

Acts 27
Shipwreck reveals Paul's character

Introduction

Acts 27 is remarkable not only for its spiritual lessons but also for other reasons worth mentioning. It is one of the most vivid and striking episodes in the Bible as it describes a shipwreck in the Mediterranean leading to arrival at Malta. The narrative has been described as "one of the most instructive documents for knowledge of ancient seamanship". James Smith of Jordanhill (1848) was a soldier and yachtsman of 30 years experience and knew Malta well, familiar with its weather patterns, studied seamanship in the ancient and modern worlds. He concluded that the description in Acts 27 was the work of an eyewitness who was a landlubber, not a professional seaman. No man could have written it unless from actual observation. The landlubber was Luke, Paul's companion, who wrote Acts, and who gives his presence away when he says "we". This was his daily log.

The ship left from Sidon. The centurion in charge was Julius from the Imperial Regiment, which had a special relationship to the Emperor. All the prisoners on the ship were probably condemned to death, probably death in the arena to amuse the populace of Rome. Paul was treated with much consideration. The ship sailed north of Cyprus, and stopped at Myra. There they changed ships, and journeyed south of Crete. Against Paul's advice, they sailed on instead of stopping at Fair Havens. The waters are dangerous for 5 months November to March, and there should be no sailing in the open sea. But the ship carried on despite this, and got caught in a fierce NE hurricane. They took a violent battering, and threw cargo overboard. They had no sun or stars to steer by, and the ship drifted. On the fourteenth night of the storm they were close to Malta, and everyone managed to get to safety before the ship broke up.

In this situation, Paul was not the leader of a missionary band, or a great preacher. He was just one of the 300 men – soldiers, sailors and prisoners – washed up on land. He was a lonely Christian among many pagans. Very soon his powers of leadership and courage reveal themselves. He tells people not to lose heart; he speaks out and recovers hope. He is the one bright light against a very dark background.

It is always the case that people's true character is revealed when troubles come. When things are going well, everyone is happy and content. But when trouble comes, danger threatens, things are breaking up, then people show what they are really made of – their true colours. Here was a Christian man who, when everyone else was in despair, gloom and hopelessness, was self-controlled, courageous, confident in God. His relationship with the Lord, and awareness of His purposes gave him power and insight. He had inner resources that the world knew nothing about. People must have asked themselves, why is he different, what is his secret, why is he not like the rest of us?

Paul had a wonderfully integrated Christian character. His spirituality, common sense, practical sense were remarkable; he was a man of God, heavenly minded, and of

earthly use. We are going to examine this character, and how his life was controlled by God's purposes and plans, and how he had confidence in God's Word.

Life controlled by God's purposes

Paul was able to be courageous and reassuring because **last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me** (Acts 27:23,24). Paul was aware that his life was planned by God. An unseen hand was directing, protecting, providing, opening and closing doors. This began before he was born. **God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles** (Galatians 1:15,16). **Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God** (1 Corinthians 1:1). **I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you** (Romans 1:10). **By God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed** (Romans 15:32). He was called to his work by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1), and to Macedonia (Acts 16:9), and in Corinth, **the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."** (Acts 18:9).

So here in the ship in the middle of the hurricane, God intervenes again. **The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom** (2 Timothy 4:18). He was in the safe hands of another, and all was working to a plan. God always reveals the next step, **according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will** (Ephesians 1:11). He is in charge. This is one of the most important and blessed features of the Christian life – that sense of being in higher hands, and that life has meaning and purpose. And the one in charge loves us and has our best interests at heart.

In his book *“Does God believe in atheists?”* John Blanchard sums up the humanist view of life: “They believe in a universe with no purpose, humanity with no meaning, morality with no fixed reference point.” Man is just a “curious accident”, “the result of a purposeless process. There are no facts which exist which assure me my life has served an eternal purpose. To ask what purpose there is in life is a silly question.” “To believe in God means to see life has a meaning, while atheism and meaninglessness are a perfect fit.” “If God is lacking, nothing a man does is of any more consequence than the acts of a mouse.” “This is the massive problem for the atheist.” [It is assumed all these quotations are from John Blanchard.]

To know God, to be led by God, to give one's life to God, to live in His will, brings such enrichment to life. We have meaning, confidence, assurance, and peace.

*“I'd rather have Jesus than houses or land.
I'd rather be led by His nail-pierced hand.”*

Intimacy of Paul's relationship with God

Paul's relationship with God is summed up perfectly in the concise phrase, **whose I am and whom I serve** (Acts 27:23). Paul declares that he is God's and he serves Him with all his heart and life. He was wholly the Lord's with one aim and objective in view.

- Paul was the Lord's by creation. **It is He who has made us and not we ourselves** (Psalm 100:3).
- Paul was the Lord's by preservation. Every breath we draw, every faculty we use, our health, strength and possessions, **What do you have that you did not receive?** (1 Corinthians 4:7).
- Paul was the Lord's by redemption. God had paid the price so that Paul could be His. **You are not your own; you were bought at a price** (1 Corinthians 6:19,20).

