

Title: Acts 27-28: Paul's Voyage and Arrival in Rome

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Abstract

This lecture covers Acts chapters 27 and 28, describing Paul's perilous sea voyage, shipwreck on Malta, and his eventual arrival and ministry in Rome. Dr. Craig Keener analyzes the historical and meteorological accuracy of the Mediterranean storm narrative, highlighting how the Holy Spirit miraculously preserved all 276 lives on board. He details Paul's subsequent power encounters on Malta, including surviving a viper bite and healing Publius' father, before transitioning to Paul's two-year house arrest in Rome. Ultimately, the lecture explains how the book's open-ended conclusion represents the ongoing, unstoppable expansion of the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Voyage to Rome (Acts 27:1-2)

A. Paul's Long-standing Desire for Rome

1. Evidenced in Romans 15: Paul's plans to visit Rome after carrying relief to Jerusalem.
2. Evidenced in Acts 19:21: Paul resolving to visit Jerusalem and then Rome, mirroring Jesus setting His face toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51).

B. Arrival in Custody

1. Fulfilling his plans but in Roman custody—a highly difficult context for an active missionary.
2. House arrest in Rome allows him to preach to visitors, mirroring his hearings before the governors in Caesarea (Acts 24).

C. Companions on the Voyage

1. Aristarchus and Luke (evidenced by the 'we' sections) travel with Paul.
2. Centurion Julius permits their presence, recognizing Paul is not a direct threat to Roman political security.

3. Luke, likely the physician (Colossians 4:14), functions as a helpful resource for the crew.

II. Ancient Sea Travel and Its Hazards

A. Dangerous Nature of Ancient Navigation

1. Shipwrecks are prominent motifs in ancient Hellenistic novels and histories.
2. Demands for divination: about one-fifth of questions put to ancient oracles concerned safe sea journeys.
3. Paul had already survived three shipwrecks (2 Corinthians 11) before this voyage; Acts details this final shipwreck with Luke as an eyewitness.

B. Sailing Timeline and Seasonal Risks

1. Winter travel on the open sea was banned (closed sea / mare clausum) due to severe danger.
2. Reference to 'the fast' (Day of Atonement, late September/early October) marks the onset of the dangerous sailing window.
3. Economic incentives: Emperor Claudius offered special bonuses and expensive insurance to shipowners who risked shipping grain during winter shortages.
4. Crew composition: often comprised of Egyptian slaves or poor individuals with no other livelihood.

III. The Journey to Fair Havens and Decisions on Crete (Acts 27:3-12)

A. From Caesarea to Southern Crete

1. Sailing north from Caesarea to Lycia (southern Asia Minor) and catching a massive Alexandrian grain ship.
2. The ship carries 276 people (crew and passengers), about half the size of the giant second-century ship 'Isis' (600 people).
3. Stubborn headwinds force them to hug the southern coast of Crete for wind shelter.

B. Stop at Fair Havens and the Decision to Move

1. Fair Havens was a tiny fishing community unsuitable for wintering.
2. Sociological limitations: local families would not accommodate a large crew of 276 sailors, lacking entertainment and provisions.
3. Captain, navigator, and centurion decide to risk sailing across the bay to the larger Cretan port of Phoenix.
4. Paul's warning: warns of impending disaster and loss of cargo/life based on experience and revelation, but is overruled by professionals.

IV. The Great Mediterranean Storm (Acts 27:13-38)

A. The Euroquilo (Northeaster) Tempest

1. Severe mountain winds blow down the peaks of Crete, pushing the ship out into the open sea.

2. Historical and meteorological accuracy: checked by James Smith's 19th-century study, 'The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul.'
3. Passengers are forced below deck; crew struggles to maintain control of the ship.

B. Emergency Operations

1. Sheltered by Cauda, the crew secures the ship's skiff (lifeboat) before it smashes the hull.
2. Undergirding: passing cables under the hull to prevent structural cracking.
3. Steering away from Sirtis: trying to steer north to avoid running aground on the Sirtis (dreaded shallows and quicksands of the Libyan coast that destroyed Roman fleets).
4. Lightening the ship: throwing some wheat cargo and ship's gear overboard (Luke notes throwing it with 'our own hands').

C. Paul's Prophetic Reassurance

1. Continuous darkness and lack of sun/stars prevent navigation, leading to total despair.
2. Paul delivers a message of hope: an angel of God declared all 276 lives would be saved, though the ship would run aground on an island.
3. Speaking at sea: parallels ancient generals speaking to massive armies at sea; George Whitefield's 18th-century voice projection as an empirical parallel.

