

LEADERSHIP IN THE STORMS OF LIFE ACTS 27

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

One of my favorite towns is Gloucester, Massachusetts. (PROJECTOR ON, GLOUCESTER MA) I proposed to my wife there. We spent our wedding night there. In our early years it had our favorite place to eat out, a restaurant that overlooked the harbor. We did a whale watching tour once out of Gloucester Harbor.

One of the most famous movies set in Gloucester is “The Perfect Storm.” (PERFECT STORM) It is a true story about the sinking of a fishing boat based in Gloucester. George Clooney plays the skipper of the boat which is sunk during a hurricane in 1991.

Fishing at sea is still a dangerous occupation. But the advent of modern weather forecasts and radar and radio and better boats has made sinking and shipwrecks much less common. In olden days mariners lacked such technological advantages. So shipwrecks were more common centuries ago. At the end of Paul’s catalog of difficulties that he had seen in his life, recorded for us in 2 Corinthians #11 v. 25 (2 CORINTHIANS 11:25), he wrote, **“Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea.”**

Shipwrecks weren’t the only problem that Paul faced in his life. From our study of the Book of Acts we have seen that he had been beaten, whipped, run out of town, stoned, and jailed. (PROJECTOR OFF) The broader question this raises is: Why would a man of God encounter such difficulties? If Paul was truly working for a sovereign God, shouldn’t his life have been easier? Why is life often so difficult for us?

The passage that we are going to look at this morning involves a storm and a shipwreck. As we examine Acts 27, I am hopeful that we will discover at least a partial answer to the question about why the godly sometimes have more than their fair share of troubles. In the process we may also learn something about how the godly should act in the midst of the storms of life.

We left off our story two weeks ago with Paul about to be sent to Rome. The Jewish leaders had charged Paul with causing a riot in the temple in Jerusalem and the Roman leaders kept him imprisoned in the provincial capital of Caesarea. (PROJECTOR ON--- ANCIENT CAESAREA) Because the apostle was a Roman citizen, he had certain legal protections. The case against him was weak. The Roman governors had trouble even figuring out what the charges were that the Jewish leaders were trying to have placed against him. But the governors also did not want to alienate the religious leadership.

When the new governor Festus showed up in 59 AD, the religious leaders tried to have Paul brought to Jerusalem for trial. Paul was hesitant to go along with that. So he

exercised his legal right to have his case heard in Rome. Because Festus didn't quite understand the case against Paul, he had the Jewish King Agrippa listen to the apostle to help him fill out a report for the authorities in Rome. Last time we looked at Paul's speech on that occasion. Now we take up the story with Paul about to be sent to Rome.

I.

In the first eight verses we are going to relate the story to the subject of PAUL'S LEADERSHIP AND DIFFICULTIES. (I. PAUL'S LEADERSHIP AND DIFFICULTIES) In vv. 1 & 2 we read, **"And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica."**

There were several groups in the Roman Army that had the designation "Augustan Cohort." We know from secular history that one was based in Syria at this time. This centurion was detached from that unit and given this prisoner delivery job.

The centurion found a boat from Adramyttium (ADRAMYTTIUM), which was a town in western Asia Minor, north of Ephesus. This boat was a coastal ship which, because of its small size, had to avoid the open water and hug the coastline. This chapter provides considerable detail about first century seagoing travel. It is one of the most detailed narrative descriptions of ancient maritime travel in all of ancient history. Over 40 nautical terms are used in this chapter and the next.

(PROJECTOR OFF) The writer Luke now begins to use the pronoun "we" in the story. The obvious inference is that Luke was along on this journey. Luke also speaks of a fellow named Aristarchus, who came from Thessalonica and accompanied them on the journey. Aristarchus's name appears in two of the New Testament letters of Paul, which make reference to the presence of Aristarchus in Rome with the apostle. It would not have been unusual for a Roman citizen who was arrested to have attendants like Luke and Aristarchus accompany him on such a trip.

