



SHIPWRECKED!

SERIES: LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 27:1–44

48th Message

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Have you ever been in a situation when a family member, colleague, or company you worked for was at a potentially dangerous crossroads, and you had the foresight to know the right course of action, but your advice was not heeded and disaster struck? It's even more painful when the consequences impact you and your loved ones and you can't do a thing about it. That's where Paul finds himself as he begins his voyage from Caesarea to Rome and ends up shipwrecked. Like Paul experienced, poor choices of others can plunge us into dark depths beyond our control, making us feel like prisoners of complex social entanglements that put our calling and our lives at risk.

You'll recall last week that, though the Roman governor Felix knew there was no evidence against Paul, he was unwilling to release him because he was hoping for a bribe, which was not forthcoming. Paul refused to play Felix's game and remained in Roman custody without another public hearing for two years until Felix was recalled to Rome and replaced by Festus, who was more inclined to follow Roman protocol of justice. "Wishing to do the Jews a favor," Festus asked Paul if he wished to go to Jerusalem to be tried (25:9). Paul, knowing he would not receive a fair trial in Jerusalem, responded, "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried...I appeal to Caesar" (25:10–11). Shortly after Festus' appointment, two members of the Judean royal family, Agrippa and his sister Berenice, came to Caesarea to pay him their respects. Their visit was opportune for Festus, who was in a difficult position after Paul appealed to Caesar. Festus solicited the Jewish king's advice as to what he should write. After hearing Paul's defense, it became obvious to all that Paul had done nothing to deserve death or imprisonment and Agrippa concluded by saying, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar" (Acts 26:32). Finally after what must have seemed like endless waiting, Paul is on his way to Rome. In his introduction to the voyage F. F. Bruce writes,

Luke's narrative of the voyage and shipwreck of Paul is a small classic in its own right, as graphic a piece of descriptive writing as anything in the Bible...Luke, who accompanied Paul on the voyage, viewed the sea through Greek eyes, and tells us what he saw in unforgettable word-pictures.¹

Because of the length of our text, rather than reading it, I will provide a summary of Luke's travelogue, followed by reflections on surviving shipwrecks.

I. The Voyage from Caesarea to Sidon (27:1–3)

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. 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. (27:1–3)

Once Festus decided that Paul's case must be heard in Rome, Paul was placed in the custody of a centurion named Julius, who was part of the elite imperial cohort "detailed for communication-service between the emperor and his provincial armies."² He will prove to be a key player in our story. They embarked on a vessel that hugged the coastline, stopping at various ports along the way. Accompanying Paul on the voyage were Dr. Luke and Aristarchus, a loyal disciple from Thessalonica. When they arrived in Sidon, Julius gave Paul freedom to leave the ship to visit the believers in the city, who sent Paul off with their love, prayers and supplies for his journey.

Thus, the voyage to Rome begins on a very positive note, as Paul is sent off with loyal companions, the love and support of the church in Sidon, and the goodwill of the centurion, who seems to respect and trust Paul enough to allow him to leave the ship and enjoy the fellowship of the church. The conditions for passengers on merchant ships were not what we would call luxurious. Passengers were responsible for their bedding and food and slept on the open deck, exposed to the elements. This highlights the sacrifice and love Paul's colleagues had for him.

II. Voyage from Sidon to Myra (27:4–8)

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. There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board. 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. Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea. (27:4–8)

During the late summer months the prevailing winds are contrary, making sailing west difficult. Putting out to sea, they were forced to sail east and north of Cyprus, and then they drifted further east as they crossed the open sea to the coast of Asia Minor. With the help of local breezes and a steady westward current, the ship was able to work its way slowly by fits and starts until they reached the port of Myra. Myra was one of the chief ports for the Roman grain fleet that transported grain from Egypt to Rome. Egypt was the chief source of Rome's grain supply, and enticing bonuses were given to ships laden with this precious commodity.

Being directly north of Alexandria, the centurion knew he would likely find a larger grain vessel there to secure the fastest route to Rome. However, once they were on board, the larger ship made little headway against the prevailing winds and with great difficulty they sailed to Cnidus, the last port before sailing west to the Greek mainland. Leaving Cnidus, winds from the north forced them to sail south to Crete and to hug the coastline until they reached the small bay of Fair Havens.

