

**PAUL THE PRISONER: TO ROME
WITNESSING TO GRACE**

ACTS 27:1 - 28:31

¹When it was decided that we were to sail for Italy, they transferred Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort, named Julius.

²Embarking on a ship of Adramyttium that was about to set sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.

³The next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul kindly, and allowed him to go to his friends to be cared for.

⁴Putting out to sea from there, we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us.

⁵After we had sailed across the sea that is off Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia.

⁶There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship bound for Italy and put us on board.

⁷We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind was against us, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone.

⁸Sailing past it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea.

The last time the narrative was in the first person ('we') was when Paul visited James and the elders in Jerusalem (see 21:18). From that point Luke has kept the focus on Paul as the suffering servant witnessing to Jesus. Now, Luke records Paul's journey to Rome, with the immediacy and accurate observation of a companion on what was a memorable voyage. Accompanied by Aristarchus, already mentioned in Ephesus (see 19:29) and in Corinth (see 20:4), they are put on board a boat registered in Adramyttium, a port near Troas.

They set out from Caesarea in the autumn of 59AD in the reverse direction to the journey from Patara to Ptolemais on which Luke had accompanied Paul two and half years earlier (see 21:2-7). The first port of call is Sidon in Phoenicia where Paul is allowed to visit his friends.

To get some protection from the contrary winds, they sail between Cyprus and the mainland, whereas on the way to Phoenicia, with favourable winds, they had been able to venture further into the open sea (see 21:3). They come to Myra in Lycia. Like Patara (see 21:3), it had a granary. Ships travelling from west to east tended to pick up grain at Patara. Ships travelling from east to west tended to pick up grain at Myra.

At Myra they board a ship that has come from Alexandria and is heading for Italy. The winds are still against them, so they make slow headway. The wind is blowing from the northwest, and they follow the customary sea route using Crete as a protection. They reach a port on the southern central part of Crete, called Fair Havens.

Paul's journey from Asia to Jerusalem was swift and without incident, helped along constantly by favourable winds. Luke left us with the impression that divine providence was assisting Paul. The mood on this reverse journey is very different. It is slow, difficult, with constant contrary winds. One is left with the feeling that some superhuman power is trying to stop Paul from reaching Rome.

Map 9 : Caesarea to Crete



Map 10 : Crete - Malta - Rome



The contrary winds mean that ‘much time had been lost and sailing was now dangerous’. Sailing had to be suspended during the winter months, from about mid-November through to mid-March. It was already October.

Fair Havens, though protected, was quite a small port and ‘not suitable for spending the winter’, so when a moderate south wind begins to blow, the pilot and the owner, ignoring Paul’s warning, decide to leave the harbour and work their way west to the much more suitable winter-quarters of Phoenix. To reach it they had to round cape Matala and then sail in unprotected waters fifty-four kilometres northwest.

However when they leave the protection of cape Matala, a ‘violent wind’ (Greek: tephōn) sweeps down from the north-east and blows them south-west. There is nothing for it but to let the ship be driven before the wind. The small protection afforded by the island of Cauda, some forty kilometres south of Crete, enables them to haul in the ship’s boat and use ropes to strengthen the hull, but for many days all they can do is hope to survive the typhoon. Their fear is to be swept into the Syrtis, renowned and dangerous shallow gulfs on the coast of north Africa. Though still many hundreds of miles north they lower the anchor to slow their pace in the hope of not being swept so far south. Unable to take any readings because of the overcast sky, they have no idea where they are and abandon all hope of being saved.

⁹Since much time had been lost and sailing was now dangerous, because even the Fast had already gone by, Paul advised them, ¹⁰saying, ‘Sirs, I can see that the voyage will be with danger and much heavy loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.’

¹¹But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. ¹²Since the harbour was not suitable for spending the winter, the majority was in favour of putting to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, where they could spend the winter. It was a harbour of Crete, facing south-west and north-west.

¹³When a moderate south wind began to blow, they thought they could achieve their purpose; so they weighed anchor and began to sail past Crete, close to the shore. ¹⁴But soon a violent wind, called the northeaster, rushed down from Crete. ¹⁵Since the ship was caught and could not be turned head-on into the wind, we gave way to it and were driven. ¹⁶By running under the lee of a small island called Cauda we were scarcely able to get the ship’s boat under control. ¹⁷After hoisting it up they took measures to undergird the ship; then, fearing that they would run on the Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and so were driven. ¹⁸We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard, ¹⁹and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship’s tackle overboard. ²⁰When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

²¹Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, 'Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. ²²I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.' ²⁵So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. ²⁶But we will have to run aground on some island.'