Verse 3 says, **"The next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for."** (PROJECTOR ON--- PAUL'S TRIP TO ROME) They apparently left from Caesarea and stopped next at Sidon up the coast. Festus may have encouraged the centurion to give Paul lenient treatment. A guard still would have gone with him when he went to see his friends. But throughout the Book of Acts and in the New Testament as a whole centurions responded positively and with integrity to Christians. That Luke originally wrote Acts for the benefit of a Roman official named Theophilus certainly was a reason for recording incidents that showed other Roman officials having a consistently positive response toward Christians.

Next in vv. 4 & 5 we read, **“And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia.”** (MYRA) At this time of year the winds along the coast were from the west. But there was a current along the coast that flowed from the east toward the west.

Luke continues in v. 6: **“There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board.”** Egypt was a major source of grain for Rome and for Italy. So there was a steady stream of grain boats that would follow this route up along the coast and across to Italy. Myra and its nearby port city were a major stop on this route. The centurion knew that he could find a grain ship here, which would be a bigger vessel and would be able to take a more direct route to Rome. We will find out later that this ship from Alexandria in Egypt was carrying passengers and crew numbering 276 people. Josephus later describes a voyage he took on a ship on which there were 600 passengers..

Verses 7 & 8 add, **“We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. (CRETE) Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.”** The ship was fighting a head wind. Normally sail boats today use a technique called tacking to fight a head wind, which involves taking a zig zag course. This ship may indeed have used such a tactic. But it was much harder for these boats, given the way that they were rigged and their size, to do it. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The point is that it was a struggle for this ship to make headway. The crew encountered difficulties. If the Apostle of Christ was onboard this ship, wouldn't we expect that the sovereign God that he served would see that things went smoother? Paul wasn't running away from God, like Jonah was. In fact the Lord had assured him that he was going to make it to Rome and preach the gospel there. Yet this was only the beginning of difficulties that Paul and his shipmates were going to have on this voyage.

Why do people on God's team often encounter difficulties? It would seem like it would be a God-honoring thing to do to make a trip to Israel. It doesn't seem like that is going to be possible right now. God's desire is that people come to know and trust Him. It is often through the difficulties of life that this is accomplished. It was Jesus' behavior on the cross that caught the attention of the centurion who supervised His execution. After Jesus died, his response was **“Truly this was the Son of God.”** Similarly it is our response as Christians in the storms of life that often catches the attention of an unbelieving world. This will be the case in Acts 27. It will be Paul's leadership in this storm that will bring glory to God.

II.

In vv. 9-19 then we are going to notice PAUL'S LEADERSHIP AND RISK TAKING. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. PAUL'S LEADERSHIP AND RISK TAKING) Verse 9 tells us, **“Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even**

the Fast was already over, Paul advised them..." The time from mid-September to mid-November was recognized as a dangerous time for sailing in this part of the world. This was the time when storms were more frequent and more intense. After mid-November boats just did not sail in the eastern Mediterranean.

The term "the Fast" was a reference to the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur. This holiday occurs in late September or early October. So at Crete it was probably the middle of the dangerous shipping season, and there was still a considerable distance left to be traveled to reach Rome.

Thus Paul expresses his opinion in v. 10, "**Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.**" There is no specific indication that Paul had any divine inside information about what was going to happen. In the end it appears that no lives are actually lost. So I am inclined to think that he was just expressing his opinion, which indeed proved to be mostly correct. Paul had spent much time in sea travel. He had been shipwrecked three times. So he was probably extra sensitive to dangers that travel at this time of year posed.

(CRETE) According to vv. 11 & 12, "**But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. And because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.**"

These grain ships were owner-operated. The captain of the ship was normally the owner. He typically would choose the pilot, and the pilot in turn would pick the crew. But a ship that was used in grain service was under the authority of the Roman government. So the centurion in this situation apparently had the final say in the decision about the place in which the boat would spend the winter.

Spending the winter at Fair Havens was apparently doable. But Phoenix about 40 miles west had a more desirable harbor. It was also a bigger town that offered more comforts and more things to do. I can imagine that a crew of pagan sailors might have much preferred the bigger town. But getting to Phoenix entailed going across an open bay that would expose the ship to potentially dangerous winds from the north and west.

Paul in some ways may have seemed in a better position to take risks than these other people. God had promised that he was going to make it to Rome. God was on his side. These other guys had no such promise. Yet Paul was mature enough to realize that he should not tempt God by acting unwisely. He was also concerned about the well being of his traveling companions and the passengers and crew.

