Preparing to Teach Acts 27-28

You know how movie advertisements and book covers tend to have blurbs to get you to pay attention? I was privileged to write a blurb for an important book on game design at one point and, a few times, my reviews were quoted in game advertisements. So, as I was preparing this study, a few phrases jumped out at me regarding Acts 27-28 and the voyage to Rome.

The Pentecostal scholar, French L. Arrington, calls this “…one of the most dramatic sections of Acts.” [Arrington, French L., *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 254.]. The revered F. F. Bruce called it: “…as graphic a piece of descriptive writing as anything else in the Bible.” [Bruce, F. F., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974—original 1954), p. 498.]. Emphasizing the facticity, Gloag writes: “In no writing of ancient times which has come down to us, have we in so small a compass such a minute description of a voyage as that contained in this chapter of the Acts.” [Gloag, Paton J., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Volume II* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), p. 304; Robertson, p. 388.]

Carrying on the tradition with which we started, the early 20th century commentary by Foakes-Jackson asserts: “…among the finest pieces of descriptive writing in the New Testament.” [Foakes-Jackson, F. J., *The Moffatt Commentary: Acts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), p. 227.]. In addition, a commentary with which I grew up observes there is “…no other part of the New Testament that can equal its vividness.” [Smith, T. C., “Acts” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 10: Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 144.].

Yet, perhaps it is that very vividness that has caused some to doubt the historicity. Some, like Vernon K. Robbins, have pointed to the fact that shipwrecks were such a familiar occurrence in ancient writing that other ancient writers parodied them [cited in Keener, Craig S., *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Volume 4: 24:1-28:31* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), p. 3563.]. But, Luke is more accurate than Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy with regard to the location of Cauda [Keener, p. 3565.] and others have said it is “one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship” [H. J. Holtzmann as cited in Bruce, p. 498.]. The details of the name of the storm wind [a combination word formed from the Greek “euros” (meaning east) and the Latin “aquila” (meaning north) adds credibility. This is an old mariner’s term attested in Latin inscriptions [Gloag, p. 405; Marshall, I. Howard, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983 reprint), p. 408.]. The detailed description of using the four anchors to stabilize the stern and the fact of “undergirding” the ship and reducing sail reflect actual conditions an alert eyewitness would have observed [Smith, p. 146.].

It seems very clear to me that this is an eye-witness account, as Schnabel argued: “The episode is a historical narrative of a storm, shipwreck, and survival, containing personal names (besides Paul: Julius, Aristarchus, Publius; 27:1, 2; 28:7), unnamed persons (the eyewitness of the “we” account [27:1 etc.]; the pilot and owner of the ship [27:11]; “friends” of Paul, i.e., fellow Christians, at Sidon [27:3]; believers in Puteoli [28:14]; believers from the city of Rome [28:15]), chronological information (27:3, 7, 9, 18, 19, 27, 33, 39; 28:11, 14), and detailed geographical and nautical information.” [Schnabel, Eckhard J., *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Book 5: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012), p. 1818.].

Before going verse-by-verse, though, I can’t help but note that many commentators compare this storm at sea with the one faced by the prophet Jonah (Bruce, p. 498; Keener, p. 3555; Munck, Johannes, *The Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1967), p. 252; Willimon, William H., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts* [Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 182.]. I like to call Paul the “reverse-Jonah” because he is responsible for saving the lives of those on shipboard differently than Jonah’s cowardly confession. “In the story of Jonah and his tough sea voyage, the presence of a reluctant prophet endangered the lives of everyone on the ship. Paul is no reluctant messenger of God, however, and his presence is the avenue of salvation for all on board.” [Willimon, p. 184.]. Inspired by Keener’s chart [Keener, p. 3559.], I went through both accounts again and developed this chart.

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| **JONAH** | **Verse(s)** | **PAUL** | **Verse(s)** |
| **flees call to west (ends of earth)** | **3** | **follows call west (unhindered)** | **28\_31** |
| **great storm/walking, raging** | **4, 13** | **typhoon-like wind** | **14** |
| **ship thought to be shattered** | **4** | **ship aground / shatters** | **41, 44** |
| **hurl cargo overboard** | **5** | **throw cargo overboard** | **18** |
| **fears God (negative?)** | **9** | **belongs to/worships God** | **23** |
| **cause of storm/danger** | **7, 12** | **cause of salvation/protection** | **23-24** |
| **crew saved after Jonah tossed** | **15** | **saved by swimming/floating** | **43-44** |

