

# Study 39: Acts 27

## ***Introduction***

Paul was finally able to go to Rome, but the journey was not without drama. Luke travelled with him, and gave us a first hand account of the journey. The description of such an accurate and detailed account of a troublesome sea voyage, is unique not only in the bible, but also in contemporary literature.

- Timing:***            *When did these events occur?*  
***Content:***           *What are the major events?*  
***Cast:***              *Who are the major players?*

## ***Body of the Study***

- How does the journey begin?***
- How did the guards regard Paul?***
- The first part of the journey***
- The second part of the journey***
- How does Paul address the party?***
- The third part of the journey***
- Paul's address to the people on the ship***
- The shipwreck***

## **Homework:**

*Read the notes as a review of the study.*

- *How do you think that the Roman soldiers, the sailors, and the other passengers on the ship might have reacted to Paul when he spoke about being “a servant of God”?*
- *How does the Centurion Julius “connect” with Paul? What was it that made him have such a connection? Is it likely that Julius might have become a christian?*

*Read chapter 28 in preparation for next week*

## Notes for study 39: Acts chapter 27

### *Introduction*

Paul was finally able to go to Rome, but the journey was not without drama. Luke travelled with him, and gave us a first hand account of the journey. The description of such an accurate and detailed account of a troublesome sea voyage is unique not only in the bible, but also in contemporary literature.

**Timing:** *When did these events occur?*

We don't know how long it took Festus to arrange Paul's transport to Rome, but it probably wasn't very long after the hearing with Agrippa. Festus had not long arrived in the area, and was trying to "clean-up" the legacies left behind by Felix. If he acted judiciously and quickly then Nero would see him in a favourable light. To leave Paul bound in prison for a further period would not help calm things down with the Jews, nor would it demonstrate Festus' ability to clean up and put right the things left behind.

Consequently, the timing is probably around mid to late AD 60. The record of the travels would suggest that it was coming up to winter – probably late AD 60.

**Content:** *What are the major events?*

Journey to Rome begins. Went to Sidon, sailed under Cyprus, came to Myra. Sailed under Crete to Fair Havens. Paul's prediction and the fruition of the shipwreck.

**Cast:** *Who are the major players?*

Paul, Luke, Julius the Centurion.

### *Body of the Study*

#### ***How does the journey begin?***

Moving Paul as a prisoner would not have been such a difficult task of itself. He was put in the custody of a soldier with some degree of authority and responsibility, a Centurion who had authority over 100 men. Certainly Julius had the control of soldiers under him on the journey, but probably not the whole 100. There were other prisoners who were also going with them on the journey "...they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to one named Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment..." (27:1 NKJV). Allowing for four watches per day (see notes at 12:4) it would seem that between 16 and 30 soldiers would have been more than sufficient. With perhaps 10 prisoners, then it was necessary to find a ship that was travelling in the required direction (probably not too hard) that was able to accommodate 40 or so people. The journey must have taken some little time to arrange. It is possible that Julius had accompanied Festus from Rome, and having completed his mission it was an appropriate time to return home.

Luke and Aristarchus accompanied Paul. Did they pay their own passage, or were they included as Paul's servants or slaves? As a physician, Luke would be a most welcome companion (from both the soldiers and from the ship's crew), and as a servant of Paul it is quite likely that he would have received free passage. Aristarchus had come from Thessalonica to Jerusalem with Paul with the gift for the poor in Jerusalem (20:4). Paul wrote the letter to the church in Colosse from his (first) imprisonment in Rome (about 2 years after the timing of the present chapter), and described Aristarchus as his "*fellow-prisoner*" (Col 4:10). It could be possible then, that Aristarchus was arrested in Jerusalem along with Paul, - or it could be that he was mentioned as such by Paul in a figurative sense, and was travelling

back home to Thessalonica. He would have then left Thessalonica some time later and joined Paul in Rome towards the end of his imprisonment.