In a similar way the Bible tells us Christians that whatever happens we are headed for an eternity in heaven. Those who have never trusted Christ as their Savior are headed for an eternity in a place called the Lake of Fire. Yet it is the unbelievers who often take

unnecessary risks. They break the law to make just a little more profit for their company. They go for the opportunity to experience pleasure and risk getting STDs or becoming pregnant or having a drug overdose or driving under the influence. We Christians can look forward to a mansion in heaven, but it is more often unbelievers who will risk their houses in speculative investments or in gambling debts. We are right not to take unnecessary risks, for we are accountable to God for our behavior. We are not supposed to tempt Him. The risks that we are encouraged to take are steps of faith based on promises in His word.

Seemingly favorable circumstances arose in our story. Luke says in v. 13, **“Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore.”** A south wind would enable the ship to make it across the bay to Phoenix. Favorable circumstances are often taken as good omens for whatever course of behavior we have chosen to follow. There is always a danger, however, in reading too much into circumstances.

Verse 14: **“But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land.”** People in our Northeast got hammered with snow last weekend that was a result of a northeaster. Verses 15 & 16 say, **“And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat.”** (CAUDA SYRTIS) The pronoun “we” suggests that Luke and the other landlubbers were put to work in this situation.

According to v. 17, **“After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along.”** Cables were put around the hull to keep the seams tight and to prevent joints from splitting. The shallows of Syrtis were shoals that were south of Crete, stretching to North Africa. Getting grounded on them would be a big problem. Lowering the gear meant bringing down the mainsail to prevent the mast from breaking and to allow some steering by having the sail close to the deck.

Verses 18 & 19: **“Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.”** The weight of the cargo would place stress on the hull. More importantly the decision to get rid of the cargo suggests that they were taking on a fair amount of water from the storm. To keep the ship from getting swamped, they had to lighten the load.

III.

In the midst of this situation of stress and panic and growing despair, there was a desperate need for leadership. In vv. 20-26 we see Paul provide the Christian leadership that was needed. I have labeled this section **PAUL'S LEADERSHIP AND GOD'S BLESSING**. (III. PAUL'S LEADERSHIP AND GOD'S BLESSING) Verse 20 describes the situation that developed: **“When neither sun nor stars appeared for**

many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.”

Ancient mariners were dependent upon seeing the sun and the stars to figure out where they were at sea. These guys didn't have a clue as to where they were. They were taking on water. Many were sea sick. It was hard, if not impossible, to sleep. It was hard to eat. They were becoming drained physically and emotionally. Gradually all hope was abandoned. The situation seemed to be hopeless. They were going to die.

It is just such situations of hopelessness and despair that are opportunities for God to intervene and for God's people to lead. It was when the children of Israel were backed up against the Red Sea by the Egyptian army that the world was rocked by the power of God with the leadership of Moses. It was when David and his tribe were being chased by King Saul that there was the need for leadership and the opportunity to display the faithfulness of God. It was when King Hezekiah and the city of Jerusalem were surrounded by the much more powerful Assyrians that there was an opportunity for God to glorify His name.

In a similar way today it is when the lab test comes back positive for cancer that there is an opportunity for God to get people's attention. It is when we are handed the pink slip that there is an opportunity to test the faithfulness of God. It is when there is a death and a funeral that people are often open to hear a word from God. It is in the storms of life when all hope is gradually abandoned when there is an opportunity for God to be glorified. What is desperately needed in such situations is leaders who will lead and who will point people to faith in God.

It was just in such a situation that Paul stepped forward and led. Verse 21 tells us, **“Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, ‘Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss.’”** This was “I told you so.” But it was “I told you so” with a purpose. For Paul had a word from God, and he had instructions that needed to be followed for the passengers and crew to survive.

Paul continued, **“Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. 23 For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, 24 and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’”** Encouragements not to be afraid usually come from heaven only to those who are afraid. It appears that Paul also was frightened by this storm. It is natural to experience fear in the midst of the storms of life. The important thing is what we do in the face of our fear. Paul was praying. He had an assurance that he was going to get to Rome. I don't know if he was fearful about his own safety or not. He may have been worried about the fate of his friends Aristarchus and Luke. He was also concerned about the other passengers. The assurance from God that all the passengers will be saved is an answer to his prayers.

