

ACTS—WEEK 24

SHIPWRECK



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is “Paul’s Shipwreck” by Ludolf Backhuysen (1630–1708), on display at Ostfriesisches Landesmuseum, Emden, Germany.

Paul sets sail for Rome as a lowly prisoner. In a way, he’s in his element, so he never stops preaching.

Sure enough, Paul quickly becomes everyone’s go to guy.

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Thank you.

Acts 25:13–26:32 — Shipwreck
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1 Acts 27:1–8 (ESV)

And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. The next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board. We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

There are many interesting details in this passage that are easy to miss. We learn that there were *some other prisoners* on board the ship with Paul. Since appealing to Caesar wasn't common, that's a mystery.

The centurion guarding Paul is named—Julius. This is high praise. The only other centurion in scripture who merits a name is Cornelius, who (in Acts 10:22) was directed by an angel to play a key role in Peter understanding his vision of the sheet. Julius may deserve being named by Luke because he *treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for*.

As we will see, Paul's status as a prisoner doesn't keep him from earning the respect of everyone on the ship. Julius's treatment of Paul, right off the bat, sets him up to be paid attention to. This ends up being critical.

The next day we put in at Sidon. We?

Luke is on the ship! Consider the magnitude of the sacrifice that implies. This isn't a one-week vacation so Luke can tour Rome; it'll cost him months (and maybe his life) to accompany Paul.

That kind of sacrifice, which was typical of the first Christians, puts us to shame.

No one asked Luke to make this sacrifice (at least none recorded). Luke's description doesn't note anything we'd describe as a "calling." He just went.

This contradicts the notion that we need some kind of sign to make a life-changing sacrifice. Luke seems to have made this choice without any supernatural prodding, or even a natural nudge from a friend.

This means that insisting on a sign can be wrong. Sometimes, we should make decisions simply by using the tools God gave us.

That includes our brains.

2 Acts 27:9–12 (ESV)

Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, “Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.” But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. And because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

Being after the fast (Yom Kippur—in early fall), it’s too late for safe sailing in the Mediterranean. Paul knows God wants him to go to Rome, but he knows Mediterranean fall weather too, so he announces, “Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.” Since he’s a prisoner, his advice isn’t heeded. *The majority decided to put out to sea.*

They voted on this?! We cannot know if Paul even got a vote—his status as a prisoner was pretty low. So, not surprisingly, *the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said.* They make the wrong call here, but it will all turn out providentially in the end.

This dialogue will play a role in what happens next, which is why it’s worth including in scripture.

When Paul said, “*Sirs, I perceive ...*” he was speaking for himself. God hadn’t revealed this to him.

But God had revealed that he should go to Rome (and that he will get there). So why hesitate now? Is Paul having second thoughts about obeying God’s command to go to Rome?

Absolutely not. This is a great example of how Christians can be shrewd in obeying Christ. We need to be willing to take risks for the Lord, but not stupid ones. Paul took a lot of risks and made a lot of sacrifices, but this sailing is reckless.

This is one of the great challenges in following Christ—how to draw the line on taking risks. Some risks are just God’s wisdom trumping secular wisdom.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? — 1 Corinthians 1:20b (ESV)

But secular foolishness is still the model for what foolishness is.

One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is reckless and careless. — Proverbs 14:16 (ESV)

The is way too deep a topic for a daily devotional, but the right balance comes from not being hasty—being careful and deliberative. Always check with what scripture says, and seek the advice of others.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. — Proverbs 1:7 (ESV)

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice. — Proverbs 12:15 (ESV)

3 Acts 27:13–26 (ESV)

Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. But soon a 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 and were driven along. Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. 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.

Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. Yet now I urge 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 before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on some island."

Gordon Lightfoot said it best in *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*, "Does anyone know where the love of God goes, when the waves turn the minutes to hours?" In today's passage, we get to see His love.

The Lord does something unusual here; He gives these distraught sailors very specific news of their future. This isn't some cryptic prophecy where "weeks" means "years." They will survive this tempest.

