

CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
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DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 27

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

CHAPTER 27 - 28

INTRODUCTION

This lesson concludes our study on the Acts of the Apostles. In the first section of the book, Luke recorded the Apostles' witness of Christ in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7). From there, the gospel spread to the neighbouring regions of Judaea and Samaria (Acts 8-12). With the conversion of Paul, God's chosen Apostle to the Gentiles, the gospel spread to regions beyond the borders of Palestine "unto the uttermost part of the earth."

The apostle Paul, who longed to visit Rome (19:21), finally had his wish. Luke went with him from Jerusalem to Rome as indicated by the "we-section" (27:1- 28:16). This lesson is occupied with the long, detailed and vivid account of the sea journey to Rome. The ship which transported Paul, his companions and the other prisoners nearly sank in a big storm. The divinely inspired writer, Luke, recorded this episode not merely for the historian but also for the Christian who will find the account both instructive and edifying. Paul set the example of how we should rise above times of tribulations and how we should react to dangerous and life-threatening circumstances. He showed total trust

and dependence on God where others would have given up hope.

Chapters 27 and 28 can be divided into the following sections:

(1). The storm at sea threatened the lives of the seafarers (27:1-20), (2). The action of Paul saved the lives of the seafarers (27:21-44), (3) .The reception and recuperation in Malta (28:1-10), (4) The final stretch and arrival in Rome (28:11-16), (5). The ministry of Paul in Rome (28:17-31).

COMMENTARY

The Storm at Sea Threatened the Lives of the Seafarers

The Roman authorities transferred the custody of Paul to Julius, a centurion of Augustus Caesar's guards. Luke specially honoured the centurion by recording his name. As we shall see, Julius distinguished himself by his respect for and favour towards Paul, and his decisive action during the storm. Apart from Luke and Aristarchus, a Thessalonian Christian, there were other prisoners on board the ship. These prisoners (as one historian suggested) were already condemned to death and were being sent to Rome to satisfy the crazy craving of the Roman populace through their deaths in the arena.

They boarded a ship of Adramyttium origin and set sail from Caesarea. The intention was to sail along the coasts of Asia Minor. They went north for about seventy miles (112 kilometres) and stopped over at Sidon, a sea-port town of Phoenicia. Paul had friends in Sidon, and Julius, the centurion gave him the freedom to visit them and to refresh himself. Soon they

left Sidon and sailed along the northern coastal sea of Cyprus where the island shielded them from the strong winds. From there, they sailed across the sea off the coasts of Cilicia and Pamphylia, and docked at Myra, the sea-port town of Lycia. There Julius transferred Paul, his travelling companions and the other prisoners to an Alexandrian ship which was bound for Italy (27:6). Leaving Myra, the winds were not as favourable. However, they made their journey slowly but surely. After many days, they arrived at Cnidus and from there, they sailed south towards Crete. They passed Salmone and arrived at the sea-port called "The Fair Havens" (in Crete near a town called Lasea). They docked the ship for a number of days and replenished their supply of water and provisions.

Paul Warned the People

Before they set off from The Fair Havens, Paul warned that it would be dangerous to sail at that time of the year as the "fast" (the Day of Atonement in October of each year) was already past. They would run the risk of shipwreck and possible loss of lives (27:10). But as Paul was not an expert sailor, his advice was superseded by those of the master and the owner of the ship. In addition, the bay at The Fair Havens was not good enough for the ship to dock in winter. A better bay in Crete would be the one at Phoenix, which was farther west of where they were.

Julius gave the go ahead to sail. They kept close to the coasts of the island and head westward towards Phoenix. But before long, a strong raging wind "Euroclydon" arose. The sailors could not control the ship, which was driven into the open sea. When they came near Claudia, an island off

Crete, which temporarily provided some shelter, they quickly took steps to rig the ship so that it could withstand the storm. The first thing they did was to bring the lifeboat, which was usually towed behind the ship, on board. Then, they lightened the ship, which was violently tossed about. Luke used "we" implying that the passengers helped the sailors – all hands were on deck! On the third day, they let down the "tackling" in the hope of steadying the ship (27:19). However, the storm did not abate. Unable to take their bearing by day or by night because they could not see the sun or the stars, the men lost "all hope" of being saved (27:20).

