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A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

ACTS CHAPTER 27 & 28

“ROME VIA A SHIPWRECK”

The Jennings have been a boating family. I have always been fascinated with sea stories, having a few adventures that I could recount from my own personal experience. Therefore Paul's journey by ship toward Rome has a special attraction for me.

No story of the sea is more widely known than the record of the shipwreck suffered by Paul and his companions on their journey toward Rome, recorded in Acts chapters 27 and 28. One of Paul's companions was Luke, the author of the book of Acts and it is easy to understand why he writes with such graphic minuteness of detail. He is describing the most thrilling and perilous adventure of his life.

Life has been compared with a sea voyage. In fact we are told in Job 9:26 that our lifetime is "passed as a swift ship." To be sure, we sail the ship of our souls, at times, through turbulent and storm-tossed days.

Our Christian vocabulary is sprinkled with words relating to the sea. We talk about the Bible being our Chart, the Holy Spirit being our Compass and Jesus Christ being our Pilot. Phrases like "depths of despair", "sands of time" and "storms of life" are used frequently. David said, "*All Your waves and billows have gone over me.*" (Psalm 42:7)

Some hymn books contain songs such as, "Jesus Savior Pilot Me", "Throw Out The Lifeline", "My Anchor Holds" and "The Haven Of Rest", among others, picturing life as a sea voyage. The Navy Hymn, "Eternal Father", is especially beautiful:

"Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bid'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep.

Oh hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea! Amen."

(Lyrics by Reverend William Whiting and Music by Reverend John B. Dyke)

Luke's story of the storm through which they sailed teaches us several wonderful lessons. Here we see an example of the outworking of God's providence, a Christian's character shining like a beacon in adversity and, above all, the triumph of faith.

The story begins with Paul being sent to Rome as a prisoner. He is going as an innocent

man; he is going because he has appealed to Caesar; he had been dragged through the lower courts, but justice had not been meted out; he is now going to the Supreme Court, as it were, Caesar, for what he hopes will result in his freedom.

Rome had long been the goal of his ambition. He has said, "*I must also see Rome.*" (Acts 19:21) the Lord had stood by him one night and had said, "*you must bear witness at Rome also.*" (Acts 23:11)

There are a number of lessons about life that we can learn from this sea story, some practical pointers for present day problems.

I. FAITH TESTED. Acts 27:4-13

Passengers sailed aboard cargo ships as space was available. This voyage would take place on three ships. Notice two things that stand out here:

A. The comfortable places.

Notice v. 13 "*the south wind.*" The south wind was a gentle, warm and non-threatening wind. However, a soft south wind is no good if you want to make rapid progress. A soft south wind will never test your faith!

And v.8 "*the Fair Havens.*" Faith is not tested in fair havens! Faith may be talked about in fair havens, it may be toyed with in fair havens but it is not tested. Thank God for fair havens. The calm, sheltered and cozy coves of life. Most of us want to live in fair havens for all of our lives with no threatening waves and jagged rocks. But faith is seldom tested in such easy places.

B. The contrary powers. v.4

v. 4 "*contrary winds*"; v.9 "*dangerous winds*"; v.14 "*tempestuous winds.*"

The direct sea route from Adramyttium in Syria to Rome was from East to West. The prevailing winds in September, when in all probability they set sail, was from West to East. To make progress the captain of the square-rigged sailing craft made use of land and sea breezes by sailing in the lee of Cyprus and Crete.

After much difficulty the ship arrived at Fair Havens on the south coast of Crete. The Day of Atonement had passed and it is thought that the date was early October. Storms were a very real risk in October and Paul warned that to proceed would bring disaster. However, Fair Havens was a poor harbor to winter in and the captain and owner of the ship persuaded Julius, the centurion in charge, that it would be better to sail forty miles along the coast to Phoenix. It was only forty miles after all. A gentle south wind blew and so they took their chance. They were given a window of opportunity to improve their situation and they took it.

In this instance Paul, who was born and raised in the sea coast town of Tarsus and had done a fair amount of sailing, sensed that the wind was not right. He had already been ship wrecked three times and knew that it was foolish to put lives in danger.

