

Hope in Stormy Times

Acts 27

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Many people love to travel. Personally, I tend to find travel somewhat tiring and stressful. I enjoy being at my destination, but the process of getting there is always a bit of a challenge. Regardless of whether we're driving, flying, taking the train, or some other form of transportation, I always feel a whole lot better once I arrive at my destination. And I always feel a whole lot better once I've returned home. The process of getting to each place is something I tend to endure, not enjoy.

And yet, travel in our world today is much easier than it has been at almost any time in history. We have cars which readily (and relatively comfortably) travel long distances. We have roads that are generally well-maintained and marked. We no longer need to use paper maps, because GPS directs us easily. If we need to travel long distances, airplanes can cross the country or even the world in a matter of hours. And all of these modes of transportation are reasonably safe. Great effort has been put in to make travel as safe and quick as possible. But I still don't care for it!

In the first century, however, travel was not nearly as straightforward, easy, or safe as it is today. There were no cars, there were no airplanes, there was no GPS, and there were no government standards of safety. Most travel across land took place either on foot or on animals. There was always danger from robbers who would attack those traveling alone. Wild animals were also a constant threat. Travelers had to know the way to where they were going, as there weren't maps available to purchase at the corner gas station. And there were no websites to book hotels in advance, let alone even being sure of what accommodations were available when you stopped in a town.

Travel at sea was even less predictable. Sailing across open water was still primitive. While ships regularly sailed across large bodies of water like the Mediterranean, it was still not easy. There were no motors to help propel the ship in the direction you wanted to go, and sailing technology at the time meant that ships had great difficulty going in a given direction without favorable winds. Ships navigated based on their crew's knowledge of the area and their ability to follow the stars. While shipping was a regular part of the first century world, it was still unpredictable and dangerous.

Understanding that is essential as we approach our story today, because it's very easy for our 21st century minds to forget what travel in the 1st century was like. Today, we're going to look at the account of Paul's journey to Rome, and the shipwreck that occurred along the way. While it's an engaging story, the bigger question is always, what can it teach us? I think as we walk through the experience with Paul, we will be reminded of how we can have peace, even in the most tumultuous of times. When God is with you, you can weather even the harshest storms.

The First Leg

Paul had been waiting in Jerusalem for more than two years at this point, having been imprisoned even though he had done nothing wrong. The Jewish leaders were consistently trying to find a way to have him killed, but Paul persisted. When it became clear that his life would be in danger if he stayed in Judea, he decided to exercise his rights as a Roman citizen and appeal his case to Caesar. Now, the journey toward Rome was finally beginning.

When the time came, we set sail for Italy. Paul and several other prisoners were placed in the custody of a Roman officer named Julius, a captain of the Imperial Regiment. ² Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was also with us. We left on a ship whose home port was Adramyttium on the northwest coast of the province of Asia; it was scheduled to make several stops at ports along the coast of the province. (Acts 27:1-2, NLT)

Paul was being transferred to Rome with several other prisoners. They were all placed under the guard of a Roman officer named Julius. Paul was also permitted to travel with companions. Luke tells us that he and Aristarchus, who was from Thessalonica, traveled with Paul. These three Christians were traveling alongside several prisoners and likely several other Roman soldiers who served as guards.

The ship they boarded initially was a local vessel. It was going to hop along the coastline at various ports until it reached its home port of Adramyttium, which was north of Ephesus. There were no direct trips to Rome, so the Roman officer would have to be creative in finding ships that would provide them passage, hopping their way gradually closer to their destination. Thankfully, the Roman officer was gracious toward Paul, granting him a level of freedom you would not expect a prisoner to have.

³ The next day when we docked at Sidon, Julius was very kind to Paul and let him go ashore to visit with friends so they could provide for his needs. ⁴ Putting out to sea from there, we encountered strong headwinds that made it difficult to keep the ship on course, so we sailed north of Cyprus between the island and the mainland. ⁵ Keeping to the open sea, we passed along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, landing at Myra, in the province of Lycia. ⁶ There the commanding officer found an Egyptian ship from Alexandria that was bound for Italy, and he put us on board. (Acts 27:3-6, NLT)

Julius allowed Paul to go ashore when they arrived in Sidon. He met with the church there, who ministered to him and provided for his needs, possibly giving him provisions for what was likely to be a long journey (though they couldn't have known just how long it would be!) It's possible that Festus had told Julius to be lenient on Paul and that he could be trusted.

Already at this time, the winds were becoming difficult, which made it a challenge for the ship to travel on its desired course. They adjusted, trying to use the natural features of the region to enable them to reach their destination. Eventually, they landed at Myra, and Julius decided to switch a different ship. The plan had never been to take this ship all the way to Rome, but rather to reach a place where they'd be able to transfer to a

ship that was heading in that direction. They found an Egyptian grain ship that was from Alexandria and was heading for Italy. This seemed like a good option, so the commanding officer made arrangements for them to book passage on this ship along with their cargo of grain.