III. Paul's Advice Not Heeded (27:9–12)

Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, "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." 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. (27:9–12)

Given the extensive delays caused by contrary winds, Sir William Ramsay suggests, "that a ship's council was held, and that Paul, perhaps because he was an experienced traveller, was invited to attend it." Whether or not that is the case, the fact that Paul, as a prisoner, is able to provide input to the centurion, who is the acting commanding officer, is striking. It demonstrates how, in such a short time, Paul's character and demeanor earned him respect from those in authority.

So, what was it about Paul's character that impressed the centurion? Paul was no stranger to the sea, for he had sailed this route before and had first-hand experience of the sea's destructive power. Three times he had been shipwrecked, and on one occasion he spent "a night and a day adrift at sea" (2 Cor 11:25) before being rescued. Given his experience, I suspect Paul had been keenly observing the wind and, with the onset of winter,³ was deeply concerned that the sea was becoming even more dangerous, threatening not only the loss of cargo, but their lives as well. Out of that concern he advises, "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" (v. 10).

The pilot and the ship's owner, however, felt Fair Havens was not a "suitable" harbor to spend the winter in and desired to sail forty miles to the west "on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix" (v. 12). As one might expect, the centurion put his money on the experts rather than Paul, and the majority of the crew concurred. Fair Havens, though protected by small islands, was more exposed to the elements than the harbor of Phoenix. But given the risk of unpredictable winds that come without warning, one wonders what other factors might have motivated the pilot and crew? Profit was certainly one, as Craig Keener notes, "Sailors are apt to hurry things with an eye to their own gain, ... [and] those in charge may have been concerned with the sailors' and soldiers' discontent at wintering at this fishing village instead of a livelier urban area such as Phoenix."⁴ Where would you have chosen to spend the winter, Moss Landing or San Francisco? I'm sure Paul was deeply disappointed and fearful, but he quietly submits. Yet as life teaches us all, you don't need a title to have influence.

IV. Storm at Sea (27:13–20)

A. The storm hits with a vengeance (27:13–15)

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. But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. (27:13–15)

When a gentle southerly breeze sprang up, they saw their opportunity and weighed anchor, thinking it would be smooth sailing to Phoenix. But soon after, a tempestuous wind, the infamous nor'easter (Latin: Euraquelo— the most dangerous wind driving rains from Italy to Africa), rushed down from the Cretan mountains with

hurricane force. "Not being able to face the wind or tack without the risk of losing his mainsail or even the main mast, the captain ordered to give way to the wind and to be driven along."⁵ For the next fourteen days, as they were mercilessly pummeled and battered by torrential rains and unforgiving winds, they did everything within their power to save the ship.

B. Extraordinary measures to save the ship (27:16–20)

Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. 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. 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. 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. (27:16–20)

First, taking advantage of what little shelter the small island of Cauda could offer them, they hauled up the skiff or lifeboat, Luke adds "with difficulty," for it was already filled with water. Secondly, the captain ordered the ship to be undergirded by running ropes under the ship to prevent the planks from breaking apart and more water to seep into the holds. Thirdly, with no mainsail, foresail or steering oars, there was no ability to steer the ship. Fearing they would run aground on the dreaded Syrtis sandbanks off the coast of Libya, they lowered the sea anchor to act as a brake as they drifted along. Fourthly, on the following day they took such a violent battering from the storm, they jettisoned some of the cargo. Fifthly, on the third day they lightened the ship further by throwing the ship's tackle overboard. The storm raged for eleven more days, consuming them in deep darkness with neither sun nor stars to guide them. At this point the whole ship's company sank into despair as "all hope of being saved was at last abandoned" (v. 20). This is the turning point in the story.

So how did Paul respond when his wise counsel was ignored and the consequences threatened his destiny, not to mention the lives of everyone onboard? What would you do? If I'm honest, I suspect I would have been consumed with a combination of rage at those in charge (perhaps even learning a new vocabulary!), and terror and helplessness in the face of the storm.

We are not told what Paul said during these fourteen days, but I can guarantee you that he was praying. What do you think he was praying? Praying the Psalms, many of which speak about the Lord's power over the vengeful sea. Paul was keenly aware that there were bigger forces at play behind the storm. You'll remember when Jesus attempted to cross the Sea of Galilee to the Gentile side of the lake, a huge windstorm came down upon the lake, so that the boat was swamped. Jesus "rebuked the wind and the raging waves," as if they were demonic, "and they ceased, and there was a calm" (Luke 8:24). So now, when Paul is commissioned by God to announce Jesus' Lordship before Caesar, "it seems as though the cosmos itself has joined forces with the pagan world to prevent Paul getting there, to stop Caesar's world from being challenged by the message of the crucified and risen Lord."⁶ Though Paul is an apostle and performs the signs of an apostle, he has to ride out the storm like everyone else. And rather than venting his rage, he and his colleagues courageously jump in with both feet to help the crew save the ship by hauling in the lifeboat, which was no easy task. What an example Paul is to us as believers! So often when things don't go our way, it is easy to step aside and blame others for mistakes, rather than stepping in to help alleviate the consequences.