Scarcely had the ill-fated ship put out to sea, when she was caught in a fierce gale. The storm increased until it was necessary to jettison freight and unnecessary weight. Luke wrote, *"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."* (v.20) It was an extreme emergency that they faced for 2 weeks! (v.33)

This was certainly a period of testing from Paul. The Lord had said, *"you must bear witness at Rome also"* but it looked like he would never make it to Rome. We should never doubt in the dark what we believe to be true in the light!

II. FAITH TESTIFYING.

A. Paul's absence V.21-25

Paul absented himself in order to pray. Sometimes the person of faith becomes known more by their absence than by their presence. Daniel is a good illustration of this truth. Three times a day he absented himself from the crowd in order to pray.

B. Paul's announcement.

"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. And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.' 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."

Paul took command of the ship! Faith makes one courageous.

C. Paul's affirmation. V.23 & 25

"I belong to God" - his identification

"I serve God" - his occupation

"I believe God" - his confession

Jonah's ship was periled by his presence; Paul's ship was preserved by his presence. A faith that stands the test is a faith that can testify!

III. FAITH TEACHING.

We hear nothing about the captain of the ship during the most difficult part of the storm. The experienced sailors seem to be at wits end and had given up all hope. It was then that Paul came forth and instructed them.

We not only teach by our words but by our actions. Paul's calm demeanor, his confident persona and his wise conduct were a witness to the power of faith. Perhaps these 275 sea-soaked and sick sailors had never met a Christian before. They were seeing one now and what lessons for life they could learn from him. They could learn from:

A. His courage.

Faith invigorates and infuses us with courage. God said repeatedly to Joshua, *"Be of good courage."* (Joshua 1:6,7,9) Paul's faith, like Joshua's, is demonstrated in his bold leadership. How often men of God like Paul, in times of storm and peril, have been assured of the presence, power and protection of the Lord. And, often their faith made them appear heroic figures towering above their companions.

Paul's dauntless courage gave new heart to his sailing companions. There is overwhelming evidence in Luke's account of the voyage to Rome that Paul inspired confidence in others.

B. His cheer.

"And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you" – ("Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer." v.22 KJV) and "Therefore take heart, men...." (v.25)

They had lost all control of the boat. It was just drifting before the wind. They had experienced the bleakest conditions - howling wind, rain, tumultuous waves. One grain of the Savior's salt influenced 275 others who had given up hope. There were 275 sea-sick, soaked and scared sailors and one holy, hopeful man – Paul! Sounds like the life of a Christian who aggressively lives his/her faith, doesn't it? The Christian's attitude and actions in times of despair is a stabilizing influence upon others.

C. His counsel.

"Take nourishment."

"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. 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." 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. Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves." (v.33-36)

Everyone was hungry. No proper meal had been eaten since the onset of the gale. The ship's company was totally disorientated. They were not physically prepared for the ordeal that was yet to face them. It was then that Paul said, *"take nourishment."*

They were going to need strength to swim. I must admit that when I have been in storms on the water, the last thing I wanted to think about was eating. There have been times when I lost what I had previously eaten! But Paul knew what was ahead because the Lord had told him that they were to run ashore and the ship would be destroyed. Paul knew that they needed to be physically ready.

"Stay in the ship."

"Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." (v.31) Did you ever feel like jumping ship? Has your faith ever really been tested? Do you have a fair weather faith only or is your faith also a foul weather faith?

IV. FAITH TRIUMPHANT.

Paul's faith is evident throughout this sea story. He is an Exhibit "A" of a triumphant faith. He could have said:

"Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees
And looks to God alone;
Laughs at impossibilities
And cries, "It shall be done!"

A. Ship wrecked. Acts 27:40-44

The ship broke apart when it hit land and was destroyed but the persons aboard were saved. Those of strong and robust bodies struck out boldly for shore but others needed to cling to planks and broken pieces of ship.

The 276 survivors of the shipwreck reached shore in a pitiful condition - exhausted, shocked, wet and cold. A pagan people showed Paul and his companion's unusual kindness. The islanders built a great fire to dry them out and warm them up. We could say that the cold sailors received a warm welcome!

I've often wondered, after they were safely on land, did the captain or any of the crew ever thank Paul for taking charge of the situation resulting in their lives being spared? We do not serve the Lord for the thanks we get from people, but a little gratitude shown along the way sure does go a long way toward helping us keep our spirits up.

