

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

An Exposition

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The remarkable book now draws to its close.

The journey towards Rome and the Apostle's presence in Rome as a prisoner brings us to the end of the record. Shipwreck and the chief actor of the greater part of this book in a prison conclude the story of the early days of the church on earth.

Behind the historical account one may easily see the stormy voyage of the professing church; her adversities, tossing about and shipwreck. However, such an application needs caution. It is easy to step into fanciful and far-fetched allegorical teaching. Besides church history, other applications have been made of this narrative.

A commentator claims that the keynote to the interpretation is given in verse 34 in the word salvation.

“This and cognate words occur seven times in the chapter: Hope to be saved, ye cannot be saved, to be completely saved. While the contrary fate is no less richly depicted - injury, loss, throwing away, perish, kill and to be cast away. The history, then, is a parable of the great salvation, by which man is brought through death to life.”

We shall not attempt to seek for an outline of church history in the events of this chapter. Here and there we shall touch upon a few lessons suggested by the account of the voyage.

The central figure, the prisoner of the Lord, shall occupy us more than anything else. It is said that in all the classical literature there is nothing found which gives so much information of the working of an ancient ship as this chapter does.

Even the critics have acknowledged that this chapter “bears the most indisputable marks of authenticity.”

“Historical research and inscriptions have confirmed the facts given in this chapter, while the accuracy of Luke’s nautical observations is shown by the great help he has given to our understanding of ancient seamanship. None has impugned the correctness of his phrases; on the contrary, from his description contained in a few sentences, the scene of the wreck has been identified.” *

* Richard B. Rackham on Acts.

The whole account is most clearly proven by a work of wide research on “*The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*,” by James Smith.

We follow then briefly the different stages of the Apostle’s journey towards Rome.

I. From Cesarea to Fair Havens (Verses 1-8).

II. The Unheeded Warning. The Storm. Paul’s Vision and Assurance of Safety (Verses 9-26).

III. The Shipwreck (Verses 27-44).

I. From Cesarea to Fair Havens.

“And when it was determined that we should sail into Italy, they delivered Paul and certain other prisoners unto one named Julius, a centurion of Augustus’ band. And entering into a ship of Adramyttium, we launched, meaning to sail by the coasts of Asia; one Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, being with us. And the next day we touched at Sidon. And Julius courteously entreated Paul, and gave him liberty to go unto his friends. to refresh himself. And when we had launched from thence, we sailed under Cyprus, because the winds were contrary. And when we had sailed over the sea of Cilicia and Pamphylia, ‘Ye came to Myra, a city of Lycia. And there the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing into Italy; and he put us therein. And when we had sailed slowly many days, and scarce were come over against Cnidus, the wind not suffering us, we sailed under Crete, over against Salmone; And, hardly passing it, came unto a place which is called The fair havens; nigh whereunto was the city of Lasea” (Verses 1-8).

Some time must have elapsed after the memorable speech before Agrippa and the beginning of the journey. Perhaps the certain other prisoners had first to be gathered and then Paul with the others were delivered to a centurion of Augustus’ band, named Julius. The great Apostle with all the wealth of divine revelation is now in custody of a Roman officer.

From the second verse we learn that besides the beloved physician and inspired author of this book, Luke, Aristarchus was also on board. In chapter 21:18 we learned that he was then also with the Apostle.

Later in writing from Rome Paul calls Aristarchus, his fellow prisoner (Colossians 2:10), which however, does not necessarily mean that he was carried along as a prisoner. Had he been arrested with the Apostle as some have stated, surmising that he was with Paul in the temple, when the mob fell on him, then surely some statements to that effect would have been made before.

Julius treated Paul with much leniency. He knew of course the verdict given by Herod Agrippa, that he was not guilty and might have been a free man had he not appealed to Caesar.

At Sidon, where they landed, Paul is permitted to visit his friends and to refresh himself. Most likely Paul was in a physically weakened condition so that Julius entreated him to leave the ship.

The Lord's gracious and loving care for His faithful servant shines out in this. How clearly the whole narrative shows that all is in His hands: officers, winds and waves, all circumstances, are under His control. So far all seemed to go well; but contrary winds now trouble the voyagers. The ship is tossed to and fro. If we look upon the ship as a type of the professing church and the little company, headed by Paul, as the true church, then there is no difficulty in seeing the issue. Winds which drive hither and thither trouble those who hold the truth and live in fellowship with the Lord, while the professing church is cast about.

Then Myra was reached. Here they took a ship of Alexandria.

