

March 1, 2009  
The National Presbyterian Church

## Shipwreck at Malta

Acts 27:1 - 28:10

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This is the last sermon in the series of messages that we've been preaching on Saint Paul and his friends and the cities they love. We've journeyed through the Book of Acts, watching Paul and Peter and the others and what role they played and what happened to them and how they shared the good news of Jesus Christ.

Well, the place that Paul wanted to go, most of all, was to Rome. Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. And in fact, Paul wrote a letter to the Romans when he was in Corinth saying, "I hope to come to Rome. I plan to come to Rome. I want to share with you there." I'm sure he didn't plan to go the way he went as a prisoner, but he wanted to go to Rome. Instead he ends up in Jerusalem, is arrested in Jerusalem because riots broke out after a speech he gave, and he's put in a temporary imprisonment in Caesarea on the Mediterranean Coast, actually in the very precincts of the palace that the Roman governor rented from Herod Antipas. That palace on the Mediterranean, Caesarea, is where Paul was kept for two years incognito. He doesn't write any letters from there. He's not able to do it for some reason. He is

just stuck there.

And finally, he had a restless edge, and he finally decides, "I'm going to appeal to Caesar so I can get out of here." And so Festus decides to accept that and sends him to Rome as a prisoner. And he finally does arrive in Rome. The 28th chapter of Acts tell us of his arrival, how when he came there, the Christians came to meet him at Three Taverns, which is a little village 30 miles away from Rome. And when he saw them, he thanked God. He took courage, and then he comes to Rome, and he was allowed to stay there with the soldiers who guarded him.

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Finally the last sentence of the Book of Acts. In a way, Luke ends the book without an ending. It just abruptly stops because it doesn't end with the final year or years of Paul's life, because we know that from Rome he will write letters. He writes amazing letters for which we are grateful. He writes to the Philippians. He writes to Timothy. He writes letters from that great city to Ephesus. The last line of chapter 28 is: "And he lived there for two years preaching the kingdom of God and teaching openly about the Lord Jesus Christ." And so he finally arrived in Rome, and he was able to do what he does best. Paul is a teacher. He taught his way through errors at Lystra. He taught his way for two and a half years at Ephesus. He taught in Antioch for a year with Barnabas. He's a teacher sharing the Good News with his generation. But how he got there was quite a harrowing trip. And Saint Luke decides to devote an entire chapter to the ride aboard the ship, and I think it's worth reading that great 27th chapter of Acts. It'll prepare us for the Lord's Supper in a wonderful way because in the middle of that journey he told the sailors to eat. They took courage when they ate. And in the Lord's Supper, we receive the great meal of all meals from our Lord himself. So this ship incident is worth reading.

Well, here's Luke's account. "And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy," this is chapter 27, "they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustine cohort named Julius." A centurion is a commander of one hundred soldiers, and he has actually a named cohort which is significant. Julius is in command of this ship as the Roman official. "And embarking on a ship from Adramyttium," that would be from southern Turkey, "which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia,"

that means the Roman province of Asia, which is Turkey today, “we put to sea.” Notice this is a “we” passage; it means Luke is the other person who’s there, and you’ll see another young Christian from Thessalonica, Aristarchus, is also on board the ship. “We were accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. The next day we put in at Sidon,” that is in present day Lebanon, “and Julius treated Paul kindly.” Here, we’re already seeing that Paul is able to make friends across a broad spectrum of people. In this case, he’s made a friend of this Roman centurion that will later play a major part of this narrative. And so Luke says that Julius was kind to Paul and let his friends from shore come and care for him. “Then putting to sea from there, we sailed under the lee,” that would be the leeward side, the less windy side of Cyprus, that’s the island Paul had already been through once, “because the winds were against us. And when we sailed across the sea which is off Cilicia and Pamphylia,” that’s southern Turkey, “we came to Myra and Lycia. And there a centurion found the ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy.” See, they’re on their way to Italy. Their goal would be to go up to Corinth and go across that sand spit at Corinth from the Aegean to the Adriatic Sea and then across to Rome. That would be their goal. “So we found the ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy, and they put us on board. We sailed slowly for a number of days, arrived with difficulty off Cnidus,” and now, this is going to be Crete. Now they’re coming to the little island of Crete in the Mediterranean. “And as the wind did not allow us to go on, we sailed under the lee of Crete, coasting along it with difficulty, and we came to the place called Fair Havens near the city of Lasea.” This is on Crete, the southern part of Crete.

