

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 28

Paul's Voyage to Rome

Perhaps the very first comedy album I heard, certainly the first one I remember hearing, was Bill Cosby recounting the story of Noah. Cosby tells the story of Noah's initial ark conversation with God. Noah questions whether the voice he hears is really God, especially when the instruction is for Noah to build an ark!

God further instructs Noah to gather two of every animal to put in the ark, causing Noah again to ask, "Who is this really?" as if someone was pulling a practical joke on him. Noah wonders, "Am I on Candid Camera?" When God explains he is going to bring rain and flood the world, Noah still wonders what is going on.

As Noah is building the ark, Cosby imagined interchanges Noah must have had with his neighbors. In one conversation, when a neighbor fusses with Noah over the construction, the neighbor finally asks Noah just why he is building such a thing. Noah responded with the statement, "I can't tell you." When the neighbor pushes harder for an answer, Noah finally says, "I will give you hint. How long can you tread water?"

As I got older and learned to read scripture carefully, I realized that the story was not necessarily as related by Cosby. Still, I have never lost appreciation for the hint, "How long can you tread water?"

I suspect that any good Jewish boy growing up and studying the Torah would have great familiarity with the story of Noah and the ark. That story would stick with most anyone as they see how God used water to cleanse the world of evil and to separate Noah and his family out from those who were wicked. In this sense the apostle Peter used the Noah story as an illustration to explain how baptism separates and saves the believer from the wickedness of the world and its peoples.¹

We do not know what was on Paul's mind when he boarded the boat leaving Caesarea for Rome, but that boat was not only taking Paul to a place where he had long desired to minister, but it was taking him from a place where his countrymen had spent two years trying to take his life. In a sense, Paul's boat venture was

¹ 1 Peter 3:20-22, "who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him."

both a door to a future he longed for and an escape from a boatload of troubles! It is that part of Paul's life that we explore in this lesson.

PAUL SAILS FOR ROME

Luke gives us the account of Paul leaving Judea and heading to Rome in Acts 27. We should note at the outset that this is one of the "we" sections in Acts where it is apparent that Luke is joining Paul for the journey. Not only do we have Luke's inclusive language ("we") but we also have Luke giving exacting directions and accounts, mentioning travel detail with great precision like we saw in the earlier "we" sections of Acts.²

Paul and some other prisoners were given to the care of a centurion named Julius who took them on a ship out of the harbor at Caesarea going first to Adramyttium. We should pause here and consider a map's layout of where Paul was and how he was to sail to Rome.



(1) Caesarea; (2) Sidon; (3) Myra; (4) Fair Havens; (5) Malta; (6) Puteoli

² This again shows us the precision of the history recorded in Acts. Luke writes much of Acts from first hand knowledge. The rest of Luke's gospel and Acts history was written from Luke's careful investigation. As Luke said, "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Lk 1:3-4). No doubt Luke spent the two years Paul was held in Caesarea researching and speaking to many first hand sources about the facts that went into Luke and Acts.

Paul was taken “in a ship of Adramyttium” that was set to sail along the coast of Asia. This was the typical means of ship travel. In a day when navigation instruments were relatively crude (at least by today’s standards), when weather forecasting was even more speculative than today, and when even the sturdiest of vessels were still dangerous in the open sea, most water travel was done with land in sight.

Luke and Aristarchus accompanied Paul on the ship. Aristarchus had come with Paul several years back from his home church in Thessalonica to help bring the Greek churches’ contributions to the church in Jerusalem. We can assume that the centurion carried with him the papers that were prepared for Paul’s appeal, including the most recent write up where Agrippa and Festus had found no crime associated with Paul.

On the voyage, “Julius treated Paul kindly.” When the vessel reached Sidon, 69 miles north of Caesarea and the first stop Luke tells us about, Julius allowed Paul “to go to his friends and be cared for.” The word Luke uses for “cared for”³ is rare in the New Testament. It denotes some type of medical or physical help, telling us Paul may not have been in the best of health for this journey.