D. Sailor Escape Attempt and Cutting the Lifeboat

1. Soundings in the dark indicate depths of 20 and 15 fathoms (matching St. Paul's Bay in Malta).
2. Crew drops four anchors from the stern and prays for dawn.
3. Sailors attempt to escape in the lifeboat under pretense of laying stern anchors.
4. Paul warns: 'Except these remain on board, nobody can be saved' (conditional prophecy).
5. Soldiers immediately cut the ropes, letting the lifeboat drift away, securing the sailors' critical navigational expertise for daylight.

V. The Shipwreck on Malta (Acts 27:39 - 28:10)

A. The Wreck

1. Daylight reveals an unfamiliar bay with a beach.
2. Cutting anchors, hoisting the foresail, and driving the ship toward the shore.
3. Ship strikes a reef or sandbar where two currents meet, breaking up the stern in the heavy surf.
4. Soldiers' plan to execute prisoners to prevent escape is vetoed by the centurion Julius to save Paul.
5. Evacuation: strong swimmers go first; others hold onto wooden cargo partitions (planks).
6. Complete preservation: all 276 reach shore alive and safe.

B. Hospitality of the 'Barbarians'

1. Identification of the island as Malta (Melita).
2. 'Barbarians' (barbaroi): Greek term for non-Greek speakers; Malta's population spoke a Phoenician/Punic dialect.
3. Pious hospitality: building a fire in the cold rain (contrasting with sophisticated Athenian mockers and Jerusalem persecutors).

C. The Viper Encounter and Power Encounter

1. Paul gathers sticks; a cold, stiff snake revived by the heat bites and fastens to his hand.
2. Skeptical objection: no poisonous snakes currently on Malta.
 - a. Rebuttal: increased human habitation and deforestation over 2,000 years led to their local extinction.
3. Locals' interpretation of justice (Dike): 'This man survived the sea, but Justice does not allow him to live.'
4. Paul shakes the viper into the fire unharmed; locals change their mind and declare him a god.

D. Healings in the Household of Publius

1. Publius, the 'first man' of the island (official title for the chief Roman governor).
2. Paul prays and lays hands on Publius' father, healing his acute recurrent fever and dysentery (malaria parallel).
3. Locals bring all their sick, resulting in widespread healings and generous provisions for the voyage.
4. Healing narrative directly mirrors Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law in Luke 4.

VI. The Arrival in Rome (Acts 28:11-16)

A. The Journey to Rome

1. Boarding an Alexandrian ship wintered in Malta, featuring the Castor and Pollux twin gods figurehead.
2. Sailing north to Syracuse (Sicily), Regium (tip of Italy), and Puteoli (Naples bay).
3. Taking the Appian Way land route north.

B. The Christian Embassies

1. Rome's believers travel down to Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to greet and escort Paul.
2. Ancient custom of apantesis: embassies coming out to meet and triumphantly escort an honored guest into the city (reminiscent of Cicero's return or Jesus' entry to Jerusalem).
3. Paul is greatly encouraged, thanking God.

C. The Rome Custody

1. Handed over to the Praetorian Guard (imperial elite guard).
2. Allowed private, rented quarters (house arrest) chained to a single guard, with free access for visitors.

VII. Paul's Ministry to Rome's Jewish Leaders (Acts 28:17-29)

A. Addressing the Synagogue Leaders

1. Consistent with Paul's strategy of going 'to the Jew first' in every city.
2. Gathering leaders of Rome's diverse, decentralized synagogues (Rome did not permit a centralized Jewish authority).

B. The Leaders' Response

1. Leaders claim they received no official negative letters from Judea, but know this 'sect' is spoken against everywhere.
2. Explaining the division: Jewish believers had returned to Rome after Claudius's 54 AD death, but maintained separate house churches outside the synagogues.
3. Divided response to Paul's day-long exposition: some believe, some reject.

C. The Isaiah 6 Citation and the Gentile Focus

1. Paul cites Isaiah 6:9-10: 'You will indeed hear but never understand...'
2. Explains the 'hardening' of Israel as a divine pattern (mirroring the Parable of the Sower and Romans 11).
3. Declares the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, who will listen.

VIII. The Open Ending of Acts (Acts 28:30-31)

A. Two Years of Unhindered Ministry

1. Paul lives two years in rented quarters, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about Jesus.
2. The final word of Acts: 'unhindered' (akolytos), serving as a triumphal summary.

B. The Mystery of the Missing Trial

1. Luke ends before Paul's trial.
2. Potential reasons: Two-year statutory limit for prosecutors to appear in Rome; when Judean prosecutors failed to appear, the case was dismissed.
3. Paul's subsequent release, travel, and later rearrest/martyrdom (beheading) under Nero's intense persecutions (c. 64-67 AD).

C. The Ongoing Mission

1. From heritage (Jerusalem Temple) to mission (Gentile Rome).
2. The open ending invites subsequent generations of the church to continue writing the story of the Holy Spirit's global mission.