Notice how Luke is so attentive to the details of sailing. He was a doctor, but maybe he had been on some ships before, because he is very interested in what’s happening. “As much time has been lost and the voyage was already dangerous because the fast had already gone by,” that would be the Day of Atonement fast they’re referring to there, which is always at the end of September, early October, because the Greeks had a tradition that you did not sail below the Aegean (which would be getting out of the Mediterranean), but you wanted to stay snug and up close to the Greek coast. You don’t want to go down after October. Now, they’re already under Crete so they’ve got to be in that dangerous water after October.

So Paul, being a sailor, I guess, says, “Sirs, I perceive the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only the cargo and the ship but also our lives.” But the centurion paid more attention to the captain and the owner of the ship than to Paul. And because the harbor was not suitable to winter in, the majority advised to put to sea from there on the chance that somehow they would reach Phoenix that would be over in the far end of the island of Crete, which was a harbor of Crete. Looking northeast and southeast, it would be a safer harbor, in other words, and then we would winter there. “And when the south wind blew gently,” now everything looks pretty good, now they’ve got a south wind. “Supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete close in the shore. But soon a tempestuous wind called the northeaster, struck down from the land.” I have to tell you about the northeaster. The Mediterranean looks like a fairly small body of water. It looks like it would be a very safe body of water. Don’t you believe it. It’s more dangerous than the Atlantic because of this famous northeaster wind, because it would come without warning. During World War II, there were several great naval battles, one in which practically the Italian fleet sank, unfortunately, because of a northeaster storm, and the British were better prepared and they handled it better. After the first service, a sailor came up to me, a United States naval officer, said that, “I was on a 500-foot ship just south of Crete when a northeaster hit us, and we were trying to get our helicopter from shore to the deck of this 500-foot ship. Because the ship was pitching so much, our helicopter crashed on landing.” That’s a northeaster. He said, “I know all about northeaster winds.” It’s a very dangerous wind and a very dangerous storm, and has now hit this ship south of Crete.

“So the tempestuous wind called the northeaster struck down from the land, and when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it.” Those are the most dreadful words any sailor can ever say is when you have to give way and are driven. So we were driven. You’re not sailing now; you’re just being driven. That means that you’re at the mercy of the wind. “And running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the boat. We hoisted it up and took measures to undergird the ship.” That’s ropes and things to try to make the ship undergirded. “Then fearing that we would run on the Syrtis” The Syrtis is still there in the Mediterranean. It’s a body of rocks that are just beneath the surface of the water. They’re the most dangerous of all rocks because you don’t see them necessarily and yet they’re lethal when ships hit them. Many,

many ships have crashed on that body of rocks to this day. “And so fearful they would run on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear and so we were driven. And we were violently storm-tossed. And they began the next day to throw the cargo overboard. And the third day they cast out with their own hands the tackle of the ship.” No one ever wants to do that. “And when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.”

As they had been long without food, Paul came forward among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me.” Now, that is not exactly a pleasant thing to say. Have you been on a trip where someone has said, “You know, you all should have listened to me. I gave you directions and nobody paid attention.”? But Paul has won the right to say that because he did give good advice, and he is a friend of this man, Julius, and Julius doesn’t write him off. So you can see Paul evidently had the right to say it. “Men, you should have listened to me and should not have sailed from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. But I now bid you to take heart.” So I’m glad he added that sentence after scolding them. “I want to bid 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 by me an angel,” the word means ‘messenger,’ a messenger of God, “...to whom I belong and whom I worship.” Paul had this amazing experience where the Lord sent a messenger to him, and all we know is what he says here in this text. “And he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand before Caesar, and lo, God has granted you all who sail with you.’ So take heart.” Paul had this amazing encounter in which the Lord said: ‘Paul, you’ve wanted to go to Rome all along. You’re going to Rome. And you’re going to stand before Caesar.’ Now, the irony of that sentence is when Paul writes his last letter to a church, the Letter to the Philippians, at the end of that letter he sends this greeting. He says, “All the saints greet you, especially those in Caesar’s household.” We know there are five prisons in Rome in the first century, and one of the prisons ironically is under the Via Villa, the villa where Nero himself lived. That is simply a tradition of antiquity that emperors would have dungeons underneath their castles where prisoners would be kept. It seems perverse. It seems terrible, and yet they did it. And so Paul is in that prison. So the guards are the Praetorian Guard. The guards of the emperor are guarding him, and he tells that to the Philippians. He says, “Those in the Praetorian Guard send greetings to you, those in Caesar’s household.” He is winning these guards to Christ, and so he does, this actually happens. Paul ends up in Rome.

