

THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH

(13) Over the Sea to Rome.

Acts 27:1-28:10. Notice that in the first verse Luke says "we" though he never mentions the hardships he must have endured as Paul's companion on the epic voyage to Italy. In His mercy God gave Paul a second companion in the person of Aristarchus, a Jewish convert from Paul's visit to Thessalonica who had also stayed loyally by him during the trouble in Ephesus. Later he shared, it seems voluntarily, Paul's house arrest in Rome. (Colossians 4:10)

In the story of this disastrous voyage it is exciting to see how Paul, "some other prisoners" and sundry other passengers were amazingly kept safe in the mighty providential hand of God. Even the centurion Julius, of the Imperial Regiment, had an important part to play: he appears as a credit to the corps, a capable officer whose simple decency and manliness were used more than once to save Paul's life. Chapter 27:3 highlights his compassion for his unusual prisoner. And even on this voyage, after all that he had endured, Paul soon emerged as the natural leader. By far the most experienced traveler on board, he was able to warn the sailors of impending peril and to give sensible advice when they had given up all hope. It is important that Luke gives us so much detail of this voyage, because it is from this that we learn how a great Christian leader, teacher and preacher conducted himself under trial and the threat of drowning. Paul's words to the churches were great: his letters were great: but here we see that the man himself and his conduct, his strength and faith in God, were also great. Nothing speaks so loudly, so clearly as the sermon of our lives.

The voyage was dogged from the start by the lateness of the season. Chapter 27:9 says it was "by now after the Fast" (the Day of Atonement) which means it was late September or early October, the tail end of the sailing season. The Romans considered sailing after September 15th doubtful, and after November 11th, suicidal. Already the winds were against them as they sailed close to the coast as far as Mysia, where Julius found a wheat ship on its way to Rome (probably under government contract) and transferred the prisoners forthwith. But progress was still slow against the head winds and when they came at last to Crete, they were glad to drop anchor at the harbour of Fair Havens. It was obvious to the pilot that they would have to tie up for the winter but Fair Havens was not particularly suitable for a long stay and he, the ship's owner and the centurion all decided to make along the Cretan coast for the more commodious Phoenix and winter there. Paul, a mere prisoner, had the presence and the confidence to predict disaster, in Chapter 27:9,10, but the men with the nautical experience felt they knew best, and when a gentle south wind began to blow, they weighed anchor and set sail for Phoenix. (verse 13.)

It is intriguing to wonder how things would have turned out if they had taken Paul's advice and stayed in Crete for the winter. There were Cretan Jews at Pentecost who may have taken Christianity back to their island, but it is a fact that morality on Crete had reached a deplorable level. The dishonesty, gluttony and laziness of its people were proverbial. If the ship had wintered there, Paul, with Luke and Aristarchus, may have been able to discipline and encourage the church there; Paul's letter to Titus some time later tells him to go to Crete to give the Christians there some much-needed firm teaching in Christian behaviour!

And of course, they would not have had to weather that disastrous storm. Is God in charge of the weather? Couldn't He have calmed the storm? Yet how much of Paul's faith and God's faithfulness do we learn from that nail-biting story? Was it worth it?

The rest of Chapter 27 tells of the terrifying voyage. Winds of hurricane force swept down, catching the boat so that steering was impossible and they were driven in a crazy zig-zag by the storm. Apparently Luke, Paul and Aristarchus joined in the sailors' efforts to save the lifeboat, rope the ship's hull and throw some of the cargo overboard. On the third day they even threw out the ship's tackle and, after days of clouds and darkness, they finally gave up all hope.

We could think at this stage that we might never have had the Gospel of Luke or this story of Acts! We could ask why did Paul and his stalwart friends have to go through such an experience? Couldn't God have organised it so that they travelled to Rome overland? Perhaps the reason was, that we can know, however fierce the storm or dark the night, God is with us and we are in His hands. What else matters?

At verse 21 there is a turning point in the story. Enter Paul again, pointing out he was not such a dummy when it came to advice, and showing that he had compassion not just for himself but for all the benighted travellers, including the prisoners. "Keep up your courage," he exhorted them. "We are not going to drown; though the ship will be lost, we will all be rescued." They may have felt a despairing scorn at his words, but Paul went on with the confidence of his faith to tell them that the God he belonged to and served, was right beside him during the night with His promise that Paul was indeed going to make it to Rome and the passengers would all be saved with him. Verse 2 is a wonderful combination of spiritual revelation and cold hard fact; "I have faith in God that it will happen just as He told me" ... (and the method?) ... "nevertheless, we must run aground on some island."

The crew could have scoffed at Paul again at this statement: the little island of Malta was unknown to them. Fortunately God knew of it, and He was guiding them!

Verse 27 begins the great confirmation of Paul's prediction. The depth of the water was lessening: could it be that they were nearing land at last? Fearing a fatal encounter with rocks, they dropped 4 anchors and "prayed for daylight." One wonders how they prayed, and to whom? Three of them at least knew which God would answer their prayers! The demoralised sailors tried to escape in the lifeboat, but Paul warned the centurion that they would be needed and this time Julius took notice of him and set the lifeboat adrift. Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat (verse 33), for after 14 days without food they would need all their strength to get themselves to land. Setting a good example he calmly took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. They, all 276 of them, followed his example, felt a lot stronger and further lightened the ship by throwing the rest of the grain cargo into the sea.