The Second Leg

There was a problem, however. It was getting late in the year. The general rule at that time was that sailing after about mid-September was dangerous. By mid-October it was considered impossible to sail again until sometime around mid-March. It was most likely late September or even October when they departed on the grain ship. Luke tells us of their troubles.

⁷ We had several days of slow sailing, and after great difficulty we finally neared Cnidus. But the wind was against us, so we sailed across to Crete and along the sheltered coast of the island, past the cape of Salmone. ⁸ We struggled along the coast with great difficulty and finally arrived at Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. ⁹ We had lost a lot of time. The weather was becoming dangerous for sea travel because it was so late in the fall, and Paul spoke to the ship's officers about it. (Acts 27:7-9, NLT)

The wind was fighting them, and the sailing vessels of this time had limited ability to sail against the wind. They attempted to sail close to islands hoping for some protection from the wind, allowing them to travel in the direction they would like. With much difficulty, they arrived on the island of Crete, specifically at a place known as Fair Havens.

Luke tells us they had lost a lot of time. The underlying text specifically says that it was after the Day of Atonement. This means it was probably about late October of AD 59 when they arrived in Fair Havens. It was extremely dangerous to travel any more, as the winds would become even more treacherous than they had been so far. Paul went to speak with the men leading the ship, surely asking them to ride out the winter there for everyone's safety.

Paul may have been a tentmaker, but it seems that he had spent his fair share of time on ships. We know he had some bad experiences on ships as well. Listen to what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians (which he wrote before this trip!)

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. (2 Corinthians 11:26, NLT)

Paul had already experienced three shipwrecks, and one of those times he had spent a whole 24 hours just drifting at sea. Paul knew the dangers of sailing these waters. He may not have been a sailor, but he had some experience, and he wanted to share his insights with these men, encouraging them not to venture out again.

But there were a couple of problems. First, in the eyes of these sailors, Paul was a prisoner, which meant he was not to be trusted, and he wasn't an experienced sailor.

So they easily dismissed him. The second problem was that Fair Havens didn't really live up to its name. It wasn't a good place for a ship to spend the winter. It faced the wrong direction, which meant there was a good chance that if you kept your ship there the whole winter, it would be so badly battered by the sea that it would be destroyed by springtime. Understandably, the ship's officers and the ship's owners were not keen to see that happen. They knew there was a better port just a few miles up the coastline, so they waited for a break in the weather and decided to try to get to that port, where they could then ride out the winter. This would prove to be a fateful decision.

The Shipwreck

They left Fair Havens on a day when the winds had let up a bit. They figured if they stayed close to the coastline, they would be better able to stay on their course. But once they left, a storm came up, with strong winds blowing from the north. Those winds made it impossible for them to reach their destination, and began pushing them away from the island and out into the open seas. This was a dangerous situation.

Luke described what happened in great detail. This passage again shows the truthfulness of Luke's account. He records the actions of the crew members and the concerns they had during this storm. While he didn't write like a sailor keeping a ship's log, he accurately records everything the sailors did. His account reads exactly like a passenger on a first century ship would have recorded it.

The storm was not just a passing thunderstorm. It kept up for days, most likely weeks. The sailors couldn't see the sky, which meant they were simply adrift on the open sea. They stopped trying to fight the sea and started simply trying to survive it. They pulled in the lifeboat behind them (used for docking and going ashore) because it was becoming swamped with water. It was in danger of capsizing and putting the ship itself in danger as well. So they pulled it aboard (which wasn't easy since it was full of water!) They also ran ropes under the ship as a way of trying to keep the wooden timbers of the ship together as the ship was being battered by the waves. They were in survival mode.

While they couldn't be sure where they were, they knew they were surely drifting south because of the north wind. They were worried about being driven so far south that they were going to be pushed into Africa! They were concerned they might end up stuck in some of the sandbars in the area, which would cause the ship to get stuck and likely be destroyed. The sailors were now regretting their decision to ignore Paul and tempt fate.

As we have seen a couple of other times in Paul's story in Acts, just when things seemed darkest, and Paul might have been tempted to despair, the Lord showed up and gave him what he needed.

²¹ No one had eaten for a long time. Finally, Paul called the crew together and said, "Men, you should have listened to me in the first place and not left Crete. You would have avoided all this damage and loss. ²² But take courage! None of you will lose your lives, even though the ship will go down. ²³ For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me, ²⁴ and he said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul, for you will surely stand trial before Caesar! What's

more, God in his goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you.’²⁵ So take courage! For I believe God. It will be just as he said.²⁶ But we will be shipwrecked on an island.” (Acts 27:21-26, NLT)

Paul started with a gentle, “I told you so!” but then moved into his real message. God had appeared to him through an angel last night and told him he was going to make it to Rome alive. This wasn’t a surprise to Paul, since God had told him he would be His witness in Rome. Paul knew God would keep His promises. But he told his fellow passengers that the Lord had promised that while the ship would sink, they would all survive. They would be shipwrecked on an island.