²⁷When the fourteenth night had come, as we were drifting across the sea of Adria, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. ²⁸So they took soundings and found twenty fathoms; a little farther on they took soundings again and found fifteen fathoms. ²⁹Fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. ³⁰But when the sailors tried to escape from the ship and had lowered the boat into the sea, on the pretext of putting out anchors from the bow, ³¹Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, 'Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.' ³²Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the boat and set it adrift.

Perhaps one reason for Luke's including this voyage in such detail is that he sees it as a symbol for the life a disciple, of a missionary and of the church. We recall Paul's words warning his Gentile readers to be careful not to be 'tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine' (Ephesians 4:14).

Once, when the disciples were in a boat on the lake of Galilee, a 'windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger' (Luke 8:23). Jesus challenged them to have faith and he brought them to safety. Here the focus is on Paul, who knows that it is God's will that he reach Rome in safety: 'you *must* stand before the emperor' (compare 23:11). He promises salvation and tells the others to have courage. We hear an echo of the words of Jesus: 'stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near' (Luke 21:28).

When the storm abates, they find themselves drifting somewhere in the Adriatic - a term which was used in the first century for the sea between Greece and Italy extending down as far as Africa. The northern part which goes under the name of the Adriatic today was then called the Adriatic Gulf. It is the fourteenth night (the night of the liberation from Egypt, Exodus 12:13), and it is midnight. At the point of deepest darkness, suddenly there is hope. They are nearing land.

They cast anchors out from the stern to avoid the ship turning broadside to the waves. The sailors decide to take their chances and escape in the boat, but the soldiers cut the boat adrift.

Once again (see 27:27), Luke reminds us that it is the fourteenth night. Now it is just before daybreak. Death is about to give way to resurrection. When Jesus warned his disciples of the many trials that they would go through, he added:

But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

– Luke 21:18-19

Paul takes bread, gives thanks (Greek: *eucharisteō*), breaks it and eats. All on board join in the meal and they ‘satisfied their hunger’. We recall Jesus feeding the hungry crowd:

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled.

– Luke 9:16-17

We recall also the last supper:

Jesus took a loaf of 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’.

– Luke 22:19

We recall the supper shared by the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

When Jesus was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them ... he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

– Luke 24:30,35

Two hundred seventy-six is the sum of the first twenty-three numbers – a symbol of universality. There are twenty-three consonants in the Hebrew alphabet. Jesus is present in Paul offering salvation to all.

³³**Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, ‘Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing.**

³⁴**Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.’**

³⁵**After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat.**

³⁶**Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves. ³⁷(We were in all two hundred seventy-six persons in the ship.)**

Reaching land

³⁸After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea.

³⁹In the morning they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned to run the ship ashore, if they could.

⁴⁰So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea. At the same time they loosened the ropes that tied the steering-oars; then hoisting the foresail to the wind, they made for the beach.

⁴¹But striking a reef, they ran the ship aground; the bow stuck and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the force of the waves.

⁴²The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none might swim away and escape; ⁴³but 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, ⁴⁴and the rest to follow, some on planks and others on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

While at sea they needed ballast. Now, in the hope of beaching the ship, they throw the wheat into the sea.

It was normal in such circumstances for prisoners to be killed. If they escaped, the soldiers who were responsible for guarding them had to suffer the fate of their prisoners. By killing them this was avoided. However, through the intervention of the centurion, all are saved.

That God brought everyone on board to their 'desired haven' (Psalm 107:30) is a statement of the will of God 'who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4).

When the disciples returned from their first mission, Jesus said to them:

I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.

– Luke 10:18-19

A snake bites Paul, but he is unharmed. The snake is cast into the fire. The 'natives' (Greek: *barbaroi*: speaking a language other than Greek) recognise the presence and action of God. They are hospitable and share what they have with Paul and the other shipwrecked men. They are open also to receive the healing (salvation) that the risen Jesus offers them through Paul.

The welcoming, the sharing and the generosity of the community of Malta, including the governor of the island, is presented by Luke as a symbol of what can happen when the word is received with open arms and an open heart.

¹After we had reached safety, we then learned that the island was called Malta.

