

Acts 27: 1-12 Paul sets sail towards Rome – Littlebourne Sunday 14 January 2024 PH

When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. ² We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us. ³ The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. ⁴ From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. ⁵ When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. ⁶ There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board. ⁷ We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. ⁸ We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. ⁹ Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement. So Paul warned them, ¹⁰ ‘Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.’ ¹¹ But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. ¹² Since the harbour was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbour in Crete, facing both south-west and north-west.

Last week Paul repeated his testimony before King Herod Agrippa, his sister Bernice, Governor Festus and their entourage. This included additional material not revealed in earlier chapters. The words of Jesus to Paul which summarise the Gospel and the reason for Paul’s mission were: *“I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. ¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”*

Festus wanted to get rid of Paul as he had appealed to Caesar, and so sends him on his way to Rome. *When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment.* Luke is back and on the boat with Paul, because he uses the words “we would sail for Italy”. Whenever Luke provides first hand narrative, he uses the first person plural, “we”, and he is with Paul all the way to Rome. In this passage we get considerable detail of the voyage, along with the names of a few people on board. Other prisoners were also on board and the centurion Julius was probably a professional soldier. Legio X, the tenth legion was stationed in Syria, and no legion was stationed in Judea, though cohorts were in Jerusalem, as we have seen in earlier chapters. The Greek says he was part of the Sebastes cohort, which means “august” or “venerable”. I’m not sure why the NIV says “Imperial Regiment” instead of “Augustan cohort” used in other translations. Caesarea was the Roman base in Palestine, with cohorts of soldiers it seems from various legions. A centurion was entrusted with delivering prisoners and would be severely punished for any failure to do so. He would have a number of men with him... not the full hundred, but probably a dozen or two. Julius had several prisoners so he would also have had soldiers with him to guard them. We don’t know if Julius had heard Paul’s testimony, but he seems to have been fair minded and as we shall see later, was prepared to accept that Paul knew what was going to happen better than the sailors or himself, and so took advice from Paul after making the poor decision to go on rather than over-winter in Crete.

² We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us. Adramyttium is in present day Turkey mainland opposite the island of Lesbos, so quite far up the coast, but ships were small and hopped from one port to the next one as they didn’t want to go too far out of sight of land. Julius was taking boats going in the general direction he wanted to go, and switched boats at Myra in Lycia – in present day southern Turkey, a hundred miles east of Rhodes. Aristarchus has been mentioned before being seized in the Ephesian riot, at a time when Luke was also there with Paul. He is later mentioned as being with Paul in Rome in Colossians – as a fellow prisoner - and Philemon – as a fellow worker.

³ The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. ⁴ From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. They got as far as Sidon in present day Lebanon, where Julius allowed Paul to go ashore to meet friends so they could give him money and food for the journey. Paul has been imprisoned for two years in Caesarea, without any means of support. He would have needed funds as the Roman officers weren’t too keen on feeding prisoners or paying their fares using their own money, and usually expected to get money off prisoners for their keep. Luke and Aristarchus would also need money for the journey. Julius probably wouldn’t have let the other prisoners ashore, but he was kind hearted towards Paul on this occasion. They set off for Myra and the direct route would be to go west of Cyprus but the winds

were against them so they went the longer way east of Cyprus. ⁵ *When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia.* ⁶ *There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board.* Julius changed ships because the one he was on was going north and they had to go west. The Alexandrian ship was from Egypt and likely to be full of grain. Egypt paid tribute to Rome in grain, which enabled the city to distribute free bread to Roman citizens. At the time north Africa was the bread basket of the empire, as Libya and Tunisia had a wetter climate than today and as can be seen from the ruins remaining there, were prosperous places with thriving populations and crops. The two great cities of north Africa were Alexandria in Egypt and Carthage in Tunisia through which the grain exports to Rome flowed. The grain ships could carry up to 300 tons of cargo – mainly wheat and barley, but also other foodstuffs (lentils, beans, millet, oil, wines), cloth, pottery, marble, metal and spices. Most ships were able to carry around half this, at 150 tons. The boat Paul was on was one of many thousands that sailed across the Mediterranean sea at the height of the Roman empire. ⁷ *We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone.* ⁸ *We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea.* Luke is providing a detailed itinerary with the winds blowing westerly rather than easterly because it was autumn. Cnidus is just north of Rhodes, so they were hugging the coast from Myra, before heading south west across open sea to the eastern part of Crete. They then moved along the southern coast of Crete to Fair Havens near Lasea, which was a spot from which to find a safe harbour to over winter.

