

Acts 27: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 27. 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 Adramitium, 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. 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 and 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 Nidus. 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 Fairhavens, near which was the city of Lassia. 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 harbour 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 harbour of Crete, facing both south-west and north-west, and spend the winter there. 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 north-easter, 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. Running under the lee of a small island called Corder, 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 surtiss, 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 tempests lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned. 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. When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, 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. 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 two hundred and seventy-six persons in the ship. And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea. 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. 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.

[5 : 30] The story of the journey to Rome, and the shipwreck in Acts chapter 27, is an exciting episode of the narrative, highlighting the Lord's protection of his servant Paul. However, one might wonder why this account is so lengthy, when much of it, exciting though it may be, might not seem to advance the larger narrative of the book in which it is found. The question of what it is doing here should be considered. Is it simply a result of the fact that Luke is an eyewitness to these events, and as a result is more long-winded in his description? That might well be part of it, but I think there might be something more going on. Luke wants us to pay attention to the significance of this story within the wider framework of his narrative. Both in his Gospel, and in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke frames his narrative around journeys, and there are parallels between the two accounts.

Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem, and Paul sets his face toward Rome. N.T. Wright observes a deeper parallel between this particular account and the account of the crucifixion in the Gospels. At the equivalent point where, in the Gospel, we come to the crucifixion itself, we come in Acts to the shipwreck, the moment when the forces of wind and wave do their worst, and it looks as though Paul will be drowned at sea, or smashed on the rocks, or killed by the soldiers, or finally, in an almost comic touch, poisoned by a Maltese snake. The darkness and hopelessness of the storm at sea mirror the dark hopelessness of Gethsemane and Calvary itself. And then, finally, after the sailors have used one anchor after another to slow the boat down and prevent it simply accelerating into the waiting rocks, they manage to steer close enough into land, so that when the ship finally runs aground and starts to break up, everyone on board comes safe to shore. We have already seen parallels between Paul's hearings and trials and those of Jesus. There are further details in the narratives that fill out the associations, such as the presence of a centurion who gives some sort of favourable witness in both. Sea imagery is prominent in Matthew, Mark, and John. Luke, by surprising contrast, does not employ the language of the sea in the same way or to the same degree in his gospel.

What is referred to as the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias in the other gospels, for instance, is consistently spoken of as the lake in Luke. Luke's sea imagery waits for the Book of Acts, where it is associated with the Mediterranean, and especially at this point with the journey to Rome. The sea is connected with chaos. It's a realm beyond human mastery and order, yet it's bounded by God's sovereignty. In revealing the destructive might of the sea, the event of the flood also reveals the radical dependency of creation upon a gracious providence more generally. Through the flood, we can see the whole world as a sort of arc, a realm whose hospitable elements, stable ground, gentle rains, fertile earth, light winds, meandering rivers, changing seasons, are a fragile environment that can only be enjoyed because the terrifying forces of chaos that lie just beneath the surface are held at bay by the might and the goodness of God. The sea is a realm where providence can come into a new focus, as it does in Acts chapter 27, in ways that accentuate and foreground broader narrative themes. Among other things, in the Gospels and now in the Book of Acts, the sea serves as a powerful metaphor for the new field of mission that the Church has been called out into. It's a dangerous realm, in which they must depend upon the provision and the protection of

[9 : 01] God from the immense powers that surround and will assail them. While the typical servants of God in the Old Testament are shepherds, in the New Testament we see disciples commissioned to be fishers of men.