From Sidon, the winds were blowing such that the ship went around the western end of Cyprus and followed the coast of modern Turkey until they arrived at Myra. At the harbor in Myra, Julius requisitioned passage for Italy on “a ship of Alexandria.” The Alexandrian ships were those that carried grain to Rome.⁴ The ships were typically quite large and this one, Luke tells us, had 276 people onboard for the voyage.⁵

THE STORM

The weather was not favorable for this voyage and the rout took a southerly bent under the southern coast of Crete. As the boat zigzagged off the south of Crete⁶ it

³ “This is the only New Testament occurrence of the word *epimeleia* (ἐπιμέλεια) only occurs here although Luke uses another form of it in Luke 10:34.

⁴ Bruce points out that, “Egypt was the chief granary of Rome, and the corn-trade [wheat] between Rome and Egypt was of the greatest importance.” F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans 1951) at 453.

⁵ One first century Roman shipwreck discovered recently off the coast of Caesarea was about 147 feet long, roughly half a football field.

⁶ While most every map of Paul’s voyage draws a straight line between ports, the actual sailing was typically a zigzag trying to use whatever wind was available to move. Unless the wind was directly behind you, that meant zigzagging.

neared a harbor named Fair Havens. As they neared Fair Havens, Paul spoke up to the pilot and owner of the ship as well as the centurion. “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” (Acts 27:10).

Paul spoke here, not out of some inspiration from God, but out of his own experience and opinions as an experienced traveler.⁷ Ultimately Paul was proven right in his concerns, even though he was wrong on the issue of loss of life. Paul had reason to be concerned. As Luke tells us, “much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over” (Acts 27:9). Luke is referring to the Fast that was *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. If this was the year 59, as Bruce supposes, the fast fell around October 5 of that year.

This timing is significant because the oceans were closed to normal sea traffic over the winter. Rapske and others cite to a late Roman military writer Flavius Vegetius writing that May 27 to September 14 were considered the safe times for sea travel. Sea travel was considered risky in the spring between March 10 and May 26 as well as in the fall between September 14 to November 11. The time, however, between November 11 to March 10 was so dangerous that the sea was basically closed, save for emergency travel.⁸

Rather than heed Paul’s advice, the centurion followed the thinking of the ship owner and pilot and they kept sailing past Fair Havens planning to make the harbor on the western shore of Crete. Once a gentle south wind started, the ship hoisted anchor and began sailing west. As they skirted the southern coast of Crete headed to the western edge, the wind suddenly shifted and started blowing violently from the northeast.⁹ The new wind bore down from the coast and began

⁷ For years, many Pauline scholars considered Paul an inexperienced traveler; however, as time has produced more archaeological insight into Paul and into these passages, scholars have come to decide Paul was actually a very experienced traveler in his day. It would not be unusual for Paul to give advice on decisions like this. See Rapske, Brian, “Acts, Travel and Shipwreck” *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting* (Eerdmans 1994) Vol. 2 at 29 (fnt 129)

⁸ See Rapske at 22ff; Bruce at 455.

⁹ Luke calls it a “tempestuous wind” using the Greek word *typhonikos* (τυφονικός) from which we derive the word “typhoon.” Bruce explains the adjective “refers to the whirling motion of the clouds and sea caused by the meeting of opposite currents of air.” Bruce at 458. A Prefect of the Roman fleet who wrote at the time (named Pliny the Elder) explained a typhoon as “a whirling cloudburst. This brings down with it a portion of heat torn from a cloud, which it turns and whirls round, increasing its own downward velocity by its weight, and shifting from place to place with a rapid whirl; it is especially disastrous to navigators, as it twists round and shatters not only the yards, but the vessels themselves.... The same whirlwind when beaten back by its very impact snatches things up and carries them back with it to the sky, sucking them high aloft.” *Natural History* Book 2.49.131-132 (Loeb Classical Library 1938) translated by H. Rackham. Whether

to blow the ship away from the shore. The wind was strong, and the ship could not make any headway (even zigging or zagging!) against such a strong wind. The ship had no choice but to accept the wind and get carried away from Crete.