After 14 nights of the storm, the sailors could tell they were getting close to land. They tried to escape the ship, hoping to head for land on their own, leaving their passengers to fend for themselves, but Paul caught them and told the soldiers that God would only save everyone if everyone was on the ship together. So the soldiers cut the lifeboat free and let it drift away. Now everyone was in the same boat...literally.

At this point, Paul became kind of the de facto leader of the ship. Everyone else feared for their lives. Paul was confident his life was safe. It no longer mattered that Paul was a prisoner or that he wasn’t a sailor. He was the only one with hope. He was certain his God would save them. So they were willing to follow his lead.

He had everyone eat (and the way it’s recorded, he might have celebrated communion with the group, but we can’t be sure) so that they would have the strength they needed for the swim that he knew lay ahead of each of them. After that, they dumped the rest of the grain from the ship (which would have carried tons of grain) so it would ride a bit higher in the water, giving them a greater chance of getting the ship to shore.

In the morning, they could see land, so the sailors made a last-ditch attempt to get the ship to run ashore there. They did all they could to let the boat build up speed and headed toward the shoreline. Unfortunately, there were two currents that met up with one another which had created a shallow spot in the sea. The ship ended up getting stuck in this shallow spot. Because of the speed it was traveling at, the ship was stuck hard. It wasn’t going anywhere. But because of the currents meeting here, the ship was quickly being battered by the waves and was beginning to fall apart.

The Roman soldiers prepared to kill their prisoners. Since the penalty for losing a prisoner was death, this was a way to for them to ensure their own safety. But Julius liked Paul, so he told them to stop. Paul’s words continued to ring in Julius’ ears that their safety was only guaranteed if they all went ashore. Julius placed a significant amount of trust in Paul’s words. To his credit, Paul was right. Miraculously, all 276 of the people on the ship made it safely to shore. God had shown Himself faithful once again.

Conclusion

While this is an exciting story, it’s difficult for us to understand because it is so far removed from our experience. We are unfamiliar with the region, unfamiliar with what it

was like to sail on a ship like this, and unfamiliar with what this kind of storm would have felt like. So it's easy for this passage to seem distant and foreign. But if we take a step back, we realize that this account is not so much about storms at sea, but about storms of life, and how Christians can weather those storms and even testify of God's goodness in the midst of them. So let's draw some principles from this account.

First, God is bigger than our circumstances. Every person in this account had to come to grips with the fact that they could not control the situation they were in. Every person on the ship seems to have feared what would happen...except Paul. Paul had confidence that God was in control. He trusted that God knew what He was doing. He kept reminding himself of God's promises and was able to have peace when everyone around him was churning. When storms come, our best hope is to keep reciting God's promises and reminding ourselves of His track record. Memorize passages about God's provision, recite song lyrics like those we've sung today, remember the other times God has shown Himself faithful in your life. Keep replaying God's faithfulness, so you can focus on Him, not the storms around you.

Second, we aren't guaranteed smooth sailing. Many people believe that if they do what God wants, their lives should go smoothly. And there's a sense in which that's true. We are less likely to invite trouble upon ourselves when we live according to God's commands. And yet, we also know that sometimes God leads us into situations that are hard, rocky, and scary simply because that is what is necessary to get us to a place where we can really hear Him. Many people love the story of Jesus walking on the water in the midst of the storm. I do too! But do you know why the disciples ended up in that storm? Because Jesus told them to cross the lake! Why was Paul in this situation? Because he followed God's leading! Sometimes God allows us to go through storms in our lives because it provides an opportunity for us to learn something we'd never be able to know otherwise. Rough seas are not a sign of God's absence. They may be an invitation to come close to Him and learn to trust.

Third, how we respond to storms can impact others. Paul was a prisoner. No one on the ship would have had any reason to believe him or pay attention to him at all. But the way Paul responded in a situation that had everyone else panicked got their attention. Paul had answers when no one else did. His hope was not anchored to his own craftiness but to His God. One of the best ways to testify to the truthfulness of scripture is by the way we live. When we are consistent in our faith, especially in the hard times, we attract the attention of a watching world. When they see the peace that is ours in the midst of tumultuous times, they want to know more. When the storms come, remember you have an opportunity to witness to God's faithfulness. We don't have to pretend the storms aren't hard, but we can show that we have confidence in our God. That peace is something everyone longs to have.

We are fortunate that we do not have the same dangers of travel that people did in the 1st century. But that doesn't mean our lives will be smooth sailing. We will all face storms. The question is where will we turn when those times come? It is only when we turn to Christ that we can find peace, even when the storms rage around us.

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