There are also several stories in the Gospels that focus upon the threatening sea. In her treatment of the sea in the Gospel of Mark, Elizabeth Struthers Malbihn describes the boat as a mediator between the land and the sea. Peter Lighthouse develops this imagery. The fact that Jesus teaches from a boat shoved out in the sea perhaps gives us an image of the Church. The Church is a little ark, a little bit of Israel, tossed about on the sea of nations. But there's no danger, because the Lord of the Church walks on the sea is dry land. Like the ark during the flood, the Church is a microcosm, the seed of a new humanity, waiting to find its purchase in the soil of a renewed creation. Like the ark, it is exposed to all the terror of the elements, subjected to the winds and the waves, being radically dependent upon God's good care to guide it through them all. While people of the land may seek to control their environment, people of the sea must adapt themselves more to its conditions, and look to the heavens for their care. The sea is also connected with the Gentiles. It is no accident that aside from the story of the flood, the one great boat story in the Old Testament is the book of Jonah, the Israelite prophet who has sent the Assyrian city of Nineveh. One of the important features of Jonah's story is the way that the experience of the prophet symbolises the experience of the nation. The disobedience of the Israelite prophet Jonah mirrors the disobedience of Israel and is a lesson to them. His sleep is like their spiritual insensibility. The storm is the turmoil of conflict that the region is cast into. Jettisoned from the ship, Jonah is like Israel, cast into exile. The big fish is Assyria, an appointed beast, nations being represented by beasts in the prophets and elsewhere. It swallows Jonah and later vomits him out after he prays for deliverance. This is a lesson that Israel is supposed to learn from. As a symbol of international relations, Israel as the sleeping prophet, fleeing from the calling of the Lord, caught in a storm on the ship with pagan mariners, it's a powerful one. Israel can no more control the storms of regional conflict and unrest than Jonah can control the storm in the deep. However, Israel's disobedience has consequences for the surrounding nations, as the waves of Assyria may overwhelm them too. In Jonah chapter 1 and 2, God presents a different way of thinking about Assyria, as an appointed beast to protect a disobedient prophetic nation from utter destruction, as it has forsaken its calling. The Gentiles are associated with the sea in scripture, and the seething fury of the storm-tossed sea threatening to overwhelm the weak vessel symbolises the vulnerability that the land of Israel stood in relative to the surrounding nations. As we will see, there are several noteworthy similarities and contrasts between the story of Jonah and the story of Paul's shipwreck. Once again, the Jewish prophet in the boat with pagans symbolises something greater, standing for the people of God in the vessel of Christ. The chapter begins with a description of the first stages of the journey to Rome.

Paul was entrusted to Julius the centurion, and Luke here joins them. We see the narrative changing to We. The ship that they board is a ship of Adramitium in Mysia in the province of Asia. Even though there was a network of roads throughout the empire, sea travel was generally the swiftest way to move about, even though it was more hazardous. Carl Laney discusses the fact that the Mediterranean was largely, but not entirely, closed to sea travel in the winter months. Severe storms, winter fog, and cloud cover made it very difficult to move about in those times. Conditions varied considerably, however, from one part of the Mediterranean to another. Conditions were much milder in the southeastern quadrant. For much of the Mediterranean, though, travel was exceedingly dangerous between November and February, which was why Paul suggested staying in Fair Havens. Passengers lived on the deck of the ship. Beyond water, provisions usually were not offered. Ships were for cargo and for troops. They were not for passengers. There weren't schedules. You would board whatever boat you could find, and travel was extremely dangerous. 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verse 25 was written before the events of this chapter. Within it Paul says, Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I was adrift at sea.

[13 : 34] This then will be Paul's fourth shipwreck, at the very least. As these were sailing vessels, the speed of travel also depended heavily upon the direction of the wind, and how favourable it was to the direction of intended travel. Paul and his company are sailing against the winds, which is why they had such a slow going. They travel along the coast to the north of Cyprus, along the Mediterranean coast of modern-day Turkey, until they reach Myra. There they take an Alexandrian ship to Italy, presumably a much larger vessel. As a vessel bringing Egyptian grain to Rome, it would have been one of the largest vessels in the Mediterranean at the time. Laney gives their dimensions as about 180 feet, or 55 metres in length, 50 feet, or 15 metres in width, and about 44 feet, or 13.5 metres, from the deck to the bottom of the hold. He notes Lucian of Samoseta's claim that a ship of this kind could carry enough grain to feed every person in Attica for a year.

Luke records the number of persons aboard the ship as 276, which seemed surprisingly large to some commentators, but others point out that Josephus reports 600 persons on the ship that took him to Italy. The course of travel needed to be determined in no small measure by the wind. Just as they had sailed under the lee of Cyprus earlier, the side shielded from the wind to the north, now they must sail under the lee of Crete, which is this time on the south side, until with difficulty they reach Fair Havens, which would offer temporary shelter. The fast, or the Day of Atonement, in September or October had passed, but they had tarried in Fair Havens, presumably waiting for better weather conditions.

Paul strongly warned them about going on. We should bear in mind here that Paul was not just a mere landlubber. He had three shipwrecks under his belt already, and might have learnt some things from the experience. If they stayed at Fair Havens for the winter, while it would not be ideal, it would save the passengers and the cargo. However, as they determined that Fair Havens wasn't suitable to stay in for the winter, they decided to go to Phoenix, another harbour in Crete, which would provide them with better winter shelter. They travelled then west along the Cretan coast, with a gentle south wind, but suddenly an east-north-east wind hit them, and it drove them down away from the protection of the shore, preventing them from reaching Phoenix. They get some protection from the small island of Corda, and they take three actions at that point.

