

Where Are God's Blessings Located?

"Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 27:31)

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In 2 Corinthians 11:22 - 25, Paul speaks of the many things which he has suffered because of his preaching of the gospel. Sometimes even today, preacher will talk about the things which they endure in their line of work. But I am convinced that the things which preachers might list today as things they suffer for Christ if they were listed in the Bible next to Paul's list here, they would be very much ashamed for ever speaking up.

Paul certainly did suffer much for the cause of Christ. The last statement found there in verse 25, where Paul mentioned having been shipwrecked three times and having spent a night and a day in the sea, is especially significant for our lesson this hour. We will be considering Paul's last recorded journey by ship in the Bible, his trip to Rome as a prisoner. It is found in the book of Acts, chapter 27.

Earlier in the book of Acts, in chapter 25, Paul had been on trial before the Roman governor whose name was Festus. While he was in that trial he came to understand that his situation was hopeless, at least as far as getting justice in that court. So he made an appeal to be tried before the Emperor himself, Caesar. He could do that because Paul was a citizen of the Roman Empire. Chapter 27 begins with Paul about to be taken as a prisoner to Rome.

In order to be judged by Caesar, Paul had to be taken from Caesarea to Rome by soldiers of the empire. Therefore Paul was delivered to a Roman centurion named Julius. There were also other prisoners in his care. The Bible tells us that Aristarchus, a Macedonian Christian was with them. In Colossians 4:10 Paul refers to Aristarchus as being a "fellow prisoner." It may well have been that he was a prisoner on this journey with Paul. We can also learn of another Christian who was present. The use of the word "we" so often in this chapter tells us that Luke, who wrote this book of Acts and also his gospel, was with Paul. His status however is unknown to us. We do not know if he also was a prisoner or merely a companion to Paul while going to Rome. When you examine this chapter carefully, you will realize that there is so much detail given in the telling of the story, that the writer must have been on board.

On this journey, three ships were required to get everyone to Rome. The first ship was one of Adramyttium. This ship took Paul from Caesarea and made its first stop in Sidon to the north where Paul was allowed to visit with some friends from the church. Next they left Sidon and went on to the southern coast of Asia Minor to a city and a port called Myra. It was there that they left the Adramyttium ship to find another in order to continue. Julius, the centurion found another ship going their way. This was an Alexandrian ship traveling from Egypt to Rome that had called at the port of Myra.

I believe that all the passengers who were on board the first ship are on this one too. Now this ship we do know some things about. It was a cargo ship carrying a load of wheat from Egypt to Rome. It was also a very large ship for its time, most likely well over 100 feet long and 30 feet wide. This

chapter will tell us that it was not steered by a rudder but by two steering oars at the back on each side. So this ship was not an easy one to handle. But it was large and heavy with cargo and also we will read that there were in all 276 persons on board. That certainly suggests that it was a very large ship.

The first stop for this ship with Paul now on board was Cnidus. And Luke tells us that even that short trip was made with difficulty. This was because the wind was now not favorable for westward travel so they proceeded south around the east end of the island of Crete. Crete is a major island in the eastern half of the Mediterranean Sea. It is about 125 miles long and 60 miles wide. They sailed around to the southern side of Crete, again with difficulty and landed at a port called Fair Havens where they spent many days.

In verse 9 we learn that the Fast was already over. This indicates to us what time of year it was, since the only fast required of the Jews was the Day of Atonement in mid October. Now that many days have gone by it is likely late October or early November. There was an old saying which sailors on the Mediterranean Sea knew very well that went like this: "Sailing is doubtful in September; impossible in November." So as winter grew closer, the time for sailing was rapidly ending. Now the harbor at Fair Havens was an open port, exposed to the weather from the sea. And the city of Lasea was small and not very comfortable. They knew that the port of Phoenix (Phenice) was just 32 miles west on the same south coast of Crete. The harbor there was protected from the weather and the city was much larger and more accommodating. They preferred to spend the winter there and so they were considering sailing on.

In verse 10, Paul warns them not to try to make this trip. He said, "Sirs, I perceive that this voyage will be with hurt and much damage, not only of the lading and the ship, but also of our lives." Paul made this warning according to his own understanding. But Julius consulted with the ship's owner who was on board and with the sailors who all agreed that if the winds became favorable, they should try to make it to Phoenix and spend the winter there. Julius accepted their decision and when the breeze shifted from the south, they set sail. They thought this would be an easy trip to make. After all, it was just 32 miles and they would stay in sight of the coast.

