

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #55

Acts 27:27-44

We may recall that the sailors have been drifting with Paul in the Mediterranean for fourteen days and nights. The sailors have no idea where they are and they all believed they were going to die. Paul told them that an angel of God revealed to him that all 276 persons on this boat were going to be saved (27:23). What actually is God doing here? God is showing these men and the world that this apostle knows what he is talking about and this apostle is in tune with God.

God is not doing the miraculous here at this point other than speaking to Paul by His Word. He does not stop the storm and float the ship into port. He does not even perform any special miracle for Paul except speak to him through His Word. The point here is this:

GOD'S SOVEREIGN WILL FOR PAUL'S LIFE WAS TO TAKE HIM TO ROME, AND ON THE WAY HE PROVED THAT PAUL WAS HIS APOSTLE BY REVEALING THINGS TO HIM AND DOING THINGS FOR HIM THAT DEMONSTRATED THIS TO OTHERS.

When this trip was over, not one of these people would ever forget the trip or forget Paul. They knew this man was in touch with God and they knew what he said was true. There are two main action time scenes that occur in this text:

ACTION TIME SCENE #1 – Action during the night. **27:27-32**

Seven facts are revealed to us here:

Fact #1 - The sailors sense they are near some land after fourteen days. **27:27**

This ship had been floating in the sea for fourteen days. It was day fourteen since they left “Fair Havens” after Paul warned them not to leave (27:8-10). They are now drifting where the Adriatic meets the Mediterranean (**27:41**). Now the Adriatic is the ocean between Italy and Greece, but it also incorporates the Ionian Sea which meets the Mediterranean and that is where this ship was drifting.

According to experienced seamen who have analyzed this text, a ship of this kind that was drifting in a severe gale would travel about 36 ½ miles in a 24-hour period. Now they claim that if you start tracking this ship from Clauda (some ancient manuscripts read “Cauda”) (27:16), which is where the big trouble began, you are looking at approximately 475 miles in thirteen days and that puts you very near Malta on day fourteen.

Fact #2 - The sailors take soundings to determine how far from land they are. **27:28**

Back in the 1800's the Indians who lived out west were able to put their ear to the ground and actually detect by ground sounds distances of things like buffaloes. Skilled sailors can do the same thing with sea and land sounds.

Experienced sailors are able to determine they are nearing some land by the noise of the breakers. There is a bay at Malta called “St. Paul’s Bay” and navigators say it is too low to be seen on a stormy night, but the breakers can be heard from a considerable distance. This area is known for its east and northeast winds. According to Hackett, vessels that sail by Malta even to this day can hear these sounds.

The depth level was twenty fathoms and then fifteen fathoms. A fathom is six feet. So twenty fathoms means the water is 120 feet deep and fifteen fathoms means the water is ninety feet deep.

In fact, on August 10, 1810, a British ship fell on the breakers in this area and was lost. The quartermaster, at his trial said that you could not see land even from a quarter of a mile but you could hear the surf hitting the shore (Horatio Hackett, *Acts*, p. 305).

Fact #3 - The sailors throw out anchors to wait until daybreak to see where they are. **27:29**

The sailors were not afraid of what they saw, but what they did not see. The depth was getting shallower and the sailors were fearful that they could run the ship onto the breakers so they put out the anchors to try to stop the ship from moving closer to shore. Notice we learn that this ship had four anchors, which indicates it is a very large ship.

A former Los Angeles crime scene investigator who is a dedicated Christian is a man whose name is Bob Cornuke. He specifically went to Malta to see if he could determine where this event occurred. He had some clues. He looked for an area where the depth was about ninety feet (**v. 28-29**). He looked for an area that would have a visible beach large (**v. 39**) enough to contain 276 passengers. He found such a place on the northeast side of Malta. There was a dangerous sand bar outside of St. Thomas Bay and there was a spot toward the island that contained a reef that would easily destroy a ship. In the early 60’s, divers went down into the sea at the ninety feet level and they found four anchors spaced apart just like they came off of one ship. Those anchors are most likely the very ones let down from the ship that contained the Apostle Paul. The anchors now are in Valetta’s Maritime Museum.

Fact #4 - The sailors were trying to escape the ship on the dinghy. **27:30**

The sailors were scared and they did not think they would survive the night and apparently they thought the ship would sink during the night. It had taken on much water over the previous fourteen days. These sailors are not acting like sailors, they are acting like cowards. They were going to sneak off the ship and leave everyone else behind—soldiers, passengers, prisoners. They went to where the dinghy was located and pretended to be working with the anchors, but their real goal was to sneak off the ship.

Fact #5 - Paul warned that if the sailors did not stay on the ship they would die. **27:31**

Here is a great text of Scripture, and it is the very picture that the Apostle Peter used of Spirit baptism (I Peter 3:18, 21). **The point is if you are not in the ship you cannot be saved.**

If you are not in Christ you will not be saved. You can try to save yourself, but you will never do it because you will die in your sins.