Also, since we’ve already mentioned how detailed the account of this voyage is compared to other “travelogues” in Acts, we might answer another question. Why did Luke spend so much effort describing this journey compared to the others? On a simple level, it is a dramatic way of demonstrating the providence of God bringing Paul over many obstacles as he tries to do God’s will [Arrington, p, 254; Marshall, p. 401; Schnabel, p. 1817; Smith, p. 144.] On a more complex level, Luke may have used the opportunity provided by describing the sea voyage and shipwreck to answer those who wondered why Paul needed to be tried in Rome if he was truly innocent of sedition [Keener, p. 3567.]. By demonstrating Paul’s perseverance in the face of human resistance and natural disaster, Luke would have demonstrated that it was God’s will for Paul to go to Rome.

So, the purpose of the sea voyage narrative is designed to vindicate Paul’s reputation while affirming Paul’s mission to take the gospel to the whole world. The message becomes “’Nothing can stop the gospel.’ Also it reiterates that the gospel is for all peoples; through God’s providence and his servants’ obedience and sacrifice, it will penetrate even the heart of the empire.” [Keener, p. 3569.].

As we start our journey in verse 1, it’s probably a good idea to look at the pronouns. The “we,” as we’ve decided before is Luke’s way of saying that he is involved in this voyage (even though scholars also notice that some ancient authors have included themselves to intensify the dramatic effect as though they were there). Since Luke doesn’t always use “we,” my preference is to believe that these are specific times when he wants us to know that he was an eye-witness. We don’t know if this means that Luke was elsewhere before the journey started and then joined, possibly gathering materials for the gospel while in Palestine [Marshall, p. 403.], but we presume his presence in this account.

Ramsay hypothesizes that because of the consist of prisoners, the ship wouldn’t have allowed non-prisoners except as slaves. So, he believed both Luke and Aristarchus served as Paul’s slaves much as the wife of a prisoner had deserved to serve her husband on a voyage recounted by Pliny [Ramsay, Sir William M., *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1962—original, 1925), p. 316.]. Robertson suggests that Luke was allowed as Paul’s personal physician [Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume III: The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 457.]. It is even possible that Luke and Aristarchus were allowed to go (at their own expense, of course) as witnesses for the defense [Keener, p. 3573.]. Regardless, it appears that this was a coastal merchant ship and, as long as there was room, they would have probably allowed anyone who had the fare.

I also look at the phrase “it was determined.” We know from what follows that “it” was sending Paul to Rome, but the passive phrase “was determined” is an indicator that many decisions were out of the Christians’ hands. And the “they” seems clear to mean Festus, the governor, and company. The way verse 1 reads, it sounds like Festus continued procrastinating until he finally made a decision regarding the practical aspects of sending Paul, as a prisoner, on the voyage [Schnabel, p. 1821.]. As we’ll note in a moment, we can probably put some of, if not most of, the blame on Festus’ delay for the shipwreck.

Paul was “handed over,” an official term for placing someone or something in custody to one Julius of the Augustan Cohort. This first name, famous for the so-called Julian emperors (named after Julius Caesar), suggests that the centurion was already a Roman citizen [Keener, p. 3571.]. This also makes sense to have a Roman in charge of a Roman citizen prisoner. As for the other prisoners, some have suggested that Aristarchus was also one, but the text does not specify. It is doubtful that the other prisoners were headed for an imperial tribunal like Paul was. More likely, they were going to be remanded over for gladiatorial training: “Since appeals to the emperor were rare and limited to Roman citizens, it must be assumed that these prisoners were convicted criminals being sent to Rome to be killed in gladiatorial games as part of the entertainment of the crowds.” [Schnabel, p. 1822.].

Yet, for many scholars, this reference to the Augustan Cohort offered a problem because anyone who knows much of anything about the Imperial Roman Army knows that the legions and cohorts were numbered (as pictured on the slide). However, auxiliary cohorts who were functioning away from Rome often did have a name (an “honorific”), though they usually had Roman career officers leading them, to engender more respect [Bruce, p. 500.]. There is evidence of an auxiliary cohort in Syria named for Augustus during the time when Quirenius was governor of Syria (remember Luke 2:2?) [Conzelmann, Hans, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible: Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 215.]. It also appears that such a cohort operated in Herod Agrippa II’s area of authority [Marshall, p. 403.]. An outdated perspective was espoused by Ramsay in thinking that these were special officers associated with a courier corps to provide official communication between the emperor and outlying provinces [Ramsay, p. 315.], citing handing Paul over to “his chief” as further evidence. But all we really know is that the centurion had ample authority to have a significant say even over that of the captain (perhaps owner) of the ship at a later point.