But Luke tells us that no sooner had they left Fair Havens that the winds shifted from the northeast and a severe storm arose. This storm immediately caught the ship and they could sail no further. So they let the winds drive the ship where they would. They tried to guide the ship as best as they could with the steering oars. They first noticed that they had gone south by a small island named Clauda which was 23 miles south of Crete. It was at this place that they decided to bring up the small landing boat which was being pulled behind the ship. This was done to protect it from being broken against the side of the ship. The Bible also tells us that they used helps or cables to secure the ship. These were passed under the bottom of the ship and tightened with winches to keep the ship from leaking and coming apart in the storm. They truly recognized the severity of this storm. They were also afraid of being blown too far to the south and running into the Syrtis Sands off the northern coast of Africa. So they lightened the ship by throwing overboard some of the cargo. Three days later they also tossed out some of the ship's tackling which they probably thought they could get by without.

In verse 20 we are told that it had been many days without seeing the sun or the stars. This made navigation impossible. So they did not know where they were or where they were going. Thus they lost all hope of ever being saved. The Bible also tells us that all the people on board had been fasting ever since they left Fair Havens. For it was right after they left that the storm had started. But that night, an angel of God came to Paul and brought him a comforting message. The next morning, Paul assembled all the people on the deck to tell them what the message was. Paul's words begin in verse 21. "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 sail with thee." This is what the angel told Paul. So Paul told the people, "Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me." And so Paul comforts these people saying, "God will protect us as long as we are sailing in this ship."

Now it was the fourteenth day since they left Fair Havens. Remember they were not using sails, they were only letting the storm take them where it would. It was now two weeks that they had been in this storm. It was on this very night that the sailors could hear the sound of waves breaking on nearby rocks. Knowing what that meant they immediately began to take soundings and found that the water where they were was only 120 feet deep. A little later they measured the water again and now it was only 90 feet deep. So even though it was midnight and they could not see, they knew for sure that there was land nearby. Fearing that the ship would be smashed on some rocks they tossed out four anchors from the stern of the ship and prayed for the day to arrive.

A little later the sailors had gone to the bow of the ship under the pretense of dropping more anchors there. What they were really doing was trying to flee the ship in the landing boat and leave the rest on their own. But Paul saw what they were doing and he warned the centurion Julius saying, "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 27:31). This warning was directed especially at Julius and the soldiers. What he meant was, "Unless these sailors stay in the ship for now, neither you, or I, nor anyone else will be saved. They were going to need these experienced sailors to get us safely to shore when the time came." So the soldiers immediately cut the boat loose to prevent any more escape attempts.

Well when the morning came, Paul pleaded for everyone to take some nourishment because they had been fasting for 14 days. So when they brought out bread, Paul gave thanks to God in the presence of all of these men. They distributed the bread and they all ate of it.

Now that the sun was up they could see the nearby land but they did not recognize it. But they saw a beach and planned to run the ship aground there and get off of the ship. So they cut loose the anchors, untied the steering oars to use them again, they raised the mainsail to make for the beach. The Bible says that the bow of the ship became buried in the sand but that the waves were so furious that they were breaking up the ship from the stern.

It was at this time that the soldiers, fearing that the prisoners would escape offered to kill them all. But Julius wanted to get Paul safely to Rome and said, "No." So Julius said that everyone who

could swim was to get to the shore first. Those who could not swim would soon be able to find some boards or parts of the ship that they could use to get to shore. And so the last verse of this chapter tells us "they escaped all safe to land."

This was quite an amazing journey. They were 14 days in the storm. They knew not where they were nor were they able to control where they were going. Chapter 28 tells us that the name of the island where they had landed was called Malta (Melita). Remember, it was only a journey of 32 miles that they had intended to make. But the storm had blown them a distance of 600 miles in two weeks. Can you imagine being on a ship like that, in a time like that was and not knowing where you were; without any control, in a storm of that severity, or even knowing if you would survive? Interestingly enough, they had been blown in the direction of Rome. And after winter they did arrive at Rome on their third ship of the journey.

Luke did not write about these events merely to tell us an interesting story. They serve to teach us many important lessons. Some of which I would like to rehearse for you now.

1. **Although Paul knew God had promised the safety of all those on board, he also knew he was expected to do his part in carrying out God's plan.** The Bible tells us in verse 31 that when the sailors tried to escape from the ship, Paul was the one who told this to the centurion. Paul himself could not stop the sailors from leaving; he was a prisoner and very likely bound in chains. But he could tell the one who could do something about it and that is what he did. It was Julius who stopped the crew from leaving the ship but he acted at the report of Paul. The sailors were needed to see that the ship made it to the beach where they could all land in safety. Paul understood that he himself would have to do what was necessary for God's plan to come to pass.

