

Shipwrecked

Acts 27:1–28:6

Paul had finished giving his defense and his testimony in front of Governor Felix, then he did the same in front of governor Festus. Finally, he had the opportunity to defend himself to King Agrippa. All of this took place during the two years that he was being held prisoner in Caesarea having been accused by unbelieving Jews of desecrating the temple. They desired for him to be put to death, but in spite of all the inquisitions the Roman officials were unable to substantiate any crime worthy of death. In order to prevent the Roman officials from putting him in the hands of the Jews, Paul had appealed his case to Caesar. Much of what the Roman officials did was done to appease the Jews in order to keep the peace (Acts 24:27; 25:3). With this understanding, it helps to explain why Festus would bellow that Paul looked like a crazy man, and why King Agrippa would state that in such a short time you think you can get me to be a Christian. Following this last hearing with King Agrippa, Paul is finally sent off to Rome.

Paul is loaded on a ship that is headed toward Rome along with a number of other prisoners. Since they are traveling later in the season, it is not unusual for the Mediterranean Sea to have some very unpredictable and violent weather. They were able to sail along the southern coast of modern-day Turkey and change ships in Myra. They were able to sail west along the coast until they got to Cnidus (now Knidos) and then sailed southwest to Salmone on the island of Crete. Because of the storm, they sailed with great difficulty to the south side of Crete and stopped in Fair Havens (Kalo Limenes). Since Fair Havens was not a good port to overwinter, once the weather improved they sailed westward along the southern coast of Crete toward the city of Phoenix (located west of modern-day Loutro). Unfortunately, a fierce wind picked up and they were blown far from their hopeful destination.

Paul takes charge

Before they left the city of Fair Havens, Paul had warned them to stay put. Obviously, Paul had received this information from God. From a human standpoint, it made sense for them to press on to Phoenix where an adequate harbor could be found. However, God, through Paul, promised them safety if they stayed in Fair Havens.

Trusting human judgment, they embarked toward Phoenix when the wind shifted and the weather appeared perfect for sailing. Before they were able to sail the 60 or so miles to Phoenix, a fierce wind called the Euroclydon began to blow. The Euroclydon is a cyclonic tempestuous northeast wind which develops mostly in the fall and winter. Today, the Gregale wind is most likely what the Euroclydon wind was back then. The cyclonic winds blew them away from the island of Crete and forced them to sail at the whim of the wind. They passed the island of Claudia (Gavdos), just south of Crete, and as they were being blown farther south they feared that they would run into “the quicksands,” they took evasive action by “straking the sails.” The quicksands were most likely shifting sands off the coast of Africa. It appears that they were not sure exactly where they were because the cloudy sky gave them no reference point. Straking the sails is perhaps dropping the sails so that the wind would not blow them around as greatly. The following day they were still being exceedingly tossed by the storm. They continued to take drastic action to save the boat and their lives by throwing things over the side to lighten the load and lessen the chance of running aground. By the third day, they began dismantling the ship, tossing the tackle overboard. They continued to be tossed by the violent storm for two weeks to the point that they were giving up any hope of surviving.

After being tossed around for two weeks, Paul stood up and told them that they should have listened to him when he told them to stay in Fair Havens (Acts 27:10). He continued with the good news that the ship will be lost, but there will be no loss of life. He said that this was revealed to him by an angel of God who came to him that night. Angel means messenger and it is very likely that this messenger was Jesus Christ. God promised that he would protect him so that he will be able to stand before Caesar, just as He promised Paul while in prison in Caesarea (Acts 23:11).

Finally, after being blown about for 14 days, at midnight the sailors could sense that they were drawing near to land. Taking soundings revealed that they were indeed quickly coming to shallow ground. Fearing that they would run into rocks, they cast out four anchors to slow the ship down and buy them some time until daybreak. The sailors attempted to flee the ship by lowering boats, but Paul told the soldiers that they needed to remain on the ship in order for everyone to be saved. With that, the soldiers cut away the boats that they intended to escape in.

Before dawn, Paul encouraged them to eat and gain their strength since they had not eaten for many days. Paul publicly thanks God for the food, and once again tells them that God will keep all 276 people safe. Once they were filled, they threw the remaining wheat overboard to lighten the ship.

When it became light they could see the land, but it was completely unfamiliar to them. They found a river with a shore that looked like a good place to beach the ship. They raised the anchors and hoisted the sails so that the wind would drive them into the coastline. They ran aground and the waves pounded the ship until it began to break into pieces. As this was happening, the soldiers were planning to kill all the prisoners because if they allowed any prisoners to escape, they would pay with their lives. The centurion stopped them because he wanted to save Paul. With the ship breaking up, those who could swim were told to jump off and swim to shore, the rest were to hang on to the floating debris. Just as Paul said, all made it safely to land.

It turned out that they landed on the island of Malta, a small island about 60 miles south of Sicily and about 500 miles west northwest of Crete. It is unknown where they actually landed, although there is a place today known as St. Paul's Bay on the northern side of Malta, but there is very little evidence that Paul was shipwrecked there. They met up with the barbarians who were living on the island.

Barbarians are not wild, savages, but referred to non-Greek speaking people. When Romans 1:14 speaks of the Greeks and barbarians, it is referring to the whole world, excluding the Jews. The natives on the island showed their kindness toward the castaways by welcoming them and building them a fire against the cold and rain.

Paul was also helping by bringing wood for the fire. When he went to lay the wood on the fire, a poisonous snake came out and bit him on the hand. Paul shook off the snake, but the natives who saw this thought it to be the fate of a murderer. But Paul did not die, nor did his hand even puff up from the bite. When nothing happened to him, the natives began to think that he was a god. Notice how fickle people are and how incapable they are of reading the signs. Believers today are always trying to read signs to determine what God is telling them. This is a fruitless exercise because God has not given us any signs to read in this Dispensation of Grace. Trying to read signs today to determine what God is saying only drives people away from Scripture. People want God to tell them supernaturally what to do when He has already told us through His word. There is no need for miraculous demonstrations because of the completed word of God. Before Scripture was completely written, God spoke through the prophets and apostles. God proved that he was working through them by giving them abilities that could only come from God. Once Scripture was completed, God was done supernaturally speaking to mankind. He now used Scripture and the indwelling Holy Spirit to speak to us.

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