

P. On to Rome (27:1-28:31)

More than two years prior Jesus had appeared to Paul at Jerusalem and assured him that he would indeed testify to Him at Rome. For some time Paul had desired to visit Rome and minister to the saints there, and he doubtless viewed the Lord's affirmation through the lens of his own longing and expectations. Little did he know that two years later he'd still be in Palestine after enduring a painfully protracted season of incarceration and humiliation at the hands of disinterested and disingenuous governors. It was Jesus' will that, before Paul would testify in Rome, he'd testify to Rome's appointed rulers.

1. But the day came at last for him to embark on his journey to the imperial capital. Paul was headed for Rome, but the difficult path leading there had not come to an end with his departure from Caesarea. He remained in bonds as Rome's prisoner, but that difficulty would pale in comparison to the challenges that awaited him. The Lord's providence to that point had shattered Paul's vision of his Roman visit, and the same would be the case with the journey there. Paul had no idea what lay ahead as he boarded the ship at Caesarea, but once again his words of exhortation and encouragement to his fellow saints would be impressed upon his own heart and experience: Like them, he, too, had been appointed to enter the kingdom of heaven through many tribulations (14:21-22).

Though transported as a prisoner, Paul was given much latitude by the centurion assigned to deliver him to Caesar. Some fellow Christians were permitted to accompany him, including a Thessalonian disciple named Aristarchus along with Luke and perhaps some others. (Luke provided no explanation for their presence onboard, but the fact that Luke was a physician provides a plausible explanation in his case. Aristarchus had accompanied Paul to Jerusalem from Corinth (20:1ff) and then followed him to Caesarea at some point during his two-year incarceration.) As well, when the ship docked at Sidon up the coast from Caesarea, the centurion allowed Paul and his companions to visit the congregation of saints in that city (27:1-3).

At last setting sail from the eastern Mediterranean coast, the ship headed northwest toward the southwest coast of Asia Minor. This intermediate destination meant that at least one other transport arrangement would have to be made in order for the passengers to reach Rome. Luke's account of the journey is notable for its detail and vividly descriptive language, and by it he effectively draws the reader into the drama and confronts him with the incredible hardship that marked the entire passage. As trying as the two years of incarceration at Caesarea were, that season only set the stage for the difficulties to come. Jesus had assured Paul that he'd bear witness to Him in Rome, but He hadn't promised him that the process leading to it would be easy.

- a. Sailing toward Asia, the ship navigated past Cyprus on the lee (north) side to provide a barrier against the unfavorable winds pressing against it from the west. Once again passing into the open sea, the ship continued fighting the winds until it arrived at the port city of Myra on the southern coast of Asia Minor (27:4-5). There the group disembarked and sought another vessel, probably because the former ship was continuing on to Adramyttium on the northwest Asian coast.

Luke described the second vessel as *Alexandrian*, and beyond that as a cargo ship commissioned to transport grain to Rome (ref. 27:38). Egypt was Rome's primary granary, and Alexandria was the major Egyptian port on the Mediterranean. (To this day Alexandria remains Egypt's largest and most important port city.)

- b. Setting sail from Myra, the travelers again encountered contrary winds out of the northwest and were forced to deviate their course toward the south in order to pass by Crete along the island's southern coast. Repeatedly Luke emphasized the hardship of their journey, noting the slowness and difficulty with which they made forward progress. The sailing conditions were so adverse that the captain decided to put the ship in port at the southern Cretan city of Lasea and there wait for the weather to become more favorable.

But while they waited and the days passed, so did the seasonal window for safe sailing. Paul himself recognized that fact and warned the crew that danger and loss awaited them should they decide to continue on. (The fast Luke mentioned was Yom Kippur, which occurred that year at the end of the first week of October). He recommended that they stay put and wait out the winter, but the ship's pilot and captain (owner) convinced the centurion that they should press on and try to reach the Cretan harbor of Phoenix on the southwest end of the island. The ship couldn't remain at Lasea, and since they had to set sail anyway they thought it best to winter at the most protected and accommodating port (27:9-12).

- c. The ship departed under fair winds, but things soon changed. Running close to shore, the ship encountered a Euraquilo wind: a typhonic, northeast gale that raced down upon them from Mount Ida and drove them out to sea. Unable to control the ship, the crew gave it way and let the winds drive them while at the same time seeking some relief by passing along the lee side of the small island of Clauda. Even then the ship was difficult to control and, fearing that they might run aground in the shallows of Greater Syrtis (the sandy beds west of Cyrene), the crew dropped the drift anchor in the hope of restraining their movement.

Paul had warned the group that great loss – even of human life – awaited them if they determined to press on, and now it appeared that his words were prophetic. The storm continued to rage day after day, forcing the passengers to jettison first the non-essential items and then even the ship's tackle. But when they had done all they could, and still with no relief in sight, even the most optimistic among the group soon abandoned all hope of surviving (27:14-20).

- d. Exhausted and weak from hunger, all on board had lost hope, but not Paul. His words of warning had proved prophetic, but now he had another word for them – a word of assurance from the mouth of an angel sent by the God whom Paul served with his life. Though they didn't know it, their journey was in the service of this God and the accomplishment of His will. Long before the voyage began, He had determined that Paul would stand before Caesar, but now His preserving hand was going to reach beyond His servant to all those with him (27:21-24).