The expositors who attempt to trace the history of the church in the account see much in this statement. They tell us that it is typical of the professing church's more direct course towards Rome. These different typical applications are often forced. After sailing slowly many days they reached a place called "**the fair havens.**" Then they reached the island of Crete.

The place Lasea has been geographically located. But the name of the port was deceptive. "**The fair havens**" were far from peace and rest, but the place was exposed to the blasts of the winds.

There are no fair havens of peace in this present evil age. The fair havens will only be reached when the Lord Jesus Christ returns.

II. The Unheeded Warning. The Storm. Paul's Vision and Assurance of Safety.

"Now when much time was spent, and when sailing was now dangerous, because the fast was now already past, Paul admonished them, And said unto them, Sirs, I perceive that this voyage will be with hurt and much damage, not only of the lading and ship, but also of our lives. Nevertheless the centurion believed the master and the owner of the ship, more than those things which were spoken by Paul. And because the haven was not commodious to winter in, the more part advised to depart thence also, if by any means they might attain to Phoenice, and there to winter; which is an haven of Crete, and lieth toward the south west and north west. And when the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, loosing thence, they sailed close by Crete. But not long after there arose against it a tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon. And when the ship was caught, and could not bear up into the wind, we let her drive. And running under a certain island which is called Clauda, we had much work to come by the boat; Which when they had taken up, they used helps, undergirding the ship; and, fearing lest they should fall into the quicksands, strake sail, and so were driven. And we being exceedingly tossed with a tempest, the next day they lightened the ship; And the third day we cast out with our own hands the tackling of the ship.

“And when neither sun nor stars in many days appeared, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved was then taken away. But after long abstinence Paul stood forth in the midst of them, and said, Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me, and not have loosed from Crete, and to have gained this harm and loss. And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man’s life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, Saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar; and lo, God hath given thee all them that sailed with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer; for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me. Howbeit we must be cast upon a certain island” (Verses 9-26).

The late fall had been reached and navigation was then considered a hazardous thing. Nautical instruments were unknown, and other imperfect knowledge was a great drawback to navigation at that time. Little sea trading was done during the late fall and less during the winter months. They waited till sailing had become dangerous.

The fast mentioned which had passed was that of the Day of Atonement. Could we conclude from this statement that Paul and his companions kept the Day of Atonement by fasting? Some believe this, and that the Apostle continued in all the observances of the ceremonial law and even the traditions of the elders.

This is incorrect.

It was customary to remember these different feasts and holidays simply for the sake of marking time. In this sense it is mentioned here. Most likely a consultation of the commander of the ship and the owner, who was on board, and the centurion, was held, and Paul was present. He gives them a solemn warning and cautions them to beware. This shows his close fellowship with the Lord. In prayer, no doubt, he had laid the whole matter before the Lord and received the answer, which he communicates to the persons in authority. They looked upon it as a mere guess and the centurion rather trusted in the judgment of the captain and the owner.

And here we can think of other warnings given through the great Apostle.

Warnings concerning the spiritual dangers, the apostasy of the last days, the perilous times, warnings against the seducing spirits and doctrines of demons. The professing church has forgotten these divinely-given predictions. The world does not heed them. Like these mariners, who believed in their own wisdom and disregarded the warning given, Christendom has paid no attention to these warnings. For this reason the ship is drifting, cast about by every wind of doctrine and rapidly nearing the long predicted shipwreck.

Their aim was to reach Phoenice, another haven of Crete, to put up for the winter.

All went well for a time, but suddenly a terrific tempest arose. The hurricane which struck them was known by the name of Euroclydon. The ship was caught in the high seas and driven by the gale. A small island, Clauda, afforded a little shelter. A smaller boat was trailing behind and was now lifted on board. Helms had to be used to undergird the ship and keep it from going to pieces.

Still greater danger was ahead. Large sandbanks were nearby.

To prevent the stranding they took in the sail and were once more driven by the wind. All this reminds us of the many endeavors from the side of man to keep professing Christendom together. The power gone, because disobedient to the Lord and His word, things are drifting and all kinds of worldly means and helps are employed to keep from sinking.

Paul and his companions were conscious of the fact that they were in the hands of the Lord, who made the sea and at whose command the waves and the wind must obey.

Their trouble had just begun. The next day a part of the cargo was cast from the ship to make it lighter. The third day the tackling of the ship followed. The wheat they still kept, for they had need of it. Later even that went (verse 38).

Sun and stars were hidden for many days; in despair, they abandoned all hope of salvation.

Here we may think of the Satanic influences and power, typified by the continued wind, and of the periods of church history when indeed the sun and stars were hidden, when all testimony to Christ and testimony from the side of His people seemed to have ceased.

