

Paul's Voyage to Rome, and the Shipwreck

Acts 27

Acts 27:1-20: *"And when it was decided that we should sail to Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to one named Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment. ² So, entering a ship of Adramyttium, we put to sea, meaning to sail along the coasts of Asia. Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, was with us. ³ And the next day we landed at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him liberty to go to his friends and receive care. ⁴ When we had put to sea from there, we sailed under the shelter of Cyprus, because the winds were contrary. ⁵ And when we had sailed over the sea which is off Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra, a city of Lycia. ⁶ There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing to Italy, and he put us on board.*

⁷ When we had sailed slowly many days, and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, the wind not permitting us to proceed, we sailed under the shelter of Crete off Salmone. ⁸ Passing it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea. ⁹ Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, ¹⁰ saying, "Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives." ¹¹ Nevertheless the centurion was more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship than by the things spoken by Paul. ¹² And because the harbor was not suitable to winter in, the majority advised to set sail from there also, if by any means they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete opening toward the southwest and northwest, and winter there.

¹³ When the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their desire, putting out to sea, they sailed close by Crete. ¹⁴ But not long after, a tempestuous head wind arose, called Euroclydon. ¹⁵ So when the ship was caught, and could not head into the wind, we let her drive. ¹⁶ And running under the shelter of an island called Claudia, we secured the skiff with difficulty. ¹⁷ When they had taken it on board, they used cables to undergird the ship; and fearing lest they should run aground on the Syrtis Sands, they struck sail and so were driven. ¹⁸ And because we were exceedingly tempest-tossed, the next day they lightened the ship. ¹⁹ On the third day we threw the ship's tackle overboard with our own hands. ²⁰ Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up."

Background Notes

Acts 27 is one of the more exciting and dramatic chapters of the Bible. For the average Christian, it's a lot more exciting to read Acts 27 than (for example) a chapter in Leviticus! A lot of information was included about the early navigational routes of the Mediterranean Sea and ancient sailing procedures, such as undergirding cables (v17).

The ship Paul boarded was going to Rome from Alexandria, Egypt (v6), and it was a grain ship (v38). Egypt was the breadbasket of Rome. The grain ships from Egypt sailed north in the Mediterranean Sea and then west along the more protected shores (v4-13).

However, on this voyage, the ship was blown off course by a sudden, violent and prolonged storm, with winds from the northeast. Fearing that they would be blown into the treacherous shallows off the coast of Africa, they dropped the sea anchor and let the ship be blown along at the mercy of the storm. The ship's skiff (v16) was the dinghy - the small boat that was towed behind the main vessel for ship-to-shore excursions, and could be used as a lifeboat. The dinghy was filling up with water, and they were finally able to haul it up and fasten it on board.

Acts 27 is the inspired historical record of the apostle Paul's ship voyage, but many Christians have also looked at it as an allegory of the Christian life, or of Church History. As an allegory of the Christian life, the storms represent the storms of the Christian life, and the danger of shipwreck if you don't follow the word of the Lord. As an allegory of the history of the Christian Church, the storm represents the false teaching that confronted the early Church, and the shipwreck represents what happened to the Church when false teaching brought heresy into the Church. Aside from allegorical ideas of Acts 27, there are many biblical principles that emerge from the study of this chapter.

Doctrinal Points

1. Unbelievers are not blessed when they follow the wisdom of this world.

It's obvious from these verses that the reason why this voyage was in trouble from the beginning was that they did not listen to the apostle Paul, who had the mind of God (v10). Paul had already established a good reputation with the centurion, Julius. He permitted Luke and Aristarchus to come along as Paul's "servants." Furthermore, even though he was a prisoner, Julius allowed Paul to go ashore in Sidon to meet with believers there. The centurion allowed Paul to express his opinion about the voyage, but when it came to making a decision, the wisdom of this world was followed rather than Paul's godly counsel. As a result, bad fallout followed.

This outcome is still true today if people follow the wisdom of this world rather than the principles of God's Word and the godly counsel of believers. For example, think of the broken marriages that could have been saved from shipwreck if godly counsel was sought out and followed. How many businesses would be preserved from financial disaster if biblical principles of doing business were followed? The wisdom of this world may look good and even appear reasonable at first, but it cannot result in blessing because it does not take God and His Word into account. Unbelievers are not blessed when they follow the wisdom of this world.