Now, the text doesn’t specifically say that the ship embarked from Caesarea [Bruce, p. 501.], but since Caesarea had a bustling harbor and Paul had been imprisoned there, it seems like a probable explanation. We do know that the ship is from Adramyttium, just below Troas where Paul had his Macedonian vision. The text does tell us that the ship intended to take a coastal route. Indeed, it was typical to take the route to the east of Cyprus as verse 4 will tell us, using Cyprus to block storm winds from the north and east [Ramsay, p. 317.] Then, the ship would sail west along the coast for two reasons: 1) they could follow the coastline instead of having to navigate in open sea and 2) where the mountains of Cilicia and Pamphylia would serve as a windbreak from intense northern storms.

As I said, it appears that the plan may have been to take this “coaster,” usually a smaller boat up near Troas, cross over to Neapolis—the port of Philippi—and cross the Grecian peninsula before sailing on to and around Italy. In fact, if Aristarchus, who is specifically mentioned as being from Thessalonica, was actually planning to go home by this route instead of going all the way to Rome with Paul, this would make sense. It would also make sense as to why Aristarchus isn’t mentioned again in Acts [Smith, p. 145.]. However, since most believe that Colossians and Philemon were written while Paul was in prison in Rome and Colossians 4:10 calls Aristarchus a “fellow-prisoner,” one must take that as a figurative reference [Keener, p. 3573.]. Philemon 24 only calls Aristarchus one of Paul’s “fellow-workers,” but this is immediately after verse 23’s reference to Epaphras as a “fellow-prisoner,” so it may imply being with Paul in prison. I think Aristarchus was a prisoner, heading to Rome with Paul, as per: “The evidence of Col 4:10 and Phlm 24 shows that Aristarchus shared Paul’s time of imprisonment in Rome.” [Schnabel, p. 1823.].

So, let’s get back to the journey. Verse 3 tells us that the first stop was Sidon. And here, something special happens. Julius allows Paul to visit his brothers and sisters in the church at Sidon, either on his own recognizance or with a minimal presence to accompany him [Bruce, pp. 501-502.]. It may be that, after his long confinement, Paul was experiencing some prison illness and needed medical treatment, but the literal translation would be to “take refreshment” [Robertson, pp. 457-458.]. We don’t know if he needed to be physically, emotionally, or spiritually refreshed, but we do know that his time with the church at Sidon helped to meet his need. And, at the risk of spiritualizing this too much, let me suggest that this should be what happens when we gather together as a church—we take refreshment whether we need physical, emotional, or spiritual support from each other.

From Sidon, we get the specific word from Luke that they sailed east of Cyprus. That might have been a surprise to Luke because, in an earlier season, they had sailed west and south of Cyprus to get to Sidon [Keener, p. 3579.]. In both cases, they would have been using the island as a windbreak from the fiercest winds. Square-rigged ships had tremendous difficulty beating against the wind. So, one ancient account describes a trip along the same coast as follows: “The ship worked slowly along the Cilician and Pamphylian coast, as the sailors availed themselves of local land breezes and of the steady westward current that runs along the coast. …lying at anchor in the shelter of the winding coast, when the westerly wind made progress impossible.” [Ramsay, p. 317.]. An addition to the text in some manuscripts says that it took 15 days to complete this leg of the trip and reach Myra, the customs port for the Lycian area. This is almost certainly an addition beyond what Luke wrote, but it is very, very probable [Schnabel, p. 1825.].

At Myra, the centurion apparently gave up on taking the coastal route and chose a larger boat, one we discover had wheat as its cargo and was on its way to Rome. At this season, they could keep using the strategy of local land breezes through the islands on their way to Cnidus [Bruce, p. 503.]. Some people might doubt the historicity of a ship taking the kinds of risks that this one was taking when the fierce winds stopped them at Cnidus, but in the time of Claudius, there was a great bounty on bringing wheat into Rome, “even in the winter season.” [Suetonius (Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus), trans. J. C. Rolfe*, The Lives of the Caesars* (New York: NY: Barnes & Noble, 2004), p. 201.]. Of course, that line applies to Caesar Claudius and Paul is headed toward Caesar Nero, but I think it illustrates the priority that grain was in Imperial Rome. We know from multiple sources that because there were almost 200,000 people on the dole, any limitation in grain meant serious unrest in Rome [Keener, p. 3582.]. So, there was a high reward to risk ratio.