Paul's "I told you so" is blunt, but he still delivers great news. Paul says that he has seen *an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship*. (Dude just can't stop preaching, can he?) The angel tells him, "*God has granted you all those who sail with you.*" Buried in this is the implication that Paul had prayed for everyone to be saved. That's interesting because he had earlier predicted *injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives*. He prayed that he would be wrong!

But the fascinating part is the reason the angel gives for their deliverance. *You must stand before Caesar*.

That, not all those lives, is the important thing.

God's priorities were different for the crew of the Edmund Fitzgerald, but His love was the same.

Do you know someone who is grieving? Sometimes God's love is hard to see and even harder to feel. When people need to be comforted, explaining God's priorities isn't the answer. If you know someone who is going through a rough patch, check in. Find out how you can help and how you can pray for them.

Loneliness often accompanies grief. That we can fix.

4 Acts 27:27–38 (ESV)

When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go.

As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you." And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

There's a modern word for that boat they cut loose—lifeboat. That's right; they threw away the ship's lifeboat because Paul said, "*Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.*" He wasn't even speaking in the imperative! How on earth could Paul have reached that kind of status? He's just a prisoner being transported under guard, yet they obey him reflexively. Let's review how we got here.

Paul had earlier said, "*I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.*" But he wasn't the only pessimistic one; they had to vote on whether to sail or not. Later, Paul contradicted his earlier prediction by announcing that an angel told him, "*Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.*"

It must have been that last pronouncement that did it. They went from ignoring his advice to being virtually obsequious when he announced that he'd seen an angel. But why?

Two factors are at play here. First, when you're exhausted from fighting for your life, you're more open-minded and less self-sure than usual. Second, Paul has been Paul all along; his religion is the worst kept secret in history. All these events are seen by the crew through the lens of Paul's constant evangelizing.

Like the persistent widow in Luke 18, Paul finally broke through their shields.

That's one of the great things about evangelism. The number one trick is, don't keep your faith a secret. That gives God a thousand ways to set your friends up to have their eyes opened.

But we often do keep our faith a secret. We only talk about Christ when it's "safe."

Christians are commanded to be brave. At least we should be brave enough to talk about our faith.

5 Acts 27:39–44 (ESV)

Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run 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. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. 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 plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

Notice the intricate way that God protects Paul and his shipmates from harm—even when it looks like He’s endangering them.

Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach. What luck—safe harbor at last! The wonderful angelic prophecy concluded with Paul saying, “*But we must run aground on some island.*” Looks like everything’s going to work out just fine; all they have to do is *run the ship ashore.*

Apparently, that wasn’t the grand entrance God had in mind for these guys. So, *striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground.* The ship had survived just fine when it was at sea and free to bob up and down. But now, with *the bow stuck* on the reef, the ship can’t move and *the stern was being broken up by the surf.* They end up swimming ashore (presumably without any armor or other heavy weapons) or floating in *on pieces of the ship.*

That’s a pitiful bunch if there ever was one.

As we’ll soon see, the islanders take pity on them and give them a warm welcome.

Had a platoon of armed Roman soldiers landed and hit the beach, who knows what would have happened next.

What can we do besides praise the mighty way He works? Things that look terrible at first often prove to be blessings. Has this happened to you? Probably more than you know.

When something doesn’t play out the way we wish, our disappointment often keeps us from spending time thinking about how we might be looking at it wrong. A little introspection can be useful.

What unintended consequences might you have missed? Might some “bad” outcome you experienced actually be better than the alternative? (Note: this makes more sense in cases of disappointment, not grief. Seeing God’s blessings in major tragedies is tricky. Better to start with something more manageable.)

Conversely, if you have had the privilege of seeing a silver lining turn into something more, spend some time considering what the clues were early on.

The purpose of all this is worship. As we grow in our ability to perceive God’s majestic ways, reverence naturally springs forth.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow—even the ones that don’t look like blessings.