V. Paul's Three Interventions⁷ (27:21–38)

A. The call to take heart (27:21–26)

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. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, 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.’ 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.” (27:21–26)

When despair sets in and all hope of being saved is lost, Paul stands up to encourage his fellow travelers. He reminds them that they should have listened to his advice earlier, not to rub it in, but to inspire them to trust in the encouragement he is about to give. He tells them that an angel of the God he worships came to him and promised that “there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship,” and moreover, Paul will stand before Caesar as promised. To this Paul adds the surprising conclusion that God has “granted” (κεχάρισται— “to give graciously”) him all those who sail with him. Now we discover that Paul was praying, not just for himself to be delivered, but for everyone on the ship, and God has graciously answered his request. But it won't be easy, as they must run aground on some island. The creator God is going to work his deliverance within the means of creation.

I find it extremely significant that God enters the world of the raging storm and rather than eliminating the threat, he promises strength to endure it. The result elevates Paul's character and influence and demonstrates that God's love and providential care are universal for all mankind, not just the elect. As Keener notes, “Not only will God fulfill Paul's mission; his fellow voyagers' lives will be protected on his account...The irony of a prisoner aboard saving all by his divinely mandated upcoming trial is hard to miss.”⁸

I also find it instructive that when Paul speaks to non-believers, he does so in terms they can understand (“an angel,” “Caesar”) and invites a faith response that is within their contextual world. Had Paul had more time, I'm sure he would have shared the full gospel, but in this critical moment, he allows God room to show his faithfulness to his promise to deliver their lives through the storm.

B. The call to stay together (27:27–32)

When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea (lit. “Adria”), about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. 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, 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. (27:27–32)

On midnight of the fourteenth day of helpless drifting across the Adriatic Sea,⁹ the sailors, hearing the surf breaking against the rocks or upon the shore, suspected they were nearing land. Bruce explains,

Had it been daylight, they would have seen the breakers as well as heard them. For...no ship can enter St. Paul's Bay from the east without passing within a quarter of a mile of the point of Koura,

and when she comes within that distance, (and only then), the breakers cannot fail to be seen, for they are specially violent there in a north-east wind.¹⁰

To determine their depth they took soundings, finding first they were twenty fathoms (120 feet), and then fifteen (90 feet). Fearing that they might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern to hold their position and prayed for dawn.

At this point, the sailors schemed to save themselves by lowering the dinghy from the bow, under pretense of laying out more anchors. But, as Richard Longenecker explains,

Paul saw through the ruse, doubtless realizing that no sailor would drop anchors from the bow under such conditions. He knew to try to make shore in the morning without a full crew would be disastrous. So Paul warned Julius that all would be lost if the sailors deserted the ship.¹¹

(This is an example of “conditional prophecy” — “All persons will be saved, but only if all stay in the boat.”) Now that Julius and the soldiers trust Paul more than the sailors, they take his warning seriously and cut away the ropes of the dinghy and let it go. By cutting the ropes in obedience to Paul's warning, the soldiers are demonstrating their trust in Paul's God.

C. The call to take food (27:33–38)

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.” 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. Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea. (27:33–38)

Paul is portrayed as a class act citizen and caring human being. He has worn several hats during their journey: first, he was a watchful seaman, taking note of the weather, currents and contrary winds; then a courageous servant, throwing himself into the fray to haul up the dinghy in the midst of a raging storm; then a coach to strengthen the people's courage to trust in a God who makes promises and keeps them; then like a father, encouraging them they must stay together as a family to survive; and now, like a priest, giving God honor in the breaking of the bread. Preparing the people for a life of faith, Paul models pre-Christian ritual to thank God for all good gifts. And as the people are following Paul's example, we discover that this is an extensive community of 276 individuals, each one counted as priceless to God.