For a while the ship's crew kept track of their location. They went "under the lee of a small island named Cauda" meaning they went by the island on the side that had some measure of protection from the wind. This was their first opportunity to secure the boat that was pulled along behind the ship.¹⁰ It also was a time when they "used supports to undergird the ship."¹¹ Luke was part of the team that helped secure the dinghy, "we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat" (Acts 27:16). As Bruce adds, "any landlubber could haul on a rope!"¹² The third action taken at this time was lowering the ship's "gear." Scholars are uncertain if this means dropping anchor to slow the movement of the ship or simply dropping sails or securing the ship against windy storms.

The storm did not abate over night and the next day the crew began throwing off the ship's cargo. On the third day the crew threw part of the ship's tackle overboard. For days and nights the storm continued. There were no navigable stars that could be seen, no references to land, and no real control of the ship. Luke wrote, "all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned" (Acts 27:20).

It was in this time of personal desperation for those on board that God sent a message through Paul. Before Paul told the crew of God's message, Paul added his own personal touch, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss!" Paul gently but plainly tells the crew, "I told you so!" Paul then gives his encouraging news that God had plans the weather would not thwart.

Paul gives the crew the word from God as delivered to him from an angel that very night, and he also gives them his own testimony that God is faithful to his word.

Luke is describing an actual water tornado with its accompanying storm or simply the storm that typically produces a water tornado is unclear. We are certain though that he is describing a violent storm!

¹⁰ This was the dinghy that would have been used to shuttle passengers back and forth to shore as well as to do basic work around the outside of the ship.

¹¹ This was a practice of taking rope and either wrapping it under the ship's hull and tying it off using rope across the deck to tie the opposite sides of the hull tight so the ship had extra strength. This measure was necessary in a grain ship because the grain in the ship's hold, if sufficiently wet, would expand to twice its normal size, breaking apart the ship. See Rapske at 35.

¹² Bruce at 459.

“But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me” (Acts 27:22-25).

Paul did let them know the boat would need to run aground on a sandbar at some point.

The storm continued to hurl the boat across the water for fourteen days. Sometime deep in that fourteenth night some of the sailors suspect land was getting nearer. Dropping a weight with a rope attached, the sailors determined that the water was only about 120 feet deep. A short time later a second effort showed water getting shallower, only about 76 feet deep. The crew dropped four anchors from the back (stern) of the ship to slow down progress out of fear the ship might falter on rocks as it got closer to shore. A number of sailors then stated a need to drop anchors from the front (bow) of the ship. These sailors were getting into the dinghy to do so, but Luke knew the men were actually looking to use the dinghy to abandon ship and head for shore.

Paul went to the centurion and his soldiers and told them what the sailors were really up to. Paul added, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved!” Unlike Paul’s advice that two weeks earlier had gone unheeded, this time the men had no second thoughts! They immediately cut away the ropes holding the dinghy and let it float off before the sailors could abandon ship.

As dawn came, Paul told the people on board to eat! Evidently out of fear or seasickness no one had really eaten for the two weeks of the storm. Paul again committed to the people that “not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.” Paul then took the lead by taking bread, thanking God for it out loud before everyone and eating. Others on the boat then followed suit.

THE SHIPWRECK

After eating, the crew began to lighten the ship by throwing off the rest of the wheat so it could run further inland before running aground. As the day broke, the men saw an island with a beach in a bay. Figuring they might be able to run the ship aground fairly close to the beach, they cut loose the anchors, let the rudders free, and hoisted the sail to get wind support. As they went in toward the beach, they struck a reef and ran the boat aground earlier. The bow was stuck on the reef and the waves were destroying the stern of the ship.