Paul was thus able to bring a message of encouragement and hope. That is what is needed in the most difficult situations of life. It requires Christian leadership to provide it. But notice that this assurance was clearly based upon the promise of God. It was not merely wishful thinking. Too often we Christians are guilty of making statements like “I am sure that everything will be OK. He’s going to get better. Or I’m sure that the money is going to come in.” We should not say things like that unless we can find such assurances in the Bible or unless we have some kind of divine revelation to that effect.

We are on much firmer ground in the storms of life when we tell Christians that they can count on the fact that God is with them in this situation. We can tell these people that they can take it to the bank that God has a purpose in this trial. We can assure them that God does hear their prayers, and that they are not made in vain. We can also promise them that we will support them, if indeed we will follow through on that commitment.

Notice also how others are divinely blessed in this storm because of the presence of a Christian leader. God is going to save all of these passengers at least partly because Paul is praying for them. James wrote in his epistle that the prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much. Christian leaders do their jobs not only when they bring assurance and hope in trials but also when they pray for the afflicted.

Paul continues in vv. 25 & 26, **“So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on some island.”** Notice how Paul is giving credit to God. The issue is not obedience to Paul. It is obedience to God. It is faith in Him that is at stake. It is God who is the source of blessing and the source of authority for the Christian leader.

IV.

In vv. 27-37 we observe a lesson about PAUL’S LEADERSHIP AND OFFICIAL POSITIONS. (IV. PAUL’S LEADERSHIP AND OFFICIAL POSITIONS) After this encouragement from Paul Luke says, **“When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. 28 So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. 29 And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come.”** The anchors cast from the stern would further slow the ship. The sailors wanted to have daylight so that they could see at least something of what was going to happen if they were going to come to land.

Verse 30 says, **“And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow...”** A grain ship like this had a fairly significant draft. That meant that it might strike bottom quite a ways from the land. But the smaller boat could get all the way to shore. There wasn’t enough space for all 276 passengers. The sailors were going to try to save their own hides. They did not believe Paul’s assurance that everyone on board was going to be saved. The passengers needed these experienced sailors to help get

them safely to shore. Thus we read in vv. 31 & 32, **“Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, ‘Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.’ Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship’s boat and let it go.”**

Notice here the involvement of both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. God had given His unbreakable promise that everyone on board was going to be delivered from the storm. But it was also necessary that the sailors not be allowed to abandon their fellow travelers. God’s sovereignty extends to the use of human instruments to accomplish His purposes. Paul saw a responsibility to exercise leadership and warn the centurion about what the sailors were trying to do. It made no sense in this situation to lay out anchors from the bow of the boat. So the soldiers did what was necessary.

Notice also who is taking the lead. Paul is telling the centurion what must be done. He may have had more experience than the Roman in maritime matters. This guy Paul was not just a religious fanatic or a philosophical idealist or a scholarly intellectual. He also had practical wisdom that came from personal experience.

According to vv. 33 & 34, **“As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, ‘Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.’”** In stormy seas seasick people probably had a limited appetite. Then also it was tough to prepare food, and some of their provisions may have been ruined by the salty sea.

But notice again that Paul is leading. He is doing so based upon the promise of God that they were going to make it safely to land. The soundings of the sailors and perhaps the pounding of the surf indicated that land was approaching. But even though Paul believes in the sovereign promise of God concerning the safety of the passengers, he sees a human responsibility to have them eat. Here was leadership.

Paul’s shipmates were following him now. We read in vv. 35-37, **“And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. 36 Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. 37 (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.)”**

Keep in mind the position that Paul had on this ship. He was a prisoner. He had two attendants with him, which perhaps gave him more respect than the other prisoners. He was also an apostle of Jesus Christ, but that didn’t mean diddly squat to anybody else on board. He was a prisoner. He probably did something pretty bad to get himself in this predicament. To an outside observer his leadership potential would have looked pretty minimal.