And it is important for us to realize the truth of this in our day. God has made promises of blessings to Christians, but that does not mean that we are to just sit around and wait for them to appear. In Matthew 6:11, Jesus taught us to pray, asking God for our daily bread. But we don't just sit in the kitchen and wait for it to appear in the cabinet, do we? And Paul taught that if anyone who can work, refuses to work, he should not be fed by others (2 Thessalonians 3:10). So if we work, then with God's help, His plan can be realized. Also, in the spiritual realm we know that God has provided salvation from sin, through the sacrifice of Jesus, for all mankind (1 John 2:2). But if we don't take the gospel into all the world, how are they going to be saved by that gospel? (Romans 10:14) which must be obeyed for salvation to be received (2 Thessalonians 1:7, 8).

2. **It takes more than just belonging to God to be a faithful Christian and receive His blessings, one must also trust God and serve God.** In verse 23 when Paul was addressing the people on board the ship, he said, "There stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am." He was telling them that he belonged to God. God was not HIS possession; HE was God's possession.

But this in itself was not enough. He went on in verse 25 to state his faith in God. He said, "I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me." Paul had an absolute trust in God. It was a perfect confidence, that what God had spoken, He could perform. Even if the outcome

seemed to be impossible, God could take care of Paul and any others too. But we need to have this abiding trust in God.

But still more than this is required. Verse 23 shows that Paul also served his God. Those who work for God, doing His will in their lives receive God's blessings. Paul understood that our lives should be a "living sacrifice" to God (Romans 12:1). Christianity is much more than simply belonging to God. So many Christians however are content just to have their name on the church roll. But if their faith never grows and they never do anything to be of any service to God, what is their value to God?

3. **God is not willing that any should perish.** The apostle Peter uses these exact words in 2 Peter 3:9. Peter there is using the days of Noah and the flood to illustrate the coming Day of Judgment. 2 Peter 2:5 says that Noah was a preacher of righteousness. This indicates to us that while that ark was being built, Noah was preaching and encouraging the people of his day to repent and live righteous lives so that they too might enter the ark and be saved in the coming flood. Noah did this because God was "not willing that any should perish."

So too in our study this hour, God was not willing that any of the 275 persons on board the ship with Paul would perish. And so God sent His angel to tell Paul how they all could be saved. And Paul told them that they needed to stay together as long as possible so they all could be saved. Verse 24 says, "God hath given thee all them that sail with thee." There was a way of salvation available for everyone on board. This was because God did not want them to perish.

The same is true of mankind today. Peter taught in 2 Peter 3, that these words "not willing that any should perish" applied to the way God views the world right now, in these last days. God's delay in the return of Jesus to the earth is not due to an inability of God to keep His Word. It is because God wants all to repent and obey the gospel. Thus He gives us more time.

4. **God's promise involving their safety was a conditional one.** It was based upon their remaining in the ship. The ship was the place of safety which God was using to keep them alive in the storm. If some left the ship early, that is, before it arrived near enough to where they could swim to shore then they would be lost. It was necessary for them to stay on board and guide the ship until they could reach land safely. And when they did as Paul warned, "they escaped all safe to land" (verse 44).

The same is true for Christians today. God wants us all to be saved and so He has provided a place of safety for us today too. In Ephesians 1:3, the apostle Paul says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." The place where God chooses to bless today is only "in Christ." What does it mean "in Christ?" It means in Christ's church. This same Paul would teach in Ephesians 5:23 "Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body." The body of Christ is also the church of Christ. When Christ returns, He will save the church out of the world. So the place of safety today is in the church of Christ. That is where "all spiritual blessings" are to be found.

Well, what kind of spiritual blessings? For one, salvation from our sins is found only in Christ, as is the hope of eternal life in heaven. Also the relationship of having God as our heavenly Father as well as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are blessings for those who are in Christ. Others include; being a part of the church as the family of God, the privilege of worshiping God, the privilege of praying to God, having help in time of temptation to sin, having a purpose for our lives and experiencing the joy of the Christian living. All of these spiritual blessings are available from God, but they are available only in one place; "in Christ."

Well, how does one get into Christ? We get into Christ when we complete our obedience to the gospel of Christ. One must hear the preaching of the gospel of Christ. One must believe that Jesus is the actual Son of God (John 8:24). Next, one must turn away from their sins (Luke 13:3). Then one must confess their faith in Christ with their mouth (Matthew 10:32). Finally, one must be baptized in order to be saved (Mark 16:16). When one has done all these things, then he is "in Christ." Galatians 3:27 teaches, "as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Baptism puts one into Christ; that is, into His body which also is His church. And remember, in Ephesians 5:23, it is the church which Christ will save when He returns.

It was a great tragedy that only 8 people were saved in Noah's ark when the invitation was open to all. The reason that only 8 people were saved is that only 8 people got on the ark. That was the only place of safety provided by God. Today, there is still only one place of safety from the spiritual destruction that is ahead. How many will get into that place? I do not know. But God is now waiting so that more can be saved by their obedience to the gospel. Where are you? Are you saved or are you lost? Are you in the Lord's church or are you on the outside.