So he said he had this vision of an angel that came to him and said to him that, "You must stand before Caesar," and so that gave him hope. "So take heart, men..." Now, he speaks to the sailors and the guards. "...for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I've been told, but we will have to land on some island. When the 14th night had come, they were drifting across the Sea of Adria." That's south now of the Adriatic. They were right out in the middle of the Mediterranean now, the most dangerous part of the Mediterranean. This northeaster, if it continues, if they don't run into some island, they're going to end up in North Africa. "And about midnight, the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they sounded and found 20 fathoms. A little farther, they sounded again and found 15 fathoms. And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let out four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship and were lowering the boat into the sea under the pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion, 'Unless, these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.' So the soldiers cut away the ropes of the boat and let it go. As it was about to dawn, Paul urged them to take some food, saying..." This is interesting. He now is playing the role of their chef. He's saying: you've got to eat some food. "Today is the 14th day that you've been continued in suspense without food, having taken nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food. It will give you strength since not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you. And when he had said this, he took bread and giving thanks to God in the presence of all of them, he broke it and he began to eat. And then they were encouraged, and they ate food themselves." A little later, in our celebration of the Lord's Supper on this first Sunday of Lent, we will receive bread of the greater meal, of the meal of our Lord himself, and it will give us strength and it will give us courage, too. "And so they were all encouraged. They took food. And there were 276 persons on the ship and when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea. And when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay and a beach." By the way, that will be Saint Paul Beach; if you go to Malta today, it is called Saint Paul's beach. It's the only logical beach on Malta that this could be because it's the one that faces a northeaster storm.

"And so they saw a beach, and they planned if possible to bring 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. And then hoisting the foresail to

the wind, they made for the beach. But striking a shoal, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable. The stern was broken up by the surf. The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape." You have to understand Roman protocols of the first century. If prisoners are aboard a prison ship, they are to go down with the ship. They are never to be set free because then they would escape. And that is a Roman principle, a protocol for Roman soldiers. No prisoners should ever flee or escape from a ship. Now, notice what's going to happen. That protocol is going to be broken by this man, Julius.

"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 purpose. He ordered that those who can swim to throw themselves overboard first and make for the land, and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all escaped to land. And after we escaped, we learned that the island was called Malta. Since the natives showed them unusual kindness, they made a fire for them in the beach." Paul was bit by a snake in the beach and the people said, "Oh, he must be a terrible man. He'll die now." And when he didn't die, they said, "Oh, he's a god." So he had to clear up that problem again. They thought he was a god in Lystra, too. He said, "No, no, I'm not a god." And Paul taught the Gospel to them there. In fact, one man who became a believer, if you go to Malta today, there's a great cathedral in honor of one of those who became a believer that day, and his name was Publius, who is called "The chief man of the island." And they stayed there three months. There's a great cathedral now called Saint Publius Cathedral in Malta.

They stayed three months. Paul taught again, and then they put him on a ship, and he ends up in Rome, and there he teaches again and writes his letters. What an account. What an account of the faithfulness of God in Saint Paul's life. And also what an account of the bravery and the courage, the spunk, the practical down-to-earth common sense of a man named Paul of Tarsus. He loved the cities. He loved the people he was with. He cared about them. Julius cared about him. And because of that friendship, everybody's life on that ship was saved, too. Paul even fed them, too, like we're going to be fed. It's an amazing adventure story. It's an adventure account. Luke wants you to have it. He devotes an entire chapter of the Book of Acts to that shipwreck story. Why is it there? It's a part of the journey of Saint Paul to bring him to Rome, and from there he'll write the letters that

we treasure so much.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this story. We thank you for its adventure, and that it brought these sailors and these prisoners safely to Malta, and then the rest is history. Paul is to go to Rome. He's to write letters that are to have such an impact on the whole world. Lord, we are grateful that he fed the prisoners, and now we're to be fed in a profounder way because of the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ in our behalf. Lord, feed us today. And when we're frightened by storms, Lord, protect us from that fear too so that we can live our lives with common sense and courage like Paul modeled for us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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