But Paul was a leader, a Christian leader. In a time of crisis when the things that most people depend upon for stability and security come unglued, a Christian leader cannot

be kept down for long. He will lead, because he has the answers and the wisdom that are most needed in the storms of life.

Notice his methodology. When there was a debate about whether they should spend the winter in Fair Havens, Paul didn't play power politics. He didn't try to manipulate people. He led by force of character. He led by speaking wisdom and truth. When it was obvious that the leadership wanted to move on to Phoenix, he respectfully spoke his mind. That wasn't the way to play power politics. Paul didn't model his leadership methods on the examples of power politics or on worldly ways of winning friends and influencing people. He got his models for leadership from God's Word.

Real Christian leaders won't worry about the titles or positions that they have. We Christians are commanded to respect civil and religious leaders. But we are to lead in the situations of life in which we find ourselves, especially in times of crisis. Popularity or the size of our office or the numbers of people in our Bible study or congregation or the number of people we supervise don't really matter. Ultimately we are working for Jesus Christ, and He is the One who has the right to sovereignly determine our placement and our circumstances.

V.

Finally, we come to vv. 38-44 and PAUL'S LEADERSHIP AND GOD'S SOVEREIGN PURPOSES. (V. PAUL'S LEADERSHIP AND GOD'S SOVEREIGN PURPOSES) Luke writes, **"And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea."** If they were going to run aground on an island, it was to their advantage that they get as close to the shore as possible. Dumping everything left in the boat would help the ship to ride higher in the water and closer to shore. The island turned out to be Malta according to v. 1 of the next chapter.

(MALTA MAP) Verse 39 says, **"Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore."** Ancient tradition says that this bay was located on the northern part of the island. (MALTA 02) The physical features fit the description found here in Acts, and this bay is known today as St. Paul's Bay.

According to v. 40, **"So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach."** They were making final preparations that would help the ship to get as close to the beach as possible.

Luke continues in vv. 41 & 42, **"But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. 42 The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape."** A Roman soldier whose prisoner escaped was to receive the same penalty as the prisoner was destined to receive if he was found guilty of the charges against him. Killing the prisoners in a situation such as this was the safest way to go.

There would probably not have been any negative consequences that would come to them from higher officials.

But God had promised that Paul would reach Rome safely. He had also promised that the passengers, prisoners included, would all be delivered safely through the storm. So He saw to it that a centurion intervened to protect the prisoners, and to accomplish the promises of God. Luke concludes in vv. 43 & 44, **“But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, 44 and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.”**

(PROJECTOR OFF) You see, God always keeps His promises. He always accomplishes His sovereign purposes. God had promised Paul that he would safely reach Rome. Later he promised that none of the passengers on the boat would be killed in the storm. At several points in the story those promises were threatened. They were threatened when the leaders of the ship turned down Paul’s advice and tried to reach Phoenix. They were threatened by the terrible storm itself. They were threatened when the sailors tried to get away from the ship in the smaller boat. Now they were threatened when the Roman soldiers planned to kill all of the prisoners.

But God’s purposes are always accomplished. They are accomplished largely through faithful men and women. They are accomplished through Christian leaders like Paul who provide encouragement in times of hopelessness and who point sinners toward faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Why do storms and shipwrecks come upon us in the midst of our humble efforts to do God’s will? There are various reasons. But here we see that one reason is that God is looking for opportunities where people will come to recognize Him and turn to Him in faith. If Paul and his friends had experienced a nice, short trip to Rome with a strong wind on their back, it would have been easier for everyone. But there may have been little opportunity for those passengers to be interested in the God of this strange Jew Paul.

It is only when the storms come along and lives are disrupted and death becomes a possibility and circumstances become overwhelming and everything comes unglued that people begin to ask fundamental questions about the meaning of life and what lies beyond the grave and why we are here. It is in those situations that God has the opportunity to get people’s attention. It is also in those situations that Christians have the chance to step out in faith and lead--- to provide words of encouragement and hope and to speak forth truth and to pray for God’s intervention.

Do you find yourself in a storm today? Make sure first that you have trusted Christ as your personal Savior. Then recognize that this storm is an opportunity for others around you to be pointed to faith in Christ. Pray for God to intervene. Give encouragement and hope to your fellow passengers. And speak forth the truth.