I imagine the sunrise that morning was the loveliest they had ever seen! Under foresail they headed the ship towards the shore where it quickly became stuck in the sand and broke up with the waves. Even in this life-and-death struggle the soldiers tried to kill the prisoners to avoid the dishonour of losing any one of them, but Julius, once again to save Paul, forbade them. The swimmers jumped overboard and made for land while the rest managed to float in on some of the flotsam. "In this way" says verse 44, "everyone reached land in safety."

God's Light comes to Malta.

Chapter 28:1-10. Malta proved to be a haven where the islanders were hospitable and compassionate, lighting a fire to cheer the soaking wet survivors against the rain and the cold. Helpful as ever, Paul gathered some kindling and was attacked by a viper, as if the devil could not

resist a final thrust. But Paul shook it harmlessly off his arm and God used Paul's amazing immunity to impress the Maltese with whatever unseen power this man possessed.

Publius, the island's chief official, gave the fugitives refuge on his own estate; Luke says in verse 7 "He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably." Verse 8 goes on to say that Publius's father was in bed sick with a fever and that "Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him." Of course the effect was dynamic; the way lay open now for the bringing of the Gospel to this little country. In verse 9 Luke refers to a general time of healing, the Greek word for "cured" implying medical treatment, so apparently doctor Luke brought his skills to bear on the sick as well. The rest of their three-month stay must have been idyllic, affording them time for rest and recuperation. Most of all, that 3 months was their God-given opportunity to teach and establish the Gospel to the whole population. At the end of that time a church was well-established on the responsive little island.

And here the author takes the liberty of recounting a personal experience of Malta back in the year 1955. The old ship "Esperance Bay" had been chartered to take 430 Baptists from Australia and New Zealand to London for the Jubilee Congress of the Baptist World Alliance. Malta was our last port of call and we spent a delightful day touring the island, impressed by the cleanliness and order of the place and the friendly helpfulness of the people - impressed also by a little shrine in the front of our coach with the inscription in Latin "The Word of God is made flesh." The island was somewhat barren and not self-sufficient, but up-to-date civilly and in regard to defence. The nation had voluntarily joined the British Empire but during the 2nd World War had endured barrages of, in total, 16,000 tons of bombs. They are justly proud of their George Cross awarded by King George VI so as to "bear witness to the heroism and devotion of its people" during the great siege.

The incident of the shipwreck is regarded as an outstanding event as it was the means of the whole island being converted to Christianity. The magnificent St. Paul's Cathedral, built in 85 AD, is adapted from the grand house of Publius, which he donated to use as a church in gratitude for his father's recovery. The original mosaic-tiled floor was still there for us to admire. In the island that only measures 27.5 kilometres long by 13.5 kilometres wide, there are 300 churches and chapels! "Saint Publius" himself is known as the First Bishop of Malta.

We culminated our day with a memorable visit to St. Paul's Bay, presumed to be where the famous "ship struck a sand bar and ran aground." Sitting on the rocks at that magnificent site, the calm sea swishing quietly as it folded its waves onto the sand, the 430 of us had a service of Holy Communion in memory of our Lord and His servant Paul. Grape juice was served to us in paper cups - "take a sip and pass it on" - yet crystal glasses could not have given us a more touching reminder of our heritage in Christ which has spread throughout the world.

And so to Rome! Acts 28:11-31. After a short uneventful voyage, the whole company landed at Puteoli where Paul and his friends were met by some believers and, as a last gesture of kindness and trust, the centurion Julius allowed Paul a week of hospitality with his friends. Then on to Rome, where their approach to the great city was heightened as more believers came along the road to meet them. (verse 15.) They were just what Paul needed and he thanked God for their encouragement. It must have meant a lot to him to meet these brothers to whom he had written from Corinth some years before, especially as he could now tell them how their prayers for his deliverance had been answered - particularly the last part of the prayer - "that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed." (Romans 15:32).

God miraculously saved Paul from death: here He used ordinary men to save Paul from discouragement. Have you seen this interweaving of the divine and the human as God's working in your life?

True to his practice, once settled in Rome Paul called together first the Jews, setting out the good news of the Gospel before them. A few were convinced but the majority were not interested, so once again Paul felt free to bring his message to the Gentiles. It is surmised that papers about his arrest were lost in the shipwreck because Paul was not charged with any crime, but allowed to live under guard in his own rented house for 2 years - during which time he was able to witness to the whole praetorium guard and anyone else who cared to visit him. He also had the leisure to write his letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and to Philemon, in all of which we see his joy, peace, patience and contentment, because he believed in the sovereignty of God, Who "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will." (Ephesians 1:11)

Paul indeed makes 2 revealing references to the effect of those 2 years in his letter to the Philippians. In chapter 1:12-14 he comments that "what has happened to me has served to advance the gospel." The whole palace guard realised he was "in chains for Christ" and many brothers in the Lord were encouraged to witness fearlessly under the nose of the Roman power. Again in chapter 4:22 is his significant "All the saints send you greetings, *especially those who belong to Caesar's household,*" which would have included slaves and free servants. This church so much in the eye of Roman authority was encouraged and strengthened over those years.

That is not the end of Paul's story. He did in fact stand before Nero and was released and enabled to carry out still more preaching, teaching and writing among the churches. In the end he faced martyrdom but not before he had seen the Gospel message spread from Jerusalem, the centre of God-worship, to Rome, the centre of the world. Today this "explosive" Church is still sending its sparks of light from its great Foundation and Source to the uttermost corners of the world, giving glory alone to God through His Son the Lord Jesus Christ.