

Acts

Acts 27:1-44 - The impact our faith has on others

So Paul was on his way to Rome, and note that Luke now talked about “we” in **Acts 27:1**, so Luke was travelling with Paul and experiencing first hand what happened next. Acts 27, then, is like reading Luke’s daily diary. And it’s amazing how much detail he goes into about ships and sailing. It goes to show what a great historian Luke was, and worth the accolade that what he wrote is **the best history we have** of that era, by far.

Paul, meanwhile, is probably still chained to a Roman soldier, and now under the supervision of a centurion named Julius (verse 1), who, like several other centurions that Jesus and Peter had dealings with, was a good man, “allowing Paul to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs,” **verse 3**. Take into account, as Luke does, that Julius was also in the highly prestigious “Imperial Regiment” (verse 1) responsible to the Emperor (Nero) himself, so he was a man of great authority, but also a kind and respectful man too, even to his prisoners. Not all Roman soldiers were brutish killing machines.

Luke also features Aristarchus in his log (verse 2), a young man Paul had met earlier, who had left home and country to care for Paul wherever he went. So Paul had kindness shown to him and practical help, including Dr. Luke with him as his personal physician. Paul had messed things up enough to become a prisoner, yes, but God in his mercy had provided him with good care.

So why would God not provide good weather too? Because instead of the usual north east wind at this time of year, which would have blown them very nicely up the coast from Sidon to Turkey, they hit a headwind from the north west instead (verse 4). It made for slow sailing, zig zagging across the open sea, so they holed up in Myra in south western Turkey (verse 5), where the centurion found a much larger grain ship on its way from Alexandria to Italy.

But again the wind was against them and they made little progress all the way to Cnidus (Nide-us), still off the coast in south western Turkey (verse 7). They were then blown south to the north eastern tip of the island of Crete at Salmone (Sal-mo-nay), so they crept along the south coast of Crete, protected somewhat from the wind, to Fair Havens on the southern tip of the island (verse 8). They were way off course and they’d only travelled 300 kms so far, so much time has been lost (verse 9).

By now it was “after the Fast (Day of Atonement)” in October too, which at this time of year made sailing even more dangerous (verse 9). Sudden storms that sometimes lasted for days would strike at any time. But instead of listening to Paul’s advice that continuing on would be “disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo and to our own lives also,” the centurion listens to the pilot and owner of the boat, that since “the harbour was unsuitable to winter in” they should head for the Cretan harbour of Phoenix 80 kms west. Most of the ship’s crew agreed with that too (verses 10-12).

So here was Paul, supposed to be going to Rome as God willed - and this time totally obedient to God’s will too - stuck instead in a second rate harbour in Crete at the mercy of natural forces, over which God had total control. Why, then, was God making things so difficult?

But then the wind changed, blowing gently from the south, tempting them to ignore the obvious dangers. So they set sail again (verse 13) only to be blasted by the dreaded hurricane force “northeaster” sweeping down from the island blowing them helplessly out to sea, with no way of heading back to safety either (verses 14-15). They knew they were in trouble, so they hoisted the lifeboat (towing along behind them) onto the ship and strapped it down so they wouldn’t lose it. And in fear of the ship itself being broken apart by the shifting of the grain, they somehow “passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together” (verses 16-17). But they were in the open sea, with no protection, totally at the mercy of the wind.

For Paul this must have been a bit of *deja vu*, because he too had ignored warnings, and in his case a warning from the Holy Spirit through a prophet too. And not taking **his** warning seriously had now landed the entire company on board in deep trouble as well. Their ship was taking “such a violent battering” that the following day the crew had to throw the cargo overboard, and the next day the ship’s tackle followed (verses 18-19). After several days and nights of relentless battering, despair set in. The crew were so upset they couldn’t even eat (verses 20-21).

But why was all this happening when Paul had thoroughly repented of his mistake and he could say with confidence now that “I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day” (Acts 23:1)? He’d repented, yes, but Paul had also been teaching there were **two great truths** in the Christian message (Acts 20:21). Repentance was the first, but he’d also learnt that it wasn’t trusting the Holy Spirit that had got him into so much trouble. So would he now tune into the second great truth of **trust** - that despite what looked like an impossible situation the Holy Spirit would get them through it?