The immediate reaction of the soldiers was to kill the prisoners so there would be no escaping. Julius the centurion kept the soldiers from doing so “wishing to save

Paul” (Acts 27:43). Under the centurion’s orders, those who could swim were ordered into the water.¹³ Those who could not, took planks or parts of the ship that floated and went into the water. “And so it was that all were brought safely to land.”

POINTS FOR HOME

1. One issue that has plagued scholars is the incredible detail Luke provides in this narrative. Bruce called it “one of the most vivid pieces of descriptive narrative in the whole of Acts, or indeed in the whole New Testament.” Bruce then cites H. J. Holtzmann as saying it is “one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship.”¹⁴ Why does this become an issue for scholars? Because one must ask why Luke bothers to go into this level of detail. Luke will set out years of activity in a matter of a few words, yet here he chooses to spend verse after verse recounting in detail the naval voyage and storm.

There are a number of reasons Luke may have done so. First, we have already seen Luke always provides more details for those parts of Paul’s journeys where Luke is actually there (the “we” sections). Further scholars note that there was almost a Greek literary art in describing sea voyages from the time of Homer’s *Odyssey* forward. (Over 600 years earlier¹⁵). These scholars urge us to see that Luke is following this mariner narrative craft.

But there is another reason scholars offer, which serves as our first point for home. In scripture, in secular literature at the time, and even in contemporary times, human life has been compared to stormy sea voyages. While we must tread lightly when making such allegorical usage of scripture, we may do so where our insight is bolstered by the plain weight of clear scripture.

So we ask in our first point for home, is there a storm in your life? One of typhoon nature? Are you whipped about by winds until you have lost your

¹³ Rapske notes the “readied and controlled manner” in which the ship was ultimately run aground, “passengers would have had some time to prepare themselves and secure any personal belongings against loss or destruction.” Rapske at 34.

¹⁴ Bruce at 450. For a fuller understanding of the dead on accuracy of Luke’s account from a seafarer perspective see the write up in *Biblical Archaeologist* Vol. 53 No. 1 (March 1990).

¹⁵ Luke even uses some Homeric language and allusions as he wrote the account. Referencing one example in particular, Bruce asks, “Must we not accept it for a certainty that Luke, the Physician of Antioch, had gone through his Homer?” Bruce at 467.

bearing? Do things feel totally out of control? Try as hard as you can, do your efforts still seem to come woefully short? Have your past decisions led to troubles that should have been avoided? Have you ignored good counsel to your own peril? Is your life on a collision course that could leave you drowning without rescue? If so, take heart. There is a God worthy of our worship. This God stands waiting to take control. Trusting God, doing what he says, living in faith to his word, brings comfort, security, and ultimate rescue. So take what the storm brings, but also take food, give thanks, eat, and know that God will bring about his plans and purposes. No Christian is ever alone. As Paul had already written the Romans he was going to see, “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28).

2. “Men you should have listened to me” (Acts 27:21).

Even when Paul was speaking from an oracle, he had good advice that proved to be, for the most part, right. There is a real strength in getting advice from godly people. The proverbs offer this wisdom over and over: “Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed” (Pro. 15:22); “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Pro. 11:14), etc. In this regard we should be careful, however, for we are also told that counsel of wicked and evil people bring disaster! “The thoughts of the righteous are just; the counsels of the wicked are deceitful” (Pro. 12:5). It is not surprising by the journey’s end the soldiers and centurions were following Paul’s advice on not letting the sailors abandon ship!

3. “But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan” (Acts 27:43).

Why did the centurion save Paul’s life? There was no real need to. The soldiers were well within their rights to kill prisoners to prevent an escape. Paul must have made quite an impression on the centurion. Since the beginning of the voyage the centurion was observant of Paul, and not of Paul only but also Paul’s friends. These were friends who cared for Paul in Sidon, friends who accompanied Paul on the voyage, friends who lent a hand when need on board.

We should live our lives where they impact others of the world positively. We should live lives worth saving! We should let our “light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:16).