The ship was from Adramyttium (now called Edremit) a harbour on the coast of Mysia near Troas. It was a coastal trading ship which was “...*about to sail for ports along the coast of Asia...*” (27:2 NIV), and would have stopped at many ports along the way. Julius would have been planning to find another vessel at one of the ports along the way that was going to Rome, and if that event did not come about, then an overland trip from Adramyttium to Rome could be made along the great Roman road the Egnatian way.

### ***How did the guards regard Paul?***

Paul was given considerably greater respect than would be expected for a poor penniless prisoner. If Aristarchus and Luke were travelling as his servants, then this would far exceed a *normal prisoner*.

Initially, the ship sailed northwards from Caesarea to Sidon. Julius obviously had a great deal of respect and trust for Paul, and he granted him *shore leave*. “...*The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs...*” (27:3 NIV). It may be that Paul was chained to a soldier during this time who would have accompanied Paul on his visit.

It is interesting to note the purpose of Paul’s shore visit was to *his friends*. The Romans could certainly regard the brethren as such, but *Luke* is writing the account, and if brethren were the people that Paul visited (as we could most probably conclude from a straight reading), then why doesn’t Luke say the *he visited the brethren*?

Later in the journey, Paul’s plea to not travel in the stormy conditions was heard but ignored. But when the consequences were fully realised by the time of the shipwreck, then Paul was held in the highest esteem.

### ***The first part of the journey***

They sailed West and then North of Cyprus (as a coastal trader would do), but they were also seeking shelter because of the winds which were disturbing their travel “...*we sailed under the shelter of Cyprus, because the winds were contrary...*” (27:4 NKJV). The winds were coming from the North and the NorthWest and were hindering their travels. Note the detail that Luke provides – there are secular writers who write about the prevailing winds at that time of the year in that part of the Mediterranean, and Luke is exactly right in his detail of the circumstances of the journey. This is the accurate and first hand description of an historian of the first-order.

Reese writes:

Altogether Luke has given a description of first century ships and seamanship surpassing anything else in extant Greek and Roman literature. A fascinating story of adventure, it stands as a descriptive masterpiece. Its nautical descriptions are authentic to the last detail.<sup>1</sup>

The ship landed at Myra in Lycia (on the edge of Pamphylia). Some texts say that the time of the trip across the open sea from Cyprus took 15 days, which is quite possible in the contrary sailing conditions being experienced.

### ***The second part of the journey***

At Myra “...*the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing to Italy...*” (27:6 NKJV). Egypt had been a major food supplier to Rome for hundreds of years, and fleets of ships would carry the grain to Italy. This ship was certainly carrying some wheat grain (27:38 NKJV), and given that it was the last thing cast overboard, was probably the most important cargo that the vessel was carrying.

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<sup>1</sup> Reese, p. 890

The trip from Myra was also slow, “...when we had sailed slowly many days, and arrived with difficulty of Cnidus, the wind not permitting us to proceed...” (27:7 NKJV), and it probably took another 2 or 3 weeks to arrive at Cnidus (which was South of Ephesus and near the island of Rhodes). The journey was made *with difficulty*. The length of the journey was about 200 km, and with favourable conditions could have been made in around 24 hours. Because of the difficult conditions “...we sailed under the shelter of Crete off Salomone...” (27:7 NKJV). After Cnidus the ship would no longer have the shelter of the land, and would face the full force of the contrary winds. The alternatives were to sail North of Crete and across to Greece, or to sail South of Crete. The latter route was chosen as it offered some shelter from the island of Crete.