The Action of Paul Saved the Lives of the Seafarers

At that juncture, Paul stepped forward and reminded them that they should have listened to his advice not to leave Crete. But he had some words of encouragement for them. He told them that none of them would lose their lives although the ship could not be saved (27:21). He shared with them that an angel of God – the God to whom he belonged and whom he served – had told him the night before: "Fear not, Paul, thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee" (27:24). Two divine promises. When they had given up all hope, Paul cheered them up. Paul's confidence rested completely in God. He was convinced without a shadow of doubt that God would keep His promises. All their lives would be saved. What an interesting contrast – the experienced sailors were frightened and in despair, but Paul, a Jewish preacher, who knew little about the art of sailing, had words of encouragement for them!

Paul told them that they would be “cast” (stranded, deserted) on a certain island. They drifted for fourteen days. Their faith in Paul’s words must have been tested. Then around midnight, the sailors sensed that they were near land. They took soundings and found that they were approaching land. Fearing that the ship might hit against rocks or reef, they dropped four anchors from the stern (rear) of the ship. The idea was that the anchors would hold the ship, and prayerfully they waited for daylight.

But the sailors panicked and let down the lifeboat (dinghy) into the sea intending to escape. Paul saw what they were up to and told Julius and his soldiers that unless the sailors remained on board, they would not be saved (27:32). Without any question, the soldiers under the orders of the centurion, cut off the ropes of the dinghy and let it go. Although Paul knew that God had promised that the people would be saved, he expected the sailors’ expertise and experience to get the ship to land.

Just before dawn, Paul urged them to take some food. They had not eaten for fourteen days. He reiterated that not one of them would perish. After he had spoken, Paul took the bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all the people. Then the people, including Paul, ate. As a result, they were refreshed and strengthened. There were altogether 276 people on board. When everyone had eaten, they lightened the ship by throwing off the sacks of wheat into the sea.

When it was day, they could see land but they did not know where they were. They saw a creek with a beach and thought they could steer the ship into it. So they raised the anchors,

hoisted the sails, loosened the rudder and left the ship to the mercy of the sea to drift it to shore. The ship drifted and ran aground with the bow stuck fast and immovable, and the stern smashed by the pounding waves.

Under the Roman law, if the prisoners under their charge escape, the soldiers would have to bear the punishment themselves. Thus the soldier wanted to kill the prisoners but they were stopped by Julius who commanded those who could swim to jump off the ship and head for shore. The rest who could not swim held on to pieces of boards or broken pieces of the ship and paddled ashore. When they took a headcount of the people who were saved, there were 276 of them – all were accounted for. God had kept His promise!

The Reception and Recuperation in Malta

They found themselves on the small island of Malta. It was situated between Sicily and Africa and was about 145 kilometres southwest of Syracuse, a town situated on the south-eastern tip of Sicily.

The “barbarous people” were very kind and generous to the victims of the shipwreck. They were not “barbarous” in the derogatory sense of being barbarians. The word “barbarous” was literally translated in the King James Authorised Version from the Greek text “barbaroi”. In those days, the Greeks used the word to refer to all foreigners who could only speak their own native tongue. The inhabitants of Malta (Maltese) who showed unusual kindness to the stranded visitors were not uncouth barbarians. In fact, they were very hospitable and kind. The Maltese seeing that the victims of the

shipwreck were wet and cold from the rain built a fire for them.

Paul helped them to gather sticks for the fire but in the process, he was bitten by a viper which fastened its fangs onto his hand. Immediately, the Maltese jumped to the conclusion that Paul was a murderer. They perceived that although he had escaped the sea, justice would not allow him to live (28:4). They fixed their eyes on him expecting him to drop dead but when no harm came to him, they changed their minds and concluded that Paul was a god. These Maltese were ruled by superstition. They believed that natural mishaps and misfortunes were the direct result of sins. The Lord Jesus Christ taught His disciples against thinking of victims of misfortune as greater sinners than themselves. They need to repent or they would perish (Luke 13:1-5).