Becoming a Christian is not taking out an insurance policy against future unhappy eventualities. Henceforth Paul was the Lord's. God's will and purpose became the mainspring of his life. Wherever he was, on board a ship, before the Roman Authorities, preaching in a Synagogue, in a private house – Paul was there to serve the Lord.

Paul was also a “man of God”. This term was used many times in the Old Testament, e.g. to describe Moses (Deuteronomy 33:1), Elijah (1 Kings 17:18), Elisha (2 Kings 4:40) and David (2 Chronicles), but only used twice in the New Testament, once to speak of Timothy (1 Timothy 6:11), and the second time, **the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work** (2 Timothy 3:17), which could certainly describe Paul.

It is a phrase that refers to the man or woman who commits every part of his or her life to God's will and control. He does not run his own life, make his own decisions, pander to pride, give in to base instincts, serve selfish interests, or please self. Sadly, our standards are often far from the Bible; our spiritual insight is corroded by the world and its outlook. Hence we fail to make an impression on the world. When we are the Lord's, He is ours, and all the resources of the Godhead are ours. Is that us? Is that whose we are and whom we serve? It is the only Christian life which the Bible knows anything about.

Either God is at the centre, or self is at the centre. Around whom does your life revolve? The answer to that will be an indication of your quality of character, extent of influence, and the grace of God in your life. God must own us before He can use us. Can you say, “No longer I, but Christ in the centre.” God doesn't want your gifts, He wants you.

The strength of Paul's faith in God

The angel of God promised Paul's life would be saved, and Paul believed. Even amidst the hurricane, with winds roaring, waves towering above them, timbers creaking, in total darkness, when all around were terrified, Paul's lone voice spoke of faith in God. That God had spoken was enough for Paul. He took God at His word. It was not just wishful thinking. He was not out of his mind. He simply believed God.

God's Word made all the difference and it was his grounds for confidence. And he was prepared to confess it before the unbelieving, sceptical pagans.

Like Abraham, who was promised he would have a son even when the chances looked remote because of old age, and that, moreover, his descendants would be as the stars, he believed the Lord. These men show remarkable quality of faith. In the fiercest storms, the blackest night, in the tempest of sorrow and fogs of doubt and temptations, they were confident once they heard God speak.

George Muller found a new word of promise for each new crisis of trial or need. He would put his finger on the very text, look up to God, and say, "Thou hast spoken and I believe." He was utterly persuaded of God's unfailing truth, and rested on His Word with unwavering faith. Hence he was always at peace, and it gave steadfastness to his whole character. When the flood beat on the house, it could not fall because it was built on God's Word. His main mission in life was not to found orphanages and aid missionaries, but to teach men to trust God's Word and rest implicitly on what He said.

Hudson Taylor, missionary to China, called the Bible "The book of certainties". It was the basis of his own faith, and the basis of faith of the China Inland Mission. "There is a living God. He has spoken in the Bible. He means what He says, and will do all He has promised." Hudson Taylor saw over 500 men and women go into Inland China "with only the guarantees they carried within the covers of their pocket Bibles." He also said, "We may hang on every word that God ever spoke or caused to be written by His Holy Spirit." He spoke about the inconsistencies of Christians who profess to believe the Bible, but were content to live just as they would if there were no such book. "Live by it, put it to the test. If it fails to prove true and reliable, throw it overboard altogether." "The hardest part of the missionary career is to maintain prayerful study of the Bible. Satan will always find you something to do when you ought to be occupied with that, if it is only opening the window blind."

Do you believe in God? Do you believe Him when He speaks about salvation in Christ (John 3:16)? Do you believe that if you seek His kingdom first, all the rest will be added (Matthew 6:33)? Do you believe the Holy Spirit is given to them that obey (Acts 5:32)? Do you believe that if you ask anything according to His will, He will hear you (1 John 5:14)? Do you believe He will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5)?

Conclusion

Here is Paul, the lone Christian surrounded by almost 300 pagans. But he was not cowed or intimidated. He was the same Paul as when he was preaching or leading a missionary expedition. He was aware that his life was part of an unseen eternal plan whose author was God Himself. This transformed the way he looked at life.

Paul was the Lord's man entirely, regardless of place, company or circumstances. He believed God and took Him at His word. When God had spoken, Paul knew He meant what He said and would do all He promised. This was the guiding light in all his decisions and movements.

John Wesley spoke of Christians he encountered in a storm at sea when he was on a voyage from Georgia to Gravesend in October 1735. As well as the English on board, there were German Moravian Christians. In the Bay of Biscay, a fierce storm blew up. The Moravians were serious and humble, and did not complain. They were delivered not only from pride and anger but also from fear. Even when water was pouring over the decks and the mainsail split, while the English were screaming, the Moravians calmly sang. Wesley asked them if they were afraid. "I thank God, no". "Are the women and children afraid?" "No, they are not afraid to die." Therefore Wesley told the English that there was a great difference between him who fears and him who does not fear God.