

# Acts Chapter 27

## Paul sails for Rome (27:1-12), There's a Storm at Sea (27:13-37), Shipwrecked (27:39-44)

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### “We put to sea” (Acts 27: 1-2)

Paul was under the charge of Julius, a centurion of the “Augustan Cohort” which was a imperial regiment of auxiliaries attested by historical records to have been in Syria at that time (circa 59-60 A.D.) A detachment of the cohort was probably stationed at Caesarea.

Luke wrote that Paul, some other prisoners, and crew boarded a ship which was to sail to ports along the coast of Asia (Minor). Paul’s dangerous adventure was about to begin. Presumably, the party boarded the ship at Caesarea. The coast-hugging vessel they were on had its home port at Adramyttium, a seaport on the northwest coast of Asia Minor.

Luke mentioned that Aristarchus, a disciple from Thessalonica, was with Paul’s party as it began its voyage (27:2). Luke had already identified Aristarchus as a Macedonian (19:29). He was a Thessalonian member of the delegation bringing the relief fund to Jerusalem (20:4).

Colossians 4