On the island, the “chief man” was Publius. He could be regarded as the chief official, the chief magistrate or the governor. He opened his house to the victims of the shipwreck including Paul and Luke. They stayed with him for three days. While there, Paul learned that Publius’ father was ill. So he entered the room, prayed for him, laid hands on him, and healed him (28:8). News of this healing spread to others on the island. Many came with their sick to seek healing. When it was time for Paul and his companions to depart, they were honoured with many gifts of provisions for their voyage.

The men spent three months on the island. In fact, they spent the winter there. When it was time to depart, the centurion found an Alexandrian ship that was heading for Italy. It had docked in the harbour there during the winter period. On the bow of the ship were the

carvings of Castor and Pollux; in Greek-Roman mythology, they were the “heavenly twins”, the sons of Jupiter (Zeus), the gods of the navigation and patrons of seafarers.

Not long after leaving Malta, the ship arrived at Syracuse, Sicily where they stayed for three days. After that, they “fetched a compass” which implied that they might have sailed off course. Next, they came to Rhegium, and after a day of sailing with the help of the south wind, they reached Puteoli, which was in the Gulf of Naples. That was very good progress since the distance between Rhegium and Puteoli was about 200 miles. In Puteoli, Paul and his team met some Christians and stayed with them for a week. Paul was still under the custody of Julius, who was probably awaiting instructions and preparing his soldiers and the prisoners for their final stretch to Rome. When the week was over, they travelled by land. After a few miles, they joined the famous Appian Way, which led directly to Rome.

The Christians in Rome had heard of Paul’s coming. A delegation went to meet him. After travelling for some thirty miles, some chose to stay at The Three Taverns while others persevered for another ten miles and met Paul at Appi Forum (Forum of Appius), which was a market town. One can imagine how happy Paul and his party were to see these fellow Christians from Rome. Indeed, Paul immediately thanked God and was greatly encouraged (28:15). The when and how of the planting of the Roman church was not recorded in the Scriptures. In all probability, some of the converts on the Day of Pentecost had started the church. What was most important, however, was the presence of a thriving Christian community when Paul and his party arrived.

The Final Stretch and Arrival in Rome

At last, they were in Rome, which was the capital and symbol of the Roman Empire! It was the largest and most splendid of ancient cities, and was thronged with people. The Roman Empire treated its conquered subjects charitably. For example, they allowed the Jews to practise their religious beliefs, culture and customs. They protected the Greek culture and language. While Latin was the language of the Roman courts, Greek was the lingua franca of the empire. The Romans inculcated the rule of law and respect for the law. The Roman Empire had a reputation for efficient administration, postal communication, and infrastructure (roads and ports to facilitate travel). The Roman masters made sure that the benefits of their long-standing pax romana were preserved.

The Ministry of Paul in Rome

Julius handed Paul to the commander of the Praetorial Guard, who was in control of the prisoners awaiting trial in Rome. Paul was given special benefits. He was allowed to live in his own lodgings with a soldier on guard – under house arrest.

After three days, he was settled in. He called the Jewish leaders in the city to gather at his place. When they came, Paul spoke to them. Once again, Paul practised his principle of speaking to the Jews first. In his speech, he emphasised three points. Firstly, he stated that he had done nothing wrong against the Jewish people (of whom he was one), their customs, and their fathers. Yet he was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. Secondly, Paul stressed that after the Romans had examined him,

they should have freed him because he had done nothing deserving of the death penalty. Thirdly, Paul explained that when the Jews continued to speak against him, he had no choice but to appeal to Caesar, although he had nothing against his own people (28:17-19). The Jewish leaders replied that they did not know anything about the things that he had told them. They had not received any letters from their counterparts in Judaea about Paul, or heard anything about Paul from any of the Jews who had visited them, or said anything about Paul to their counterparts (28:21). They expressed their desire to hear his views on “this sect” (the sect of the Nazarene), which was spoken with contempt everywhere. A meeting was set up.