People who know God's Word are in the best position to warn others of pending disaster. We who know God's Word are in the best position to warn people about hell and about the horrors of the Tribulation after the Rapture. **People who know God's Word are in the best position to give encouragement and warning to others.**

Actually this seems to be an odd statement. Paul has already told them that it has been foreordained by God that everyone would be saved (27:24-25), so why would Paul warn soldiers who were thinking of leaving the ship? He could have reasoned, some will be sovereignly saved by staying with the ship and others will be sovereignly saved by getting in the water. God is sovereign so it doesn't matter who does what.

Well the sovereignty of God works in perfect harmony with human responsibility in view of God's revealed will. If you want to be saved you must believe on Jesus Christ, which will put you into Christ. If you don't believe on Jesus Christ you will perish. No one will ever sneak by God. Sins will find us out. The only way to avoid eternal death is to be in Christ by believing on Him.

Fact #6 - The soldiers cut away the dinghy and let it go. **27:32**

It is very possible just as the sailors were letting down the life boat, the soldiers ran over and cut the lines. Although it seems odd that to save lives you would let the dinghy boat go, this is exactly what these soldiers did. You would logically think you could use the dinghy boat to make several trips to and from the shore. But these soldiers were a little more radical. They were making sure that all were in this together and all would leave the ship at the same time and the same way.

Sometimes the best thing to do is to remove the temptation even though only a small percentage would give in to the temptation.

Fact #7 - Paul encouraged them all to eat and told them not anyone would perish. **27:33-38**

This is a very interesting text. It is very obvious that God was not sending miraculous manna from heaven for these people to eat like He did for the nation Israel. It is also obvious that they did need to eat and God was not just miraculously causing some IV type intervention.

You need food for energy and if you are going to swim to shore you are going to need energy. God has designed our bodies to need food and these people had been so scared that they hadn't even eaten in days. It was not light yet so Paul said let's all eat because this is important to your preservation (**v. 34**). Paul told them all "not a hair" would perish from anyone. In other words, everyone would be kept safe by God. Again, notice who sovereignly controls whether one lives or dies—God.

Paul took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of everyone and started to eat and all of them joined in with him (27:35-36). All 276 people on board were eating and encouraged by Paul. Now after they had eaten they threw cargo overboard thinking it would float into shore, which probably most of it did. This lightened the ship and they could always walk the beaches to find some of these goods.

ACTION TIME SCENE #2 – Action during the day. **27:39-44**

Now all of the above actions occurred during the night, but now it was starting to get light and there are five facts we see here:

Fact #1 - They spot land and decide to drive the ship onto the land. **27:39**

As soon as it was daylight they saw the shore, but they did not recognize it. In Greek the verb “could not recognize” is in the imperfect tense which means they tried again and again to identify this land but could not do it. None of the experienced sailors could recognize this land.

They spotted a beach and decided they were going to attempt to pull the ship into a bay that would enable them to get off the ship safely and get to that beach. Now a ship needs about thirty feet of water to safely harbor. They spotted an inlet, which we believe to be “St. Thomas” not “St. Paul” inlet that appeared to be a good place to pull the ship in.

Fact #2 - They cut the anchors, loosened the rudders and put up the sail. **27:40**

Now we may remember that they had thrown all four anchors overboard at a depth level of fifteen fathoms or ninety feet (27:28-29). So to attempt to get into shore, they decided to cut all four anchors and leave them in the bottom of the ocean. By this action, these sailors could easily control the ship and sail it right into a safe area. As we pointed out, Kent Hughes claimed that most grain ships were controlled by two great paddles that functioned as rudders which were located on each side of the stern (*Acts*, p. 332). Thomas Walker called these “paddle-rudders, one on either side” (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 593). They cut loose the anchors at the same time they cut loose the paddles or rudders and put up the sail and headed toward the island.

They pointed the ship straight at the beach and headed for it.

Fact #3 - The ship got stuck on a reef where the Adriatic meets the Mediterranean Sea. **27:41**

The ship was stuck on the reef where the two seas met and it wasn’t going to be able to get free. In fact, the ship started to break apart by the force of the water.

Fact #4 - The soldiers decided to kill the prisoners so they could not swim away and escape. **27:42**

The Roman military had a custom that demanded that you never let prisoners escape or you would lose your own life. If something goes wrong in transporting prisoners, rather than let them escape you kill them.

