

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 23, Acts 27-28

6-Min. Video Overview

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Let's dive into one of the most incredible survival stories ever recorded from the ancient world. And this isn't some myth or legend. It's a stunning, first-hand account from someone who was actually there, detailing amazing leadership and faith in the middle of a total catastrophe on the high seas.

So it all boils down to this one central question. How on earth does a single prisoner manage to save 275 lives from a superstorm? I mean, the answer is just an unbelievable story of how one person's conviction can completely turn the tide against a certain disaster. All right, so let's set the scene for this perilous voyage.

The Apostle Paul, after years and years of wanting to get to Rome, is finally on his way. But this is not the trip he had in mind. He's not some free man on a mission.

He's a prisoner in Roman custody being shipped off to face the emperor himself. And he is not alone. Not by a long shot.

He's on this massive Alexandrian green ship, you know, a real workhorse of the Mediterranean. And on board, 276 souls. You've got soldiers, sailors, other prisoners, even some of Paul's friends.

That is a whole lot of lives hanging in the balance on one single boat. Okay, so the ship docks at this small harbor in Crete. But it's really not a good place to wait out the winter.

The sailors, you know, the experts, they look at the clear sky and decide, hey, let's just make a quick trip to a better port. But then Paul, the prisoner, stands up and gives this really chilling warning. If we do this, it's going to end in disaster.

So this created a really crucial choice for the Roman centurion in charge. I mean, who are you going to listen to? The experienced captain and navigator who sees a perfect day for sailing? Or this mysterious prisoner? Well, the choice seemed pretty obvious. They ignored Paul's warning and set sail.

And boy, was that the wrong decision. Almost immediately, the ship gets ambushed by this violent northeasterly wind. It was like a hurricane, a storm the locals called a ur-a-kilo.

It just grabs the ship and hurls it out into the open sea, leaving it completely at the mercy of the waves. The account we have details a 14-day ordeal. For two straight weeks, they are completely lost.

They can't see the sun. They can't see the stars to navigate. They start desperately throwing cargo overboard just to stay afloat, terrified they're going to get smashed against these infamous sandbars off the coast of Libya.

By day 14, all hope is just gone. And it's right there, in that moment of total absolute despair, that Paul speaks up again. But this time, it's not a warning.

It's a promise. He tells everyone on board that an angel appeared to him and guaranteed that while the ship itself would be lost, not a single life would perish. But just as this little flicker of hope appears, betrayal strikes.

The sailors, the only people who actually have the skills to handle the ship, decide to save themselves. Under the cover of darkness, they pretend they're laying out anchors from the front of the ship, but it's a total lie. They're secretly lowering the only lifeboat to escape and leave everyone else to die.

And this, right here, is the turning point. Paul sees their plan, and he tells the Centurion, unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved. It's what's called a conditional prophecy.

The promise of survival is real, but it totally depends on what they do next. And this time, the Centurion believes him. The soldiers rush forward, they cut the ropes to the lifeboat, and they just let it fall away into the sea.

Now, everyone's fate is tied together. So their ordeal at sea is about to enter a whole new chapter: survival on land. At dawn, they spot an island.

They have no other choice, so they drive the ship aground, and the violent surf immediately starts smashing it to pieces. But just as Paul promised, every single person, all 276 of them, somehow manages to get ashore, clinging to planks of wood. They've survived, shipwrecked on an island they soon find out is Malta.

And just when you think things can't get any weirder, they do. As Paul is gathering firewood, a viper, driven out by the heat, latches onto his hand. The islanders see this and immediately decide he must be a murderer, and that justice is finally getting him.

But then, Paul just casually shakes the snake into the fire and is totally fine. So they completely reverse their verdict. He's not a murderer.

He must be a god. You know that whole snake incident? It basically opens every door. Paul gets welcomed by the island's chief, a man named Publius, and then he miraculously heals Publius's sick father? Well, word of that spreads like wildfire.

Pretty soon, the sick from all over Malta are coming to him and being cured. The prisoner on his way to trial has become a celebrated healer. After three months, when they finally leave, the islanders honor them and give them all the supplies they could ever need.

So this brings us to the final leg of the journey and the arrival of this triumphant prisoner. The guy who saved a shipload of people, survived a viper bite, and healed an entire island is

now about to enter the most powerful city in the world, Rome. Now, a prisoner's arrival in Rome should be a moment of shame, but not for Paul.

Word of his coming is spread, and Christians from the city travel for miles down the road just to meet him. They form this welcome party and escort him into the city. It's an incredible paradox, right? A prisoner in chains receiving a hero's welcome.

So what kind of city has he just walked into? Well, Rome, around 60 AD, is a massive metropolis of about a million people. It's crowded; the poor are packed into these rickety apartment buildings; it's got a huge Jewish community, though they're not really unified; and the general vibe? Widespread xenophobia, often hostile to foreigners and new religions. This is the complex, influential, and kind of dangerous world Paul is about to step into.

And this brings us to the really powerful conclusion of the entire account. The author ends his book not with a verdict, not with an execution, but with a scene that's both a cliffhanger and a final powerful statement. The account ends right here.

For two full years, Paul is under house arrest, so he's still a prisoner, chained to a guard day and night. But what's remarkable is that from his own rented apartment, he is completely free to welcome anyone who wants to visit and to preach his message without anyone stopping him. So the whole story ends on this note of incredible forward momentum.

I mean, the ship was destroyed, the journey was an absolute nightmare, and our main character is literally in chains. But the message itself, it's unchained, and it's spreading freely right in the heart of the empire. And that leaves us with a final powerful question to think about.

What does it really mean for an idea, for a mission to be truly unstoppable?