Paul's words are easily passed over in the reading of the passage, but they are profoundly important – not only in themselves, but to what follows in the story.

- Although set in a very different circumstantial context than Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, Paul's proclamation to these Gentiles conveyed the same foundational truth: The one true God is the Creator and Lord of all things, and therefore also of the whole human race. All men not only have their existence and life in Him, they belong to Him and live in His presence and under His sovereign oversight; though the ship's crew and passengers didn't know Him, Paul's God knew them and held them in His grasp.
 - At the same time, this God's immediacy differs from that ascribed to the gods of Greece and Rome: His immediacy isn't simply spatial and administrative; it is preeminently relational. Spawned within fallen human minds, the Greco-Roman gods were conceived as quasi-human deities who are detached from human beings and their concerns and take interest in men only to the extent that they hope to derive some benefit from them. All such pseudo-gods desire only to *use* men; the God Paul proclaimed seeks men in order to give them life and make them *sons* (cf. 17:24-28).
 - Thus the Living God doesn't seek acknowledgement, tribute or gratuitous worship; He seeks *faith*: the unflappable trust that knows whom it has believed and eagerly yields to Him as a devoted son to a loving and faithful Father. Paul affirmed that he was such a man, testifying to his sailing companions that he believed God would perform exactly what He'd pledged (27:25). Paul trusted God, but they also were obligated to trust Him; *He'd promised to preserve their lives as well as Paul's*.
- e. That responsibility of faith overarches the balance of Luke's account leading up to Paul's arrival in Rome. The apostle's sure word of divine deliverance drew a line in the sand; henceforth, and in the face of continuing grave danger, would those with him meet their own challenge of faith?

Paul promised his fellows that none of them would perish, but he also informed them that the ship was going to run aground and be lost (cf. 27:22, 26): *Deliverance was assured, but only as the final outcome of a terrifying and life-threatening ordeal*. The Lord had pledged to them their lives, but not apart from a dreadful trial; gaining their lives depended upon forsaking their own speculations and devices and placing themselves entirely in His care, whatever may come.

Thus the sailors continued to battle the storm for several more days until they found themselves facing the ultimate test of their confidence in Paul's words. On the fourteenth day, and in the darkness of night, they became aware that the ship was moving into shallow waters. Unable to draw upon their eyesight or get their bearings from the stars (ref. again v. 20), the crew began to panic, fearful that the ship would be torn apart on a rocky shoreline (vv. 27-29).

Had Paul not previously told them that the ship was going to be lost their fears would have been more understandable. But God had promised to preserve their lives *through* the ordeal of the ship running aground (ref. vv 25-26). Shipwreck didn't mean death, and yet many of the crew were convinced that their only hope was to escape to the ship's lifeboat and they set about doing just that (27:30).

In itself, seeking refuge in the lifeboat didn't necessarily mean that the sailors disbelieved Paul's word; they could have simply reasoned that this was how God was going to fulfill His pledge. But the situation itself and the way Luke recounted it indicate otherwise. God had promised the lives of *all* aboard the ship, but only a few could fit in the lifeboat; many would have to be left behind (which is precisely why the sailors sought to escape unnoticed). *That being the case, remaining on the mother ship couldn't mean death – that is, unless God proved unfaithful to His word through His apostle.*

These crew members were seeking to preserve their own lives without regard for the others aboard, but when Paul realized what was happening he told the centurion and his men that this would cost the lives of all (27:31). *It's important to note that Paul's insistence that survival depended upon remaining on the ship was framed by his previous declaration that the ship was doomed.* His statement added a new dimension to what he'd already revealed and so also to the obligation of faith: They were going to lose the ship, and yet their survival depended upon remaining with it. So it is that faith always sets itself apart from sight; it trusts God irrespective of what circumstances and/or experience might dictate.

As further evidence of his confident faith and of his desire that the others would join him in it, Paul intervened in what must have been an extremely tense and volatile situation and urged everyone to stop and take something to eat. They had been consumed with fighting the storm for fourteen days, unable to even eat, let alone reorient themselves and get their wits back about them. Paul recognized that taking food was a way for the group to affirm in their own minds that this wasn't the end for them – that the God he proclaimed and served is faithful. And, that being the case, they would need their strength in order to continue on (27:33-36).

- f. When all had eaten their fill, the rest of the grain was jettisoned as a final attempt to lighten the ship. The dawning of day brought the sight of land and a bay with a beach that they hoped to drive the ship onto. But heading toward it the ship ran aground on a sandbar formed by two opposing currents and the bow stuck fast in the sand. Unable to move, the ship was soon being torn apart by the pounding waves and all on board were forced to abandon it. Fearful that their prisoners would escape, the soldiers wanted to kill them but the Lord's purpose for Paul prevailed: He had pledged Paul's life unto his witness in Rome, but He was also testifying to the nearly three hundred men who providentially were drawn into Paul's circumstance. To them as well as to His apostle, the Lord showed Himself the faithful and gracious Sovereign; He had spoken, and so He had done (27:37-44), and Paul doubtless seized the opportunity of gospel witness that it afforded.