Fact #5 - The centurion wanted to keep Paul safe and he overruled and commanded that all who could swim jump overboard and swim to shore and the rest should grab anything that floats and get to shore. **27:43-44**

The subject of swimming shows up some seven times in the Bible and two of the seven times is right here in this text. This is the text where the Apostle Paul goes swimming:

- 1) II Kings 6:6 refers to something floating on top of the water;
- 2) Is. 25:11 refers to a swimmer needing to spread out his arms and hands to swim.
- 3) Psalm 6:6 refers to David shedding so many tears that he could make his bed swim in water.
- 4) Ez. 32:6 refers to a judgment of God in which He turns the land where people swim (KJV) into a land of blood.
- 5) Ez. 47:5 refers to a water level that was so high you had to swim to get across.
- 6) Acts **27:42** refers to a swimmer who could swim to shore.
- 7) Acts **27:43** a Roman commander commands swimmers to jump overboard and swim to shore.

I watched a program a while ago about the life of Johnny Carson. After Johnny Carson retired, he was in his early 80's and out on a yacht and was an experienced swimmer, so he dove in to swim and all of a sudden he came up out of the water and said he could not breathe. Turns out it was emphysema that came from years of smoking and in a short time he was dead. But the point is even in older years he still could swim. Paul must have been like that.

Now if we put the statement about Paul in **verse 43**, it would appear that Paul was one of the ones who could swim and make it to shore. We know from II Corinthians 11:25 that he says "three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep." We certainly must assume he could tread water and swim. Furthermore, we have already seen in following places he walked that Paul was in good shape and apparently Paul was in such good shape that he could swim to shore. Now keep in mind that he had been a prisoner for two years, so he hadn't been swimming in quite a while.

I recently talked to a man who was a competitive swimmer in high school and set a record for the 100 in swimming it in less than one minute. He hadn't been swimming for two weeks and he told me it is like starting all over again. So the fact that Paul could jump in the water and swim this after being locked up for two years is an enabling strength coming from God.

By the way, Paul the Apostle has to swim. God does not let him walk on water or escort him to shore with an angel. He has to swim and so do others and others are grabbing anything that floats in order to make it to shore. God was no longer performing apostolic miracles by the year A.D. 60.

As most of you know, since my hip replacement, I am not able to jog and run like I used to so I have taken up swimming and when we come to a text like this, several interesting questions about Paul's swim go through my mind and fortunately we have been able to piece together some answers to those questions:

1) How far did they have to swim and how long would they be in the water?

There is a reef that has been discovered that is a little less than a mile from shore. This reef is the one that historians believe wrecked this ship. In fact, it wasn't too far where they found the four anchors. I have seen a picture taken from this very spot and you can see the shore and it is just about one mile away. So what this means is that Paul could swim a mile, which is 1760 yards.

Now I have been swimming for a while and in thirty minutes I can swim 1200 plus yards, which is about 2:30 per 100 yards. We must assume that Paul is not swimming as fast as one would when doing laps in a pool and he is not wearing a streamlined bathing suit or goggles to protect his eyes from the saltwater. If we assume he is swimming a hundred yards every 4-5 minutes, taking his time, it will take him 70-80 minutes to swim a mile to shore. So he would be in the water for at least 70-80 minutes.

2) What is the water temperature at this time of year around Malta?

We know that this event started after "the fast" (27:9), which was the Day of Atonement fast that occurs about the middle of October. The water temperature in late October or early November around Malta averages about 72 degrees. The average water temperature in an Olympic-type pool, which specifically wants the water on the chillier side for performance purposes, is about 77 degrees. Now when you start swimming, your body temperature raises some which makes the water more tolerable, but 72 degree water is still cold water.

3) What is the air temperature?

The average temperature in Malta in late October or early November is about sixty degrees and the month of November is one of the biggest months for rain, getting nearly four inches (28:2). At night the temperature drops to the 50's. So these people are swimming early in the morning with the air temperature in the 50's and they are swimming in 70 degree water. This would make this swim very chilly, which is supported by what we see in Acts 28:2. This swim was cold and rainy, which is why it was so wonderful that the natives had built a fire on shore.

When you get out of this water you would want to get by a fire or someplace warm. A few years ago, on Tybee Island, just for the fun of it Jim Lenfield and I went into a pool in just these conditions. It was a cloudy, rainy day and the water temperature in the pool was in the low 70's and the outside temperature was 55 degrees. We actually had people come up to us and ask if we were out of our minds. I can tell you and so can Jim that when we got out of that water, we did not want to stand around outside and tell stories. We wanted to get inside and get warm.

There is no question that when you got out of this water you would want to get by a fire. Now notice how **verse 44** ends, they were all brought safely to shore. Just exactly what God had said—no one would lose their lives.

Some parting thoughts:

- 1) By this time the apostolic sign miracles were just about over. Paul will do a couple more things, but for the most part, the miracles are over. God was speaking through His Word, not through miracles.
- 2) Even God's best servants faced real life problems, dangers and catastrophes. God's people do get into accidents, they do go into hospitals and they do face danger.
- 3) God was sovereignly taking Paul to Rome, but it was certainly not the way we would script it.
- 4) If you want to be saved, you must be in Christ or you will face eternal death. Paul's grace message is this:

"Therefore let it be known to you brethren that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39).