They found difficulty in passing the island of Crete, and came to the small bay at Fair Havens on the South side of the island “...Passing it (Crete) with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea...” (27:8 NKJV). There was no town there, and the nearest habitation was the town of Lasea, two hours walk away. This was hardly a suitable place to stay for several months of winter, but they were unable to go on as the winds were against them, and the sailing by this time was dangerous. Sailors in the Mediterranean called the period between September 14<sup>th</sup> and November 11<sup>th</sup> as the “danger season”, and from November 11<sup>th</sup> until March 10<sup>th</sup> all sailing ceased.<sup>2</sup>

They waited in Fair Havens, but were becoming frustrated “...Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over...” (27:9 NKJV). Luke says that “the fast” was over. At that time of the year, the fast was the Day of Atonement, and in the year AD 59 it fell on October 5<sup>th</sup>, and in the year AD 60 fell on September 23<sup>rd</sup>. This places the time of waiting in Fair Havens as being October, and right in the middle of the *danger season* for sailing.

### **How does Paul address the party?**

Paul spoke to the sailors and the Centurion “...Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also...” (27:10 NIV). He was not speaking by revelation, but by observation *he perceived* that the journey would end in disaster. He did have the assurance of his going to Rome, but he did not have the same assurance for those who were with him.

His advice was to remain at Fair Havens. However, the advice of the crew of the ship was that they should press on. The journey from Myra would have taken several weeks – and they had spent several more coming from Caesarea.

A ship’s council was held, with the Centurion certainly an influential part of it, and also Paul. It is interesting to note that Paul – a prisoner – had some degree of influence in these things. The Centurion had respect for Paul, and considered what he said, but also took note of what the ship’s crew had to say. The Centurion appears to have had some sway on the outcome. But at the end of the day, this was really not a suitable place to sit out the winter. There were probably several reasons for this:

- The bay offered protection from the northerly winds, but offered no protection at all from the south,
- The nearest town facilities were two hours walk away,
- Supporting an additional 276 people throughout the winter would put a strain on the town under any circumstances.

The ship’s council made a majority decision to continue to Phoenix further up the coast of Crete. The language of “...somehow we might be able to reach Phoenix...” (27:12) shows a lot of desperation. However a moderate and favourable wind led them to think that they had been successful, but on passing the nearby cape (Cape Matala) a typhoon wind rushed on them from Mt Ida in the northeast.

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<sup>2</sup> Reese, p 897

### ***The third part of the journey***

At that stage, there was no way of going back to Fair Havens due to the wind direction, and no way of continuing to Phoenix because of the violence of the storm. The word Euroclydon (Euraquilo NASB) means an “east-north-east” wind, and it must have been a common occurrence for it to have such a name.

The winds were so strong that there was no way to control the ship, and they were forced to let it run with the wind “...so when the ship was caught, and could not head into the wind, we let her drive...” (27:15 NKJV). The small tender boat would normally be towed behind the ship, but needed to be dragged in (and placed on deck). The storms were so bad that even this task was almost impossible “...And running under the shelter of an island called Claudia, we secured the skiff with difficulty. When they had taken it on board...” (27:16-17 NKJV).

The ship was then strengthened by undergirding cables “...they used cables to undergird the ship...” (27:17 NKJV). The loads applied to the hull from the mast in such strong winds could have caused the timbers in the hull to weaken and leak, or even break up. Archaeological evidence from a marble tablet found in 1837 has shown a ship's inventory of tackle and rigging, and such cables were included in the rigging inventory. The cables would have been tightened by the capstan.

Luke mentions that they were “...fearing lest they should run aground on the Syrtis Sands...” (27:17 NKJV). This was one of two major sandbars in the Mediterranean, and was near the North coast of Africa (and Southwest of Crete) – the very direction that they were heading. The shifting location of the sandbars made navigation in the area difficult. Josephus describes these constantly changing sands as “a place terrible to such as barely hear it described”<sup>3</sup>

To slow down the drift, they cast out the sea anchors, and then the next day lightened the ship by jettisoning some of the cargo. They would have done this because the ship was leaking despite their efforts of undergirding it. After three days from leaving Fair Havens they further lighten the ship by jettisoning some of the tackle – and quite likely other items of a dispensable nature such as furniture, baggage etc.