Once the ship reached the lee shore of Crete and the safe harbor port of Salmone (meaning a place of refuge from the wind), they were relatively safe [Keener, p. 3587]. But they wanted to progress to the port of Phoenix at the other end of the island and that didn’t work out so well. “A ship anchored at Fair Havens would be well protected from the sudden north winds that blew through the Asterousia Mountains to the north. The bay offered good anchorage—except from the southeast winds of winter, although offshore islands provide protection from the southwest. This settlement, which Luke calls “a place” (τόπος), was not large, nor was the town of Lasea, to whose territory the bay belonged. In v. 12 Kaloi Limenes is described as a place unsuitable for the grain ship and its crew and passengers to spend the winter. [Schnabel, pp. 1827-1828.].

When we get to the part where they are in the harbor called Fair Havens, I need to ask your permission to preach a little bit. Luke has Paul approach these decision-makers and express the idea that there will be a cost in making this trip in terms of profitability, capital damage, and human injuries and deaths. Now, as it turns out, the apostle is only partially correct. We learn later in the chapter that no one died. But, we also learn later in the chapter that Paul is mostly correct.

How is Paul mostly correct? In verse 10, he says that the voyage will experience damage and great loss, but he also says that they will lose their lives. We don’t know how much of his statement is from direct revelation from God but we know it isn’t that God has spoken audibly or with a complete and realistic vision because God doesn’t get even part of it wrong. God later gives him a clarification, but the fact that Luke records Paul’s statement, even when part of it is wrong, should be a warning to those of us who believe God has given us every detail of a situation or that we have heard God audibly.

I believe the very fact that Paul got some of his word of prophecy or warning wrong on this occasion shows that Paul was working off several levels in which God speaks to us: **[Click]** 1) experience (God affirms or corrects knowledge based on what we ourselves have done); **[Click]** 2) intuition (the Holy Spirit makes us aware of things about which we aren’t consciously aware); **[Click]** 3) knowledge (the Holy Spirit reminding us of what we’ve already learned and helping us make a leap to apply it—especially with regard to the Bible); and **[Click]** 4) spiritual insight (God gives us an awareness which can only be described as “gift” because we don’t have the resume or knowledge to understand it).

I think Paul had sailed enough and knew enough about the general weather patterns that he sensed that taking this voyage at this time wasn’t a good idea. In fact, verse 9 tells us that the season was past the “fast” and that was usually reckoned as the “Feast of Booths” surrounding Yom Kippur. So, we’re talking a September-October trip on the storm-heavy Mediterranean. It didn’t take a great deal of insight to see that this wasn’t the best possible timing, especially if they had already experienced some heavy wind and rain on the way up the coast to Sidon. Also, here’s a checkpoint for those of you who keep wondering if you’re getting insight from God or just following wish-fulfillment. Paul wanted to get to Caesar as rapidly as possible; that’s why he wanted to clear things up in Jerusalem in case things didn’t go well in Rome. Now, even Paul who can be assumed to have something of urgency about him is thinking that this isn’t a good time to be exposing himself and others to great danger.

By the way, just because I said that Paul wasn’t right about everything in his counsel doesn’t mean that it wasn’t valid prophecy. Biblical prophecy is often conditional. Jonah’s prophecy about the destruction of Ninevah didn’t come true because the city repented. Biblical prophecy is conditional because God allows humans to respond to what would ordinarily be a threat. Notice that later on, it is listening to Paul in terms of eating for strength (27:34), not engaging in a small boat maneuver (27:31-32), and helps get the twofold swimming/floating rescue going [Keener, pp. 3598-3599.].

Yet, what do we have happening here? The centurion and all of the decision-makers defer to group-think. They seem to assume that Paul doesn’t know enough about the sea to make such a decision. They decide to go on. Why? Maybe it was because of the “sunk cost effect.” They had already purchased the grain or made a contract to deliver the grain; delays would just postpone their profit. They felt like the risk was worth the reward.

Maybe, as Gloag suggests, “The idea of sailing to Italy was indeed given up by all; but it was thought advisable to shift their quarters, and to winter at the more commodious haven of Phenice [Phoenix], which was at no great distance, and might be reached in a few hours.” [Gloag, p. 399.].