On the appointed day, many Jews came to his house. In his exposition, Paul concentrated on two things. Firstly, he expounded and testified concerning the kingdom of God – the character and coming of the kingdom. Secondly, he showed from Scriptures that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He came, died on the cross, and rose from the dead. Paul spoke to them from morning to evening. His Jewish audience was split into two camps. Some believed the message but others do not (28:24). They consulted with one another and decided to leave. But Paul had some solemn words for them which he quoted from Isaiah: *“Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should*

heal them. Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it."

The passage of Scriptures draws a distinction between hearing and understanding, and between seeing and perceiving. He charged that the people's inability to understand was because of the hardness of their heart. They refused to hear and see lest they would see, hear, understand and be converted. In other words, these people did not want to repent, to turn to God, and be healed of their sins. After Paul had said these words, the Jewish leaders left and reasoned among themselves.

Paul stayed two whole years in his rented lodgings. He received all who came to him. He preached and taught them about the Lord Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. He did so boldly with "no man forbidding him" - although he was a prisoner, the Roman authorities did not ban him from speaking freely to all who visited him. Thus "though his hands were still bound, his mouth was free and open to speak for Jesus Christ."

PRACTICAL VALUE

The main lesson from Acts 27 and 28 is the providential care of God "who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Ephesians 1:11). Apart from the unusual courtesy and civility extended to Paul by Julius, the centurion; and the kindness and generosity shown by the Maltese, God's providence to Paul was evident in his status as a prisoner. In Rome, he was allowed to live in his own house, to have visitors, and the freedom to preach and

teach the Christian faith. If he had not been a prisoner, he could not have testified before Roman governors, kings, imperial guards, military commanders, and even Nero himself. His two years in Rome was an invaluable time, which opened opportunities for witnessing to others, and to write letters to the churches, which he had planted in Asia Minor!

One of the letters was written to the Church in Philippi (4:10-13): *But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.* Paul expressed that not only did he learn to be content in whatever circumstances, he also learn to greatly rejoice in the Lord. He taught us to draw upon Christ's strength and power to overcome all things. Personally, he was able to face the storm and shipwreck, and to overcome the snake bite. God takes care of His faithful and obedient servant.

There are some who think that God should have transported Paul to Rome in a less difficult and less painful way. From Paul's experience, we learned one important truth concerning the way God deals with His children. God does not guarantee that we will not suffer pain. He does not promise to spare us from tribulation, deprivation, anguish, famine, peril or death. But He promises that none of these terrible experiences will separate us from His love for us. So

Paul wrote to the Romans in the eighth chapter of his letter (vv.38, 39): *For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Our faith and trust in God and the Lord Jesus Christ should not be shaken by any bad experiences we may suffer during our sojourn on earth. AMEN

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

Monday: Acts 27:1-19; Psalm 121:1-8.

Tuesday: Acts 27:20-36; Isaiah 40:28-31; Romans 8:38-39.

Wednesday: Acts 27:37-44; 2 Corinthians 6:1-10.

Thursday: Acts 28:1-15; 1 Peter 4:7-11.

Friday: Acts 28:16-31; 2 Timothy 4:1-8.

Discussion Questions

1. What can we learn about faith as we see it exemplified here in Paul? What was the basis of his faith? What was the result of the exercising of his faith? (Acts 27:20-34)

2. What evidences of the Lord's activity do you find in these verses (Acts 28:1-10) — watching over His servant, opening for him opportunities of service, and giving him inward encouragement?

3. What was Paul's chief concern on reaching Rome?

4. What was Paul's message to the Jews in Rome? And what reason did he give for the persistence of those in unbelief?

5. How did Luke summarise Paul's ministry as a prisoner in Rome? (Acts 28:30, 31)

**QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER
PERSONAL STUDY**

What outstanding qualities of Paul do you observe in the following passages?

1. Acts 20:18-35
2. Acts 21:13, 14
3. Acts 23:1
4. Acts 24:16
5. Acts 26:19-23, 29
6. Acts 27:22-25