²The natives showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us around it. ³Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire, when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. ⁴When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, 'This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.' ⁵He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.

⁶They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.

⁷Now in the neighbourhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. ⁸It so happened that the father of Publius lay sick in bed with fever and dysentery. Paul visited him and cured him by praying and putting his hands on him.

⁹After this happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.

¹⁰They bestowed many honours on us, and when we were about to sail, they put on board all the provisions we needed.

¹¹Three months later we set sail on a ship that had wintered at the island, an Alexandrian ship with the Twin Brothers as its figure-head.

¹²We put in at Syracuse and stayed there for three days;

¹³then we weighed anchor and came to Rhegium.

After one day there a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli.

¹⁴There we found believers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome.

¹⁵The believers from there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.

¹⁶When we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

It is March 60AD. With the end of winter and the change in the direction of the wind, they set sail in another ship on its way from Alexandria to Rome (see 27:6), under the protective patronage of Castor and Pollux. They stay for three days in Syracuse, on the east coast of Sicily, one day at Rhegium on the toe of Italy, and then Paul and his companions are allowed to disembark at Puteoli in the Bay of Naples, then the chief port in Italy. The ship would have gone on to Portus, the new harbour built by Claudius at Ostia, the mouth of the Tiber. Paul, still under guard, stays a week with the believers at Puteoli.

The believers from Rome hear of their arrival and travel fifty to sixty kilometres south to meet and welcome them. In Rome Paul is permitted to live privately under a form of house arrest waiting for the arrival of his accusers so that his appeal could be heard.

Paul continues to reach out first to the Jews (see 13:46; 17:2). He gives a summary of why he is 'bound with this chain' and what has transpired since his arrest in Jerusalem. He explains that he is innocent of the charges (see 24:12-13; 25:8), and that the Roman authorities wanted to release him, but he had appealed to Caesar (see 25:21). He wants them to know that he has no complaints to make against the Jewish nation.

The key point being stressed here by Luke is that Paul is in chains 'for the sake of the hope of Israel' (compare 24:15; 26:6-7; see Luke 2:34). As has been stressed again and again by Luke, Paul is proclaiming that the hope of Israel has been fulfilled in Jesus, and that Paul, as a Jew, is faithfully taking this news of salvation to the Gentiles. The opposition he encounters is from those Jews who are not being faithful to their traditions or to the mission entrusted to them by God.

The leaders of the Jewish community in Rome explain that they have received no report about Paul. However they have had only bad reports about the 'sect' to which Paul belongs and they wish to hear more from him about it. Part of the background here could be the trouble within the Jewish community in 49AD which occasioned the edict of expulsion already mentioned by Luke (see 18:2). The edict itself would have lapsed in 54AD with the death of Claudius and the accession to the throne of Nero, but there are obviously problems between the Christians and Jews in Rome when Paul arrives in the spring of 60AD.

¹⁷Three days later he called together the local leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, he said to them, 'Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, yet I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans.

¹⁸When they had examined me, the Romans wanted to release me, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. ¹⁹But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to the emperor — even though I had no charge to bring against my nation.

²⁰For this reason therefore I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is for the sake of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.'

²¹They replied, 'We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken anything evil about you.

²²But we would like to hear from you what you think, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.'

²³After they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.

²⁴Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe. ²⁵So they disagreed with each other;

and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: 'The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,

²⁶'Go to this people and say, You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. ²⁷For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn — and I would heal them.'

²⁸Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.'

[²⁹] some ancient manuscripts add:

And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, arguing vigorously among themselves.

Paul is witnessing to Jesus in Rome (see 23:11), proclaiming that it is in Jesus that God is offering salvation (compare 19:8), and that in him is fulfilled the law of Moses and the prophets. Once again, the Jewish community is divided between those who are convinced by Paul's words and those who are disconcerted, having envisaged God's fulfilment of the promises in a very different way.

By way of conclusion, Paul quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10. Paul is making two statements. It is important that neither of them be missed. The first is a warning to Israel, a warning that has been building up throughout both parts of Luke's work. Again and again, throughout the history of Israel, the prophets called for obedience to God and for fidelity to the covenant. The destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon symbolise what happens when God's word is met with stubborn resistance. We recall the almost desperate pleading of Jesus that his contemporaries would finally listen to God's word (Luke 11:37-54) lest 'this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world' (Luke 11:50). With a broken heart Jesus cries:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you.