There are going to be times in your life of faith when you will be tempted to defer to the opinion of some professor, some consultant, some scientist, some philosopher, some editorialist, or some politician as opposed to what your brothers and sisters in Christ are sharing with you. There are going to be times when you are going to be tempted to sacrifice the truth in the Bible because you can’t figure out how to integrate it with the forceful assertions of these professors, consultants, scientists, philosophers, editorialists, or politicians. Seek God in the Bible,seek answers in prayer, and find counsel in sharing with those who are also honestly seeking.

Well, that few hours didn’t exactly work out that way. Before they could clear that little hook at the end of the island and loop back to Phoenix, they faced what some translators call “tempestuous” winds.” Literally, that would be “typhoon-like” (typhonic?) winds as the Greek word from which we get the English “typhoon” comes from there [Robertson, p. 464.]. And typhoon is appropriate because it is described as the Euroquila, a combination of the Greek word for east “euros” and the Latin word “aquila” meaning north [Arrington, p. 258; Bruce, p. 509.]. It is such a well-known weather phenomenon that that compound word is found on an ancient map with a compass rose showing North Africa [Keener, p. 3610.]. Ramsay quotes an old sailor as describing a similar experience in Cretan waters: “the wind comes down from those mountains fit to blow the ship out of the water.” [Ramsay, p. 327.].

When the ship gets caught by that wind, Luke uses a technical nautical term (ἀντοφθαλμεῖν) which refers to: “the practice of putting the bow of a ship into the wind so that it sails against the force of the waves. As a result, the crew ‘gave way,’ i.e., surrendered the ship to the wind, so that the ship with crew and passengers was ‘driven along.’” [Schnabel, (pp. 1832-1833).]. As a result, they were driven back south and nearly even to where they had originally set sail. They were close to the island of Cauda, which was inhabited at that time, but there was no way to make landfall safely.

Fortunately, they were now screened from the worst part of the wind by the island of Cauda [Conzelmann, p. 218.]. As a result, they were able to perform three important nautical actions: 1) pulling in the ship’s boat that was usually towed behind the ship (in which Luke seems to have participated—Ramsay, pp. 328-329.]; 2) undergirding the ship by running cables under and over the top of the ship to add support to the hull [Schnabel, p. 1833; Smith, p. 146.]; and 3) shortening sail so that the mast wasn’t strained and adding to the instability of the hull [Bruce, p. 509, quotes Pliny the Elder as describing: “the typhoon as the chief plague of sailors, not only breaking up the spars but the hull itself.”]. Of course, the phrase “lowering the gear” might not refer to just lowering the sail, it could also refer to throwing out anchors and cables to deaden the ship’s speed [Conzelmann, p. 218.]. It could mean lowering more than one piece of gear, but since the anchors are mentioned specifically in verse 29, this is most likely either a combination of sails, cables, and anchor or just a reference to lowering the sail.

You know things are getting serious when the crew is throwing their cargo overboard (v. 18) and even more serious when they start throwing their equipment overboard (v. 19). So, once they have the basics for, at least, temporary survival taken care of, but are still feeling so hopeless that they didn’t even feel like they could eat (vv. 20-21), Paul steps up with an exhortation in vv. 21-26. Schnabel’s translation really ties the ideas together: “Since almost nobody wanted to eat, Paul stood up among them and said, ‘Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not have sailed from Crete, and thereby avoided this damage and loss.’” [Schnabel, pp. 1835-1836.].

Unfortunately, I have always thought of this as Paul saying, “I told you so!” Because I hate people saying, “I told you so” to me, I thought this was Paul being just a trifle petty before he delivered the good news. Even F. F. Bruce suggested that this was Paul being like you and me in not being able to resist saying, “I told you so.” [Bruce, p. 512.]. However, I realized how wrong I was when I read a section of a sermon from an old Scottish preacher named Alexander Maclaren, who preached mostly in the 19th century. He wrote that Paul wouldn’t have cared for such a petty triumph. He goes on to say, “A smaller man might have sulked because his advice had not been taken, and have said to himself, ‘They would not listen to me before. I will hold my tongue now.’ But the Apostle only refers to his former counsel and its confirmation in order to induce acceptance of his present words.” [Maclaren, Alexander, “Tempest and Trust” in *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Volume XII: Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1942—original, 1904), p. 352.]. The reminder was to establish his credibility [Schnabel, p. 1836.], his track record, before he could deliver his contingent good news.