When despair had reached its heights, Paul appears once more upon the scene. When all was hopeless the prisoner of the Lord spoke the words of hope and cheer.

He reminds them first of their refusal and disobedience. What had come upon them was the result of having not heeded the warning. He then assures them that an angel of God had assured him once more that he would have to stand before Caesar; but God had given to him all that sail with him. Only the ship is to go down, the lives of all who sail with him will be preserved.

“Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer; for I believe God, that it shall be even so as it hath been spoken unto me.”

And now they were willing to listen to him. They had to acknowledge their disobedience and believe the message of cheer as it came from the divinely instructed messenger, assuring them of their ultimate salvation.

And so, at least, in part, drifting Christendom can listen to the Apostle Paul, and if the mistake, the wrong course, is acknowledged, the heavenly-sent message is accepted, salvation is assured.

II. The Shipwreck.

“But when the fourteenth night was come, as we were driven up and down in Adria, about midnight the shipmen deemed that they drew near to some country; And sounded and found it twenty fathoms: and when they had gone a little further, they sounded again, and found it fifteen fathoms. Then fearing lest we should have fallen upon rocks, they cast four anchors out of the stern, and wished for the day.

“And as the shipmen were about to flee out of the ship, when they had let down the boat into the sea, under color as though they would have cast anchors out of the foreship, Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved. Then the soldiers cut off the ropes of the boat, and let her fall off. And while the day was coming on, Paul besought them all to take meat, saying, This day is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing. Wherefore I pray you to take some meat; for this is for your health: for there shall not a hair fall from the head of any of you. And when he had thus spoken, he took bread, and gave thanks to God in presence of them all; and when he had broken it, he began to eat. Then were they all of good cheer, and they also took some meat. And we were in all in the ship two hundred threescore and sixteen souls. And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, and cast out the wheat into the sea. And when it was day, they knew not the land: but they discovered a certain creek with a shore, into the which they were minded, if it were possible, to thrust in the ship. And when they had taken up the anchors, they committed themselves unto the sea, and loosed the rudder bands, and hoisted up the mainsail to the wind, and made toward shore. And falling into a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the forepart stuck fast, and remained unmoveable, but the hinder part was broken with the violence of the waves. And the soldiers’ counsel was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim out, and escape. But the centurion, willing to save Paul, kept them from their purpose; and commanded that they which could swim should cast themselves first into the sea, and get to land: And the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land” (Verses 27-44).

How calm the Apostle and his companions must have been after this assurance of their safety.

The dreadful wind might continue and the ship drift still further. They knew they were safe, for God had spoken.

Different it was with the crew of the ship.

In great distress they feared the coming disaster and cast out four anchors. The shipmen attempted flight by a clever scheme. Paul discovered their plan and said to the Centurion and soldiers, **“Except these abide in the ship, ye (not we) cannot be saved.”**

God had given him all who were in the ship. The work of the sailors was needed when the daybreak came. And the soldiers believed the word of Paul, for they cut the ropes, which set the boat adrift the sailors tried to use.

Then Paul exhorted them to eat.

Once more he assured them that not a hair should fall from the head of anyone. Before the whole company, two hundred and seventy-six persons, Paul took bread and gave thanks to God. The Lord had exalted the prisoner and he really stands out as the leader of the distressed company. They all became encouraged by the words and action. All has its lessons. However the meal has nothing to do with the Lord’s Supper. It tells us typically how necessary it is that we must feed on the bread of life in the days of danger, the times when everything breaks up.

The details of the account we do not need to follow. The soldiers suggested the killing of the prisoners. The soldiers were responsible for every prisoner with their lives. If some were to escape they would be killed for the neglect. So for this selfish reason they would have killed each prisoner.

The Centurion kept them from carrying out this evil purpose. And when the ship went to pieces all escaped safe to land. God was faithful to His promise. God saved, though the ship went into pieces. Even so God is faithful to His promise and all who trust in His ever-blessed Son are saved and safe, and none of them can be lost. The ship, professing Christendom, is breaking up and the ship cannot save.

The story of the journey towards Rome and the shipwreck reveals the acts of the adversary once more.

No doubt he would have prevented the Apostle from reaching Rome in fulfillment of the Lord's word and plan. The last attempt was through the soldiers. But none can frustrate God's purposes.

Happy are we if we learn that all rests in His hands whose love will never fail and whose power can never diminish. The winds of trial and adversity, the schemes of man and assaults of the enemy must help together in the fulfillment of His own councils. Yea, all things must work together for good to them that love God.

The next chapter brings us to the end of the journey and to Rome itself.

~ end of chapter 27 ~

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