– Luke 13:34-35

Jesus could see that the city which he loved would once again be destroyed: 'Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles' (Luke 21:24), and all because they would not accept the peace being offered to them: 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes' (Luke 19:42).

Jesus warned his disciples that they would face the same kind of rejection (Luke 21:12), and the story of the Acts has been a long saga of hostility. At the conclusion of his address in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, Paul cries:

Beware, therefore, that what the prophets said does not happen to you: ‘Look, you scoffers! Be amazed and perish, for in your days I am doing a work, a work that you will never believe, even if someone tells you’.

– Acts 13:40-41

Speaking of the failure of the synagogue in Corinth to listen, Luke writes: ‘When they opposed and reviled Paul, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles”.’ (18:6).

It is against this background that we are to read Paul’s words to the Jews in Rome. To this point only a remnant have listened – those, like Paul himself, who accepted Jesus as the Messiah, who repented and put their trust in Jesus as Saviour. For the most part, however, Israel has continued its history of refusal to listen to the words of the prophets, even to the words of God’s only Son and of his witnesses, Peter, Stephen and now Paul. Jesus is God’s final word. Luke concludes the Acts with Paul pleading with his Jewish brothers and sisters. It is a matter of life and death for them and for Israel that they listen to the word being proclaimed to them.

This is the first point which Luke is making. But there is another. The word of God spoken through Isaiah is not a rejection by God of his people. God’s fidelity is greater than our infidelity, no matter how obstinate we may be. Even though as a whole the people fail to understand, even though they do not want to understand because of the demands which the truth will make upon them, God will never stop revealing his love to them and offering healing and salvation.

Jesus himself spoke strongly, because it mattered that people listen. ‘This generation’ has only ‘now’ to repent and to find life. After lamenting over Jerusalem, Jesus goes on to say ‘I tell you, you will not see me’, but then he adds a word that is full of hope and promise: ‘until the time comes when you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”’ (Luke 13:35). After declaring that Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, Jesus adds: ‘until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled’ (Luke 21:24). Because of God’s fidelity, there is always hope. As Paul writes to his beloved Timothy: ‘If we are faithless, he remains faithful — for he cannot deny himself’ (2 Timothy 2:13).

Even though as a whole the Jews fail to listen, Paul, as one of them, promises to take up on their behalf the mission entrusted by God to Israel. He will take the message of salvation to the Gentiles (compare 13:46; 18:6). For salvation is offered to *all*:

May your way be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

– Psalm 67:2-3

The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.

– Isaiah 40:5 (see Luke 3:6)

The kingdom of God is proclaimed

³⁰He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Luke did not set out to give us a life of Paul, any more than he set out to give us a life of Peter. His aim is to tell the story of how the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to be witnesses of Jesus, and so to reveal that the saving action of the risen Lord is continuing in human history. Jesus commissioned them to be his ‘witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’ (1:8). Peter led the apostolic mission in Jerusalem and in Judea. He validated the mission in Samaria and took the first step in welcoming Gentiles. Having completed his mission, Luke tells us that ‘he left and went to another place’ (12:17). Apart from his prophetic words at the Jerusalem Assembly, he disappears out of the story.

It is much the same with Paul. It was Paul who received the mantle of Stephen and was the leader of those who continued the apostolic mission to the Gentiles. Luke leaves us with him, still a prisoner, but in Rome, at the crossroads of the known world, ‘proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance’.

We would like Luke to have told us more of Peter’s story. We would like to have heard more of Paul. The fact that in this passage he tells us that Paul lived in Rome ‘two whole years’ hints at Paul being released at the end of the stipulated time. This fits with tradition. But Luke says nothing of any later ministry and about Paul’s death he is silent. If, as some suggest, Luke-Acts was published in 62AD, the reason for Luke’s silence needs no explanation.

He has chosen a perfect note on which to close his narrative. The word is being proclaimed with all the power and freedom of the Spirit of the risen Lord. And it is being proclaimed by one who is following his Master in humiliation and suffering. The Suffering Servant of the Lord, now glorious, is living and ministering again in his suffering servant Paul. As Paul said very early in his missionary life: ‘It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God’ (14:22). Luke leaves us listening to the word as it is being proclaimed by a ‘prisoner of Christ’. If we are Jews may we take up our privileged mission. If Gentiles, may we rejoice in sharing the faith of our elder brothers and sisters in the faith. May we all be able to say with Paul:

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

– Romans 8:38-39