Reading Maclaren’s observation, I am reminded that if we expect people to hear us, we need to work at maintaining our credibility, as well as the fact that we aren’t supposed to wash our hands of people just because they didn’t pay attention the first time. Also, it’s very possible that Paul had to deliver his words more than one time. It would be very difficult for 260+ people to hear him speaking on deck in a howling storm and, in such weather, it’s possible everyone could be huddled below decks [Keener, p. 3625.], it’s doubtful that he could be heard by all even below decks. Of course, I doubt that Paul was ever dissuaded from having to preach the gospel more than once.

Paul now delivers the good news that only the ship and no lives will be lost (v. 22). In addition to his credibility, he mentions the vision of an angel which has assured him of two things: 1) his mission to Caesar will continue and 2) no lives aboard ship will be lost (v. 24). The former is the theme of this voyage, but there’s another consideration to be seen in the second part. The fact that angel’s words promised life to all those sailing with Paul “…imply that Paul had earnestly prayed for them, and God answered his prayer that all the men on the ship would be spared (v. 24).” [Arrington, p. 260.]. If Arrington is right (and we can’t prove it, though it seems quite probable given what we know of Paul), that would be another way in which Paul is a “Reverse Jonah.”

In the next few verses, Paul doesn’t just offer encouragement, Paul has practical instructions. During the session, I talked about why it was necessary to throw four anchors to stabilize the stern so the ship didn’t start taking broadsides from the waves. [I have added an image of a Roman Era anchor to the slide with the shipwreck diagram.] In verse 30, we have some sailors planning to drop the boat and leave the passengers and soldiers to fend for themselves. I pointed out that this wouldn’t have worked, but Paul alerted Julius to their intent and insisted that they wouldn’t survive and their escape attempt would have put everyone else at risk.

Now, once again, Paul offers wise counsel that the crew and passengers need to keep their strength up. He provides an example by taking bread, blessing it by thanking God, and eating it [Schnabel, p. 1844.]. Luke says that all 276 aboard were encouraged and ate. I believe Luke deliberately uses imagery of the Lord’s Supper here, though knowing Paul’s teachings on the Lord’s Supper being for the church in 1 Corinthians 11, I don’t think this IS the Lord’s Supper. As Ramsay noted: “It is characteristic of Christianity in all periods to seek after resemblances between the Founder and any great hero of the faith at some crisis of history.” [Ramsay, p. 336.]. Willimon also observes the similarity and doesn’t believe that this means that pagans partook of the Eucharist, he simply recognizes that Paul’s example of being thankful for God’s provision and his demonstration of receiving that provision provided encouragement and strength for all aboard [Willimon, pp. 184-185.]. It merely means that Paul showed them how to turn toward God in times of crisis: gratitude and confidence.

In turn, after the ship strikes a reef off the island that they don’t immediately recognize, Julius the centurion returns the favor. The soldiers want to execute all the prisoners lest they be responsible for any escapees, but Julius recognizes his responsibility to Paul and won’t let them. So swimmers swim to shore and those who cannot swim, use the flotsam and jetsam of the ship’s breaking up to float to shore as on rafts.

Chapter 28

Okay, we now know for certain that the island the sailors didn’t recognize in Acts 27 was actually Malta, the small island off the coast of Sicily. I shared briefly with you last week that the likely reason the sailors didn’t recognize it was because they had been blown further south than they intended. Normally, they would have entered Malta through the large bay that is, today, named St. Paul’s Bay and which contains a small island in the bay known as St. Paul’s Island. Traditionally, this is the assumed entry point and the little bitty island would be where they were rescued. Yet, we’re told that they later discovered that the island was Malta. Of course, the word used in the New Testament could either refer to Melite Africana (Malta) or to another Melite which is an island off Dalmatia, very small and known by a different name today. But it certainly makes better geographical sense to assume that they hit Malta.

One of those amateur archaeologists that I’m always skeptical of believes that he has found the anchors cut adrift in Acts 27 and that St. Thomas Bay was the beach the survivors came to on the island he didn’t know. [Since the session, I added an arrow to point to St. Thomas Bay on the Malta map.] There are a couple of problems with his assessment. One problem is that there were six (6) anchors found off the Munxar Reef, not the four (4) listed in the biblical account. The more major problem is that there were at least two recognizable Roman harbors visible from the Munxar Reef and Acts clearly tells us that the sailors didn’t recognize them. Still, the discovery of Roman era anchors in such a place testifies to the credibility of the account and merely reminds us that we don’t have to find the exact spot where biblical events occurred in order to learn from them.