The last image evokes our spiritual formation — “traveling light” by throwing off all that is valuable to the world, much as Jesus admonished his disciples to give up their worldly possessions and careers and follow him. This valuable, cherished wheat, which drove the pilot to risk their lives for a prompt delivery, is now thrown overboard in order to save lives. It is the ultimate act of faith.

VI. Shipwrecked on Malta (27:39–44)

A. A miraculous landing (27:39–41)

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. 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. 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. (27:39-41)

Paul is absent from the final scene, signifying that his reputation and leadership have set everything in motion for their survival. To me this is the sign of true success, when life goes on through the people you've influenced. Indeed, the only mention of Paul in this scene refers to his influence. The captain's final maneuvers show considerable foresight.

He wanted to drop anchors and wait for dawn to break. With sunlight, he could then decide which course to take — head for some beach, to port or starboard or straight ahead. Whichever course he took meant he would cut loose the anchors in a different way...His last command was to untie the ropes that held the steering rudders and to hoist the foresail to the wind, heading to port, with the waves hitting the ship from the stern. The ship stuck fast on a sandbar inside Salina Bay.¹²

B. The centurion saves the prisoners (27:42-44)

The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. 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, and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land. (27:42-44)

The soldiers, fearing some of the prisoners may try and escape, planned to kill the prisoners on the disintegrating ship. But the centurion remembered what Paul said—they all make it to the shore, or none of them do. Not one life will be lost on this centurion's watch! Paul trusts the Lord and the centurion follows his example, and all 276 people set foot on terra firma. This last scene reminds me of the final scene in the movie "Sully," where Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger guided their disabled US Airways jet safely into the Hudson with no fatalities. As 276 people came up out of the baptismal waters they can now say, "Taste and see that the God who Paul worships is good, for his loyal-love is everlasting."

So what do we do when we are caught in circumstances outside our control? When we are at the physical or emotional breaking point due to other people's decisions that makes us prisoners of circumstance or "complex social entanglements"? Luke Timothy Johnson suggests our faith in God must not be focused so much on the elimination of these circumstances," but on God's power to endure them.¹³

I would add that the greatest demonstration of God's power to deliver is not in the instantaneous miracles we crave, but in the natural means that miraculously come together to achieve the impossible. Looking back, I find it is awe inspiring to consider the symphony of life that God orchestrated to achieve the "salvation of souls." There is Paul, who rises to the seat of influence through his wise counsel, humble submission, servant heart, fervent prayers, angelic visit and courageous interventions that, with great sensitivity, extended an invitation to know the God he served to almost 300 people. There is also Julius, the Centurion, who respects and rewards what is good in people and, most importantly, is not proud or stubborn, but is humbly able to admit wrong and change course. And don't forget the captain, whose navigational skill to land the ship aground without any loss of life was as stellar as Sully's landing his plane in the Hudson.

The exciting conclusion is that by God using "means" to deliver Paul, so much more salvation with a symphony of life took place, than if Paul was able to still the storm instantly like Jesus. It's as if the more the enemy is able to inflict his trade, the greater is the symphony of the salvation, but it takes a courageous commitment to endurance, compassion, and more than a few things we once considered vital breaking apart.

**The clouds poured down water;
the heavens resounded with thunder;
your arrows flashed back and forth.
Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind;
your lightning lit up the world;
the earth trembled and quaked.
Your path led through the sea,
your way through the mighty waters;
though your footprints were not seen.**

Psalm 77:17-19 NIV

1. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 498.
2. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 500.
3. The "fast" Luke mentions was the Day of Atonement, which falls on Tishri 10 in late September or early October.
4. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 4:3601.
5. Mark Gatt, "St. Paul's Voyage and Shipwreck: The Ship and its Wise Captain," *Times Malta*, Feb 5, 2017, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/St-Paul-s-voyage-and-shipwreck-the-ship-and-its-wise-captain.638728>
6. N. T. Wright, "Shipwreck and Kingdom: Acts and the Anglican Communion," *NTWrightPage*, <http://ntwrightpage.com/2005/06/28/shipwreck-and-kingdom-acts-and-the-anglican-communion/>
7. The titles of Paul's three interventions are taken from John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 389-92.
8. Keener, *Acts*, 4:3631-32.
9. "Adriatic Sea" (Adria) — the sea between Crete and Sicily extending further south than the "Adriatic Sea" today.
10. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 515.
11. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, EBC 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebel and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), paragraph 52450.
12. Gatt, "St. Paul's Voyage and Shipwreck."
13. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP5 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 459.