The storm was so bad, and the clouds so thick that they could not sight the stars by night, nor the sun by day. “...Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we should be saved was finally given up...” (27:20 NKJV). This was very significant in the days where the navigation was done by observing the sun and stars. The sailors had no idea where they were.

At that stage, all hope of being saved was abandoned, and the ship must have been leaking badly.

### ***Paul's address to the people on the ship***

The people were feeling forsaken, and under such circumstances we realise that we are totally reliant on God. Everyone was seasick, and had not eaten for some time “...after a long abstinence from food, then Paul stood in the midst of them and said...” (27:21 NKJV). He addressed the people, and recalled his former warning. He brought a message from God, “...I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship...” (27:22 NKJV). He re-assured them all of their safety, and gave the credit to God, and again asked for His mercy upon them all.

### ***The shipwreck***

It had been two weeks since they had left Fair Havens and they were able to eat anything. The soldiers perceived that they were approaching some land (they still had no idea where they were). They would have heard the sounds of the breaking waves near the shore. Testing the water depth, they found that it was getting shallower “...They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep...” (27:28 NIV). Depth soundings were usually made by

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<sup>3</sup> Josephus, Wars, 2:16:4

dropping a weighted knotted rope overboard, and counting the knots, which were six feet (one fathom – or 1.8m) apart. This provided confirmation that they were approaching the shore.

However, it was still dark, and they had no idea where they were. They did not want to be shipwrecked in the dark, and their best hope was to approach the land in daylight. “...*Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight...*” (27:29 NIV). Some of “...*the sailors were seeking to escape...(by) let(ting) down the skiff into the sea...*” (27:30 NKJV). Paul called them back, as they would be absolutely necessary to drive the ship onto the beach “...*Unless these men remain in the ship, you cannot be saved...*” (27:31 NKJV). The soldiers made sure that the sailors would be available by cutting the ropes to the skiff (the ship’s tender boat).

This is a very forceful statement for the belief and trust that the soldiers had in Paul. Earlier in the journey they believed the sailors more than Paul. Now there was no question.

Paul appealed to the men to take some food for their sustenance (they hadn’t eaten anything for 2 weeks), and he led a prayer “...*and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all...*” (27:35 NKJV). He then led by eating some food himself “...*Then he broke it and began to eat.*”<sup>36</sup> *They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves...*” (27:35-36 NIV).

They prepared to make a run for the beach, and jettisoned what must have been the main (and most important) cargo on the ship. This would allow the ship to sit higher in the water and get much closer to the land before it ran aground “...*they lightened the ship and threw the wheat into the sea...*” (27:38 NKJV).

They did not know where they were, and “...*when it was day, they did not recognise the land; but they observed a bay with a beach, onto which they planned to run the ship if possible...*” (27:39 NKJV). There is a place on the island of Malta that is still known as St Paul’s bay, and is the traditional site of the shipwreck (although this site is somewhat disputed, as it is not now a sandy beach).

The foresail was raised, the anchor cables were cut and the ship was run into the beach as fast as possible. As they progressed, they ran into a sandbar and the front of the ship dug in. The weakened ship broke in half and it was then every man for themselves.

At that point, the soldiers were about to kill the prisoners, so that they would not escape. If they had escaped, then the soldiers would be liable for whatever punishment that the prisoners would have received. However, the Centurion had great respect for Paul and “...*kept them from their purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land...*” (27:43 NKJV). Paul, might have been one of the ones who would have been killed. The soldiers swam to land and were ready to round up any of the prisoners who might try to escape once they had reached the shore.

Some of them swam the 0.5 to 1 km to shore, and “...*some on boards and some on broken pieces of the ship...*” (27:44 NKJV) were able to float in to the beach. All 276 of them made it to shore, and just as Paul had said – none of them perished but the ship was lost.

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