Since the location isn’t what is important about this passage, what is? We have a friendly populace providing care and hospitality to the shipwreck victims (v. 2). In Greek, we see the word for the common people (the root from which we get the word “barbarians”) providing generously (the root from which we get the word “philanthropic”) [Schnabel, p. 1850.]. This is one of the few blessings we immediately see in times of disaster is that human beings, regardless of cultural backgrounds, pull together in order to meet needs. As human beings, we sense the need and mobilize to meet it. I really believe that one of the reasons we have this recorded is to show us how God uses the ordinary, what would normally be considered crude and barbaric, to accomplish God’s will.

We’re comfortable with that. We love the fact that God uses the ordinary because it means that we can be part of what God is doing and that we can control the organization and pacing for managing that provision. But it’s what comes next that is most interesting. As Paul is helping with collecting wood for the fire, he approaches the fire and the heat from the fire awakens a slumbering viper whichimmediately fastens itself upon Paul’s hand. You’ve heard the clichés? “Biting the hand that feeds you” or “No good deed goes unpunished?” Notice that Paul experiences this attack while he is doing something good, while he is doing something ordinary, and while he is simply demonstrating his gratitude to these barbarians who have built a fire to rescue the survivors from exposure. He is doing exactly what he’s supposed to be doing. He isn’t seeking to do something special or out of the ordinary, he has seen a need and he is meeting it. That’s a key idea. Hang onto it.

Now, let’s look at the crowd’s reaction. When the serpent first bites Paul, they make an assumption much like a lot of people do today without realizing it. They say that it’s bad karma; he brought this problem on himself. They say that he must be really bad to be going through this. Since Cicero once used the idea of a shipwreck as divine punishment in court as evidence of guilt, these people must have really thought Paul had done something horrible [Keener, p. 3676.]. Some even make the story really big: “He must have been a murderer!” And what is their basis for this? Because he was saved from the sea, but “justice” wouldn’t allow him to keep on living!

You see, public opinion is a lot like a pendulum. It sways first one way and then the other, but it never quite comes back to exactly where you expect it to come. In this case, we start on the extreme that Paul deserves this life-threatening experience. Then, when Paul throws the serpent into the fire and doesn’t shrivel up and die, they go to the other extreme. If he didn’t die from the poison, he must be divine. “Thereupon they concluded that Paul is a god (εἶναι θεόν). In the context of pagan mythology, the logic is understandable: a person who survives both a shipwreck and a snakebite must be someone in whom divine power is revealed.” [Schnabel, pp. 1853-1854.].

Now, we can smile indulgently at their unsophisticated superstition or we can judge them harshly for their superiority complexes, but we’d better evaluate ourselves as we do so. Let’s be honest. We tend to think that those in poverty didn’t try to work hard enough or didn’t manage what they had well enough. We don’t say so, but a lot of times we think they deserve to be poor (and *sometimes*, this is true). We tend to look at those who are ill and judge them for not taking care of themselves (and *sometimes*, this is true) or as somehow being weak in character or virtue. We tend to look at those who fail as not having tried hard enough and at those who experience natural disasters as stubbornly locating in the wrong places (and *sometimes*, it’s true that they keep rebuilding in hurricane alleys, flood basins, and on eroding cliff sides). But everything isn’t a cause and effect relationship and we don’t have the right to judge.

But let’s not go the other way, either! Let’s not say, “Oh, she or he is so close to God because his/her prayers are always answered.” Let’s not say, “He or she MUST be righteous because I saw this or that unexplained phenomenon happen.” Let’s recognize “up front” that Paul wasn’t trying to accomplish a miracle, here. Paul just removed the serpent, almost as an afterthought—an inconvenience, not a problem, because he’d already had a word from God that his appeal to Caesar was going to happen. He had a bigger task ahead of him than demonstrating God’s supernatural intervention into normal existence. I think the most important thing we can learn from these first few verses is that God’s people aren’t supposed to seek miracles. Of course, the miraculous nature of this would remind some of Luke’s readers/hearers “of Jesus’ promise in Luke 10:19: “I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you” (cf. Mark 16:17–18, a later addition to Mark’s gospel).” [Schnabel, p. 1854.].