⁹ *Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement. So Paul warned them,* ¹⁰ *'Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.'* ¹¹ *But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship.* The day of Atonement is usually in late September or early October, Yom Kippur. The autumn weather would make shipping dangerous in small boats, and most would not venture out further at this time of year. Paul has been a traveller in the seas round about and warns them. But the ship owner and pilot decide to press on, and Paul, the evangelist tent-maker's advice is ignored... which is entirely logical given that the ship owner wanted to get paid and make his delivery rather than hang around in the open harbour of Fair Haven. There was a better harbour 40 miles up the coast at Phoenix to over winter until spring. ¹² *Since the harbour was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbour in Crete, facing both south-west and north-west.* It seems that there was some kind of voting to decide what to do, as Luke mentions that the majority decided to sail on. Fair Haven was unsuitable, or as other translations would put it, incommensurate. We aren't given the reason it was unsuitable. We'll see next week that they didn't get to their winter quarters.

What can we take from this travelogue? We have accounts in Acts of what it was like to travel around the Greek eastern parts of the Mediterranean sea, and this account details of how relatively easy it was to move around the empire at a time of peace, which lasted another two hundred years on the seas at any rate, though battles raged on land at the edges of the empire. The Romans had a navy to move legions from one part of the empire to another, to suppress revolts, piracy and to get extra troops to where they were required.

But let's look at what the passage says about Paul. Paul had developed a relationship with Julius the centurion, and was no ordinary prisoner. He had been in Caesarea for two years, and had access to both the governors, Felix (who visited him from time to time expecting a bribe) and Festus who wanted to be rid of him. He also was allowed to proclaim the Gospel to King Herod Agrippa. Being a Roman citizen had certain privileges and Paul was allowed to bring Luke and Aristarchus along with him on the journey. Julius had to organise travel for himself, the prisoners, the soldiers with him and Paul's entourage... probably up to thirty people, not all of whom would be as easy to handle as Paul. Julius trusted Paul enough to let him go ashore in Sidon. Luke saying Julius was kind hearted is a real compliment given the antipathy most Jews had towards the Romans. However we need to remember what is in chapter 23:44-47 which Luke wrote. *It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,* ⁴⁵ *for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.* ⁴⁶ *Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.'* ⁴⁷ *When he had said this, he breathed his last.* ⁴⁷ *The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, 'Surely this was a righteous man.'* A Roman officer sees the injustice of the crucifixion and recognises that God needed the praise, regardless of the injustice. Whoever noticed this from a Roman officer was faithful in reporting it, because it would have been unusual, given the vicious treatment given to Jesus earlier (scourged, whipped, mocked, and nailed to a cross). Luke's report which is believed mainly to have come from Matthew and Mark's Gospels with additional material not found in either from a source who scholars call Q (German: quelle = source). Much of Matthew's Gospel is from this source as well. Back to Julius who Luke portrays and a good man doing his job without being nasty towards his prisoners.

Paul's advice about the voyage being disastrous, with loss of cargo and ship, is prophetic but has to be seen in the light of what Jesus said to Paul earlier in chapter 23:11 *The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.'* Paul knows something that the Roman centurion, the soldiers, the sailors, the pilot and the ship owner didn't know: that he would get to Rome, regardless of the disaster that was going to happen on the voyage. Paul has assurance and we'll see that being right did not antagonise Julius but led him to trust Paul all the more. When we take decisions, if there is a choice - do we trust our human judgment or look for Holy Spirit advice? There are tough decisions in life sometimes, and the path we take can be life changing. I wanted my eyesight to be restored, as age has made the lens less clear with cataracts. Praying God would restore them would be wonderful. Trusting God to do this now would be wonderful. But leaving it and leaving it in the belief that a miracle would happen seemed to me to be asking God to do something that the surgeon could do in 15 minutes equally well! What should one do? The people brought to Jesus to be healed couldn't be healed by doctors - the lepers, the blind, the woman with the issue of blood, the lame, the dying daughter of Jairus, the centurion's paralysed servant, and the dead Lazarus. Miracles still happen and we will always pray for healing because we know God is able to heal as his Word promises its possibility. God is sovereign, and his demand from us is: Deuteronomy 6:5 *Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.* Love in the Hebrew is an active verb requiring action and is not an emotion. Love requires an act of will, rather than a reaction of emotion. The Hebrew for heart means mind rather than what we see as heartfelt - again more emotional than using our brains and understanding. The Hebrew for soul means whole being or entire life, rather than some kind of wispy spiritual entity. The Hebrew for strength is your very substance, or all of you. Translations can be slightly misleading, but we get the meaning of this sentence as being completely committed to following God's ways and putting him first in our lives. In doing so, we can be confident of his never ending love towards us, whatever happens.

Let's pray