as that would be consistent with Paul’s action throughout the book of Acts.
 - Ministry of Healing (28:7-10) – Again, Luke’s account of these incidents lacked much detail, but Luke’s emphasis here is that Paul engaged in the ministry of healing through the power and testimony of God (28:8). These seemingly simple supernatural acts were well within Paul’s ability and authority through Christ, and was instrumental in helping the crew receive needed supplies as they head for Rome.
- **Arrival in Rome (28:11-15)** – After staying on the Island of Malta for three months, Paul and the other would finally arrive safely in Rome. This would be the Spring of AD59. Paul was met by Christians from Rome on his way to the capital city.

At this point, Luke stopped providing any further details of Paul’s ministry other than to share how Paul explained his persecution and testimony in Jerusalem and in Caesarea that led him to now witness in Rome (28:17-22). Luke does not continue to record Paul’s activities in Rome and beyond, as the purpose of this work (book of Acts) is now complete (cf Acts 1:8). Shortly after arriving in Rome, the book of Acts would be completed and published, sometime in AD60.

Analysis – Acts 27

The closing chapters of the book of Acts is intended to show how the Gospel ultimately made it “..to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The chapters leading into the journey to Rome highlights the consistency of Paul’s message to the Gentile nation (Roman authorities, Roman audience, etc; cf Acts 21-26); and from Acts 28 forward, Paul’s message was likely equally consistent to the audience in Rome itself (28:17-22).

Sandwiched between Paul’s message and ministry to the Gentile audience from Acts 21 to Acts 28 is this chapter – Acts 27 – where Luke journals their adventure traveling from Caesarea to Rome. This chapter offers little insights into Paul’s ministry – his message, his audience, his challenge, etc. – towards application principles directly from the text itself. Metaphorically, however, Dr. Swindoll noted how the journey illustrates the faithfulness of God to those who clings to His promises.

To recap, the promise made to Paul was that he will testify about Christ in Rome (Acts 23:11). Clinging to this promise, Paul knew that he would make it safely to Rome despite the extreme turbulence and threats to his life and the lives of those on the ship with him. Given this narrative, Dr. Swindoll offered that it is “...hidden within the recorded story {that} we learn lessons for our lives.” From these accounts, “...we draw the strength to face our own perfect storms head-on and stare down our own feelings of panic.” To this narrative, Dr. Swindoll offered the following “anchors for our storm-tossed soul” (summarized version):

- **Anchor of Stability (27:20-26)**. When the ship was lost at sea, unable to know their location due to the darkened skies (loss of navigation system), the people on the ship panicked, losing hope of being saved (27:20). This is what can happen when we face intense adversity – we tend to focus on the loss of our navigation system, finding it difficult to focus on anything other than the “storm” knocking

us in all directions. Our tendency would be to turn to other sources for strength rather than the Word of God. Following Paul's example, recognize that our anchor of stability (Word of God) holds firm when our navigation system fails during turbulent times.

- **Anchor of Unity (27:27-32).** After fourteen nights had passed with no observable change in circumstances, the temptation was strong to abandon ship and to try to survive on their own. This is our tendency during turbulent times – to cut and run. The outcome of the cut-and-run approach is that the strength and support of the community would be lost. Individuals who leave the church or fellowship during their turbulent times inevitably find themselves alone, likely leading to depression or other undesirable alone conditions. In turbulent times, people need each other for encouragement and support. Avoid the temptation to cut and run (face the storm by yourself).
- **Anchor of Renewal (27:33-36).** During the fourteen-day turbulent times, the people on the ship were so focused on the storm that they failed to be properly nourished. In times of intense adversity, we too have this tendency to spend so much energy fighting battles that we fail to take care of our own body. We would cut corners on meals, deprive ourselves of needed sleep, and most importantly, we would forget to pray. After fourteen days, Paul had to remind the people to take a break and take care of their body. Before they ate, he led them in prayer.
- **Anchor of Reality (27:41-44).** As the vessel ran aground and the waves began to break the ship apart, the soldiers on the ship were more concerned about managing the prisoners than about surviving, being in denial of their situation that led to misplaced priorities. In times of intense adversity, we also have a tendency to be in denial that led us to have misplaced priorities. We tend to focus on our normal routines and responsibilities, missing the reality that danger is upon us. Facing reality is often difficult, as it will require us to take actions we do not want to take. In this example, 276 souls were told to jump into the turbulent waters and swim to shore – with or without a plank to assist. None of them likely would've preferred this path, but this is the reality. Jump or die. As Luke records, all 276 survived. God is faithful.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read Jonah Chapter 1. This is the incident where Jonah flees from the command of the LORD as a servant of God.

1. What can we observe about Jonah's actions and the impact it has on himself and on others?
2. What can we observe about people's reactions to calamity? People's reaction to God in times of calamity?
3. What are some principles we can learn from this Chapter about trusting in a supernatural God in times of calamity?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

Today's lesson focuses on how we prepare ourselves for – and our reactions to – “storms” in our life.

1. Reflect on a time when you were in a “turbulent storm,” defined as a time in your life where you feel hopeless, being tossed around by circumstances that you could not control. What were your “anchors” of stability, unity, renewal, and reality? Journal your reflection.
2. “Storms” of our life will hit all of us, often at the most inopportune time. It is during the calm moments of our life that we can best prepare for the storms of our life. What are some of the things you can do today to prepare yourself for the storms of your life? (Focus on Swindoll's “anchors”)
3. Go back and reflect on your experience from various “storms” of your life. If you could do things over and knowing what you know now, what would you do differently? Journal your reflection to help facilitate your thinking process for future encounters, then take your journal entries to prayers.