B. Safe on Malta. Acts 28:1, 2

Paul and his company find themselves on the island of Melita which is the modern island of Malta, located in the center of the Mediterranean Sea, 60 miles south of Sicily.

C. Snake bitten. Acts 28:3

Paul was not the sort of person who was afraid to get his hands dirty. There he was collecting sticks for the fire along with everyone else. Christians should never forget that Jesus was a carpenter. Paul picked up a bundle of sticks to place on the fire. A snake, hibernating in the sticks was warmed by the heat of the fire and bit Paul's hand.

The superstitious islanders jumped to conclusions. When they saw the snake hanging from Paul's hand they were sure that he had been poisoned and would die. So, they concluded that the man who had escaped from the sea must be a murderer. When it became clear when Paul suffered no ill effects, they changed their minds. They were convinced that he was a god.

D. Serving the Sick. Acts 28:8, 9

Three months Paul spent on Malta. The governor, Publius, graciously entertained some of the more important survivors including Paul and his friends, for three days. Publius benefited from showing Paul hospitality. The apostle healed his father of fever and dysentery. Shipwrecked, a prisoner and stuck for three months on a strange island, yet Paul found opportunities for ministry. He knew that he was there in the providence of God and he made the most of his opportunities. He was practicing what he wrote in Romans 8:28.

E. Shipping out! Acts 28:11

"After three months we sailed...." Anchors aweigh! At the end of their three-month stay the local people provided them with the supplies they needed for the journey to Rome and they were on their way again. From port to port they made their way toward Rome.

E. Seeing Rome. Acts 28:12-16

Paul and his fellow Christians were invited to spend a week with some Christians at Puteoli. So Paul and friends enjoyed Christian hospitality for seven days. On the journey from Puteoli to Rome, a distance of about 130 miles, Paul met another group of Christians at the Appii Forum, 43 miles from Rome. Then a second group at Three Taverns, 33 miles from Rome. They must have heard that Paul was coming.

Rome at last! Whew! It had been a rough trip. Paul finally arrives at Rome traveling the last part of the journey on the famous Appian Way accompanied by some Christians who had come out to greet Paul. (28:14-15)

There were many Christians in Rome and some walked out to meet him. There is no doubt about it - a warm welcome cheers the heart because it is an expression of love. When people go out of their way to show hospitality and really make you welcome it is greatly encouraging.

Over and over again through this book of Acts we have seen the providence of God at work. The Lord told Paul when he was imprisoned in Jerusalem: *"As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."* (Acts 23:11) There were times Paul's arrival in Rome seemed very unlikely. He survived assassination plots, 2 years detention in Caesarea, a storm at sea, a violent shipwreck and a close encounter with a poisonous snake.

Notwithstanding, Luke is able to write: *"Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him."* (v14)

F. Shackled but witnessing. Acts 28:17-31

While awaiting trial in Rome, Paul was allowed to rent his own house. He was still a prisoner, chained 24 hours a day to a soldier. (Acts 28:20) He reports that the palace guard had come to know that he was *"in chains for Christ"* (Philippians 1:12-14). Some of these soldiers may have become Christians. He also sent for the Jewish leaders (v.17) and reasoned with them

from morning till evening. He did everything he could to win the Jewish leaders over.

For two years Paul waited in Rome for his appeal to be heard before the Emperor. He told everyone who visited about the good news of Jesus Christ. He welcomed all those who came to see him and witnessed to them boldly and without hindrance. As Paul conversed with his friends and Christian visitors, soldiers, officials from Caesar's palace, others listened to his wonderful words of life. The ambassador for Christ was chained, but the good news was unchained!

After the statutory wait established by Roman law, Paul was released and for the next few years Paul continued to evangelize. He wrote letters to Timothy and Titus during this period. From Rome Paul also wrote the New Testament letters of Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon.

Later Paul was re-arrested. Tradition tells us that he was executed in Rome but when Paul went to meet the Lord, he left churches spread throughout the Roman Empire! From there the Gospel impacted not only the Roman Empire but the world. The Gospel had spread from Jerusalem to Rome, from the religious center of the known world to the political center of the world.

Luke's final note of triumph is to tell a Paul's bold, unhindered preaching of the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. He wrote that Paul continued "*preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.*" (v.31)

Paul was a firebrand for Jesus Christ and everywhere he went a fire or a fight broke out! He did not give up or shut up until God took him up!

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