They haul up the ship's boat, a much lighter boat that could be towed behind the ship in good weather. They undergird the ship with cables or ropes, to prevent the spars or the hull from breaking apart.

They lower the ship's gear, sail, tackle, rigging, concerned about running aground on the Sirtis, dangerous sandbanks and shallows off North Africa. They want to be as high in the water as possible.

[16:20] On the third day, they cast the ship's tackle, all the spare gear, and perhaps even the mainsail, overboard. To make matters much, much worse, there was no sun or stars for many days, preventing navigation. In contrast to the boat stories of the Gospels, the ship of Acts chapter 27 has a mixed multitude of passengers. It's saved through the message of the Apostle. A tempest striking a pagan ship bearing a Jewish prophet towards the west is quite reminiscent of the story of Jonah. However, whereas in the book of Jonah the disobedient prophet places the lives of everyone else in danger, here the situation is reversed. God grants Paul all of those who sail with him, as we see in verse 24. This is a powerful image of salvation, and as in the literary structure of the book of Acts, it is paralleled with the story of the crucifixion in Luke, it invites our attention.

A Jew and Gentile multitude are saved by observing the Apostle's teaching, by faithfully remaining on a ship, and by being sustained through blessed and broken bread, and parallels with the church are not difficult to identify. The vision of the church that appears here is one formed of many different peoples, enduring suffering and hardship, formed together in a communion that serves to break down former oppositions, surrounded by threats and tempests, persevering and overcoming through the divine guidance and aid upon which they depend. God gives Paul assurance for himself, and also for everyone else who is with him. Until Paul has completed his mission, he cannot be harmed by all of these things that come at him, and as long as he is in the boat, the other people are safe with him. This is all in stark contrast with Jonah, who threatened other people by his presence. A ship like Paul's in such conditions would drift about 36.5 miles or 58.4 kilometers a day, bringing them near to Malta. Presumably hearing sounds of breakers. They realise that they are approaching the land, and start to take soundings. They discover that they are nearing the land, and so they let down four anchors from the stern. They then pretend to let down anchors from the bow, but the sailors are actually attempting to lower the ship's boat in order to escape the vessel. Paul tells the centurion and the soldiers, and they prevent them. Paul then, as if he were the natural leader of the company, instructs them to eat a meal. Many have seen here an allusion to the Last Supper. There's a very similar context. If the crucifixion is paralleled with the shipwreck, it comes at the right point. There's a reference to the arrival of the 14th night, and the strict instruction to the centurion and the soldiers that everyone must stay in the ship or be destroyed.

Both of these things evoke a Passover context, and by extension, the context of Christ's death. The 14th of Nisan was the day of the Passover. We read that Paul took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and began to eat. And the echoes should not be that hard to hear. In Luke chapter 22 verse 19, And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. From the

plague of darkness, they're going to be delivered through this evening meal. They're going to pass through the waters. They're going to be delivered from the hands of soldiers that want to kill them, and they're going to come out safely on the other side. The specificity of the number of the company, 276, is also interesting. Like 153, 120, and 666, it is a triangular number which fascinated many ancient thinkers. St. Augustine and others refer to such numbers in their works. What symbolic meaning it might have, if any, is quite unclear to me. Perhaps something related to 24 minus 1. F. H. Coulson argues for some significance, and several early church writers speculated about some spiritual meaning. However, while the number is tantalisingly specific, no clear symbolic import suggests itself. They cast out the remainder of the food. This might again remind us of the Passover meal, of which nothing was to be left until the morning. This also serves the practical purpose of lightening the ship even further. When the day comes, they have some visibility at last, and they see a bay and a beach, although it is land that they do not recognise. [20 : 35] This part of Malta was not a normal part of the sea route. They are making for the land to run aground, so they cast off the anchors. They loosen the rudders so that they will be able to steer towards the beach, and they hoist the foresail. However, before they reach the beach, they strike a sandbank, and the vessel stuck. As the soldiers would be liable for the escapees, they plan to kill the prisoners, but the centurion prevents it from being carried out, as he desires to protect Paul. Those who could swim were ordered to swim, and the rest were given planks from the ship. According to the word that the Lord had given to Paul, all were brought safely to land. A question to consider. Where can we see themes of providence in this story that connect with broader themes of providence in the larger story of Acts?