Even in this text, we see that Paul’s immunity to the venom of the serpent led to the party’s invitation to stay with Publius (v. 7) who cared for them with benevolent foresight (φιλοφρόνως = familial-type love or relationship + thinking/planning with regard to taking action) [Robertson, pp. 480-481.]. While present in Publius’ house, a need was presented to Paul—Publius’ father was sick and hemorrhaging. Paul laid his hands on him and healed him. But notice that they stayed three days at the house. Paul wasn’t going door-to-door going, “Bring out your sick! Bring out your frail!” Paul served where he was.

And as a result of Paul’s faithfulness where he was, we see in verse 9 that people from all over the island began to bring those who needed help. This truly leads me to believe that as we meet needs effectively where we are, God will grant us wider opportunities. If we’re not meeting the needs where we are, we can’t expect that. Now, I’m not saying that we are required to have healing ministries where people are miraculously healed in order to grow as a congregation, but I am saying that just as in the parable of the talents, when God entrusts us with a single challenge, we can expect that successful completion of that challenge can lead to more.

From this point, the trip is relatively normal. From Malta,the ship sails to Sicily and puts in at the ancient port of Syracuse. From Syracuse, it’s a simple hop to Rhegium (known today as Reggio di Calabria). Then, the ship moved up the coast to Puteoli. Puteoli, though, wasn’t the usual harbor for going to Rome. That would have been Ostia. Regardless, the ship sailed to Puteoli andthe party traveled by land up the Appian Way to Rome. This may seem perverse of me, but sometimes I wonder if this tortured route followed by Paul to Rome isn’t intended to teach you and me that God doesn’t perform miracles for our convenience.

Surely, the same God who healed the sick, cast out demons, and protected Paul from poison could have given the apostle safe passage! At least, by the time the party had been shipwrecked, surely God could have taken them directly to the most convenient harbor to Rome.

That’s what I would have thought, but something interesting happens. Before Paul’s party even enters Rome proper, they are met approximately 30 miles south of Rome by a group of Christians at the Inn of the Three Taverns [Bruce, p. 527.]. If that sounds like an unsavory place to spend about seven days (as per v. 14), how about when they meet others at the Forum Appiae? One of Horace’s poems satirizes it as “filled enough to choke” with “knavish publicans and boatmen folk.” [quoted in Bruce, p. 527.].

But even when Paul gets to Rome, to add insult to injury, we don’t have Paul immediately taken before Caesar to plead his case. Look at what happened.

It looks like thefirst thing that happened to Paul in Rome was to be consigned to three days of solitary confinement (v. 16).Then, it appears that he was allowed to invite the Jewish leaders to come to him (v. 17). He may have originally been discouraged that he hadn’t been able to see Caesar, but when he gets to tell his story to the Jewish leaders, heexpresses his conviction that his imprisonment and his appeal are for “the hope of Israel.”(v. 20) He sees God at work even in his imprisonment, difficult trip, and current circumstance of being ignored by the very emperor he had risked death to come and see.

At this point,we see that multitudes are coming to his home (v. 23--which may have precipitated Paul’s renting his own house in v. 30) andwe read that some of them believed (v. 24). In this sense, one of Paul’s great hopes and visions was coming true. As I mentioned before,he rents his own place to stay and manages to reside there for at least two years without getting to make his appeal to Caesar. But his appeal doesn’t seem to be the most important aspect of Rome’s stay at Rome. Do you know what it is?

It’s foundin the very last word of the Book of Acts. It’s “unhindered.” The word is ακωλυτως, pronounced “ah-koh-LOO-tohs” by some and “ah-koh-LEE-tohs” by others, and means “unhindered.” [Robertson, p. 489.]. In the session, I described it as not being tied up or not being restrained. However, there is another classical meaning to the verb and that is “to be cut short” [Liddell, Henry G. and Robert Scott (eds.), *Greek-English Lexicon Based on the German Work of Francis Passow* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1858—original, 1848), p. 791.]. Although we aren’t positive that Luke intended it, I like to think that the nuance is there that Paul’s work was not “cut short” and that he finished what he set out to do. And by extension, if Paul’s work was not prematurely cut short, the mission of the gospel is not prematurely “cut short,” either. The final verse in Acts (28:31) tells us that God’s Kingdom and what Jesus taught were being preached throughout the world with no barriers of race, geography or circumstances.

Now, what barriers are you facing in sharing the gospel? Indifference? Complacency? Inadequacy? Fear? Prejudice? Poverty? Health? Geography? It doesn’t matter what barriers you face, if we’re truly looking to God and the advancement of God’s kingdom, we can expect sometimes even the miraculous to help us overcome those barriers. Do you?