2. Unbelievers are blessed when they follow the counsel of godly believers.

Acts 27:21-44: *“But after long abstinence from food, then Paul stood in the midst of them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss. ²² And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, ²⁴ saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ ²⁵ Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me. ²⁶ However, we must run aground on a certain island.”*

²⁷ *Now when the fourteenth night had come, as we were driven up and down in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors sensed that they were drawing near some land. ²⁸ And they took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and when they had gone a little farther, they took soundings again and found it to be fifteen fathoms. ²⁹ Then, fearing lest we should run aground on the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern, and prayed for day to come. ³⁰ And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, when they had let down the skiff into the sea, under pretense of putting out anchors from the prow, ³¹ Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.” ³² Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the skiff and let it fall off.*

³³ *And as day was about to dawn, Paul implored them all to take food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day you have waited and continued without food, and eaten nothing. ³⁴ Therefore I urge you to take nourishment, for this is for your survival, since not a hair will fall from the head of any of you.” ³⁵ And when he had said these things, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat. ³⁶ Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves. ³⁷ And in all we were two hundred and seventy-six persons on the ship. ³⁸ So when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship and threw out the wheat into the sea.*

³⁹ *When it was day, they did not recognize the land; but they observed a bay with a beach, onto which they planned to run the ship if possible. ⁴⁰ And they let go the anchors and left them in the sea, meanwhile loosing the rudder ropes; and they hoisted the mainsail to the wind and made for shore. ⁴¹ But striking a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves.*

⁴² *And the soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape. ⁴³ But the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, ⁴⁴ and the rest, some on boards and some on parts of the ship. And so it was that they all escaped safely to land.”*

Even though the ship broke apart and sank, not a life was lost. The lives of all those unbelievers were saved because of the apostle Paul and his godly counsel. I’d like to think that as a result of these events, the centurion and others trusted the Lord Jesus as Savior, but we don’t know for sure.

Unbelievers can receive a measure of blessing in their lives if they follow the counsel of godly believers. Think of how Pharaoh and the entire population of Egypt were blessed when they followed the godly counsel of Joseph. Think of how our own nation has been blessed because it was founded on biblical principles. Let's pray that our country would listen to the counsel of godly believers and return to those biblical principles.

Notice that Paul gained credibility because of the storm. Before the storm, the men didn't listen to his godly counsel, but during the storm they believed him - even his testimony about the angel who spoke with him. During the storm the centurion followed Paul's advice, even to cutting away the dinghy so that the sailors could not escape. Notice that when Paul encouraged the men to eat bread after he had given thanks to the Lord, all 276 persons on board that doomed ship followed his godly counsel and encouragement.

When the soldiers would have killed the prisoners to prevent them from escaping, the centurion preserved their lives because of Paul and his godly counsel and advice. As mentioned before, maybe some of the soldiers and sailors and prisoners became believers. Unbelievers are blessed when they follow the counsel of godly believers.

Practical Application

Watch out for "favorable soft winds."

Verse 13: *"When the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their desire, putting out to sea, they sailed close by Crete."* Paul, who had the mind of God, had counseled them to spend the winter right where they were, and continue the ship voyage in the spring. This was also simple common sense, since it was risky to sail at that time of the year. But a favorable wind blew softly, and the consensus of opinion was to go for it: "Why not? We can get to a better harbor if we chance it and sail on ahead!" But it was a mistake. They turned a deaf ear to common sense and godly counsel, and they reaped the consequences of shipwreck.

Do you see the connection? Watch out for favorable soft winds when making decisions. Why not marry this unbeliever? He's such a nice guy, and it looks favorable that he'll become a Christian later - so why not marry him now? Why not change jobs? The offer looks good. Why not sell our house and get a bigger one? The wind is moving softly. Why not make this financial investment? The winds seem favorable.

Have you really checked out these decisions? Have you prayed about them? The point is not that all job changes and moves and investments are wrong, but we need to ask if we have the mind of God on these important decisions. God promises to guide us, so wait on Him. Be careful! Beware of those "favorable soft winds."