Trust in this case was a challenge, though, because what God was putting them through to get Paul to Rome didn't make any sense. But Paul had learnt that the Holy Spirit could be trusted to work round his mistakes and still get him to his destination, which an angel then confirmed for him by telling Paul that night (probably because of Paul's heartfelt prayers for the crew's safety) that there would be no loss of life. And to calm Paul's own fears too, that Paul himself would survive to "stand trial before Caesar," **Acts 27:22-24**.

So Paul yells through the howling wind, "Keep up your courage, men, for I **have faith in God** that it will happen just as he told me," **verse 25**. So, yes, Paul was tuned into the second great truth of trust too, and because of his trust the lives of all 276 people on board (verse 37) would be spared.

It wasn't until the fourteenth night, however, that Paul's promise of them running aground "on some island" (Acts 27:26) came true. Depth readings had very quickly shown they were approaching land fast, so in fear of being dashed against the rocks the soldiers anchored the ship (stern first), but only pretended to anchor the bow too, when in fact they were lowering the lifeboat "to escape from the ship" and save their lives (verses 28-30).

Paul reported this to the centurion, telling him that "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved," **verse 31**. Amazingly, the centurion listened and ordered the lifeboat to be cut loose and allowed to drift away (verse 32). They had now cut off their only hope of surviving, on the word of a prisoner too, but this was the kind of impact Paul's faith was beginning to have.

But when Paul "urged them all to eat," which was the last thing they'd wanted to do during the scares of the last two weeks, they waited to see what Paul would do. Well, when Paul started to eat and he promised "Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head," they didn't hesitate. And it was only after they'd eaten their fill that "they lightened the ship by throwing the grain (it was carrying) into the sea" (verses 33-38). On Paul's advice, then, they ate first before trying to save the ship. And because of Paul the entire crew were now acting calmly, rather than panicking. Such was the impact of Paul's faith again.

Daylight then revealed the chance to run the ship safely aground on a sandy beach, but the surf stranded them on a sandbar and began to break the ship up instead (verses 39-41). So just when they thought their troubles might be over, they were in deep trouble again, and especially the soldiers, because Roman law required the death of a soldier if a prisoner he was guarding escaped. To prevent that happening soldiers would customarily kill their prisoners if there was any risk of them escaping.

So now a new hazard faced Paul (verse 42). But he'd clearly made quite the impression on Julius the centurion, because Julius "wanted to save Paul's life," so he told the soldiers to back off. But that put Julius' own life at stake - and even more so when he ordered the prisoners to jump overboard, with those who could swim to head for shore first, and the rest to hang on to pieces of wreckage. As Paul promised, however, "everyone reached land (Malta) in safety," **verse 44**, but they were nearly a thousand kms west of Crete and another one thousand kms south of Rome. That's how far from their course the wind had blown them. So, **"Why did God allow all this to happen?"**

Well, for a start, they'd all witnessed an even more powerful 'wind' in operation in Paul, **whose reactions in exactly the same frightening circumstances were so different to theirs**. Paul was calm, reassuring and encouraging. He didn't panic or lose his cool, even when faced with a hopeless situation they had no control over. He could even promise they'd be safe. And all of this had happened, Paul had claimed, because of **"the God whose I am (or to whom I belong) and whom I serve," verse 23**.

God was showing all those soldiers, prisoners and crew through Paul that another much greater dimension existed they could turn to for help. But this is what drove Paul to do all the travelling he did - and risked his life telling people about - that there really is a Being in existence called Jesus, who'd been resurrected from the dead to show his power in those who trusted him. And like Paul we are telling people the same thing, with the same evidence to back it up too, in **how differently WE react** to tough and scary times too.

Which answers the question as to why God allows tough and scary things to happen. It's to reveal another world in operation, made visible by how Christians react. And how important is that in a world that's being blown all over the place by powers that we have no control over either? The battering we're taking is endless, as one crisis follows another, and our political leaders have no idea what to do. How can anyone possibly have hope in such a world?

But God provided hope in the desperate battering they were going through on the ship. How? Through Paul having his trust in the God he served given a boost by an angel - and trust boosted to such an extent it had a wonderfully calming effect on the others on the ship. Is that what God wishes to do through us too, then? Is it to boost our trust in him - through obvious evidence of his involvement in our lives, including encouragement by angels - so that people close to us see the difference in how we react to stormy times, and it has an impact on their lives too? Because what else, pray tell, would give hope to people in this world? It has to be what God gives us Christians, as we see in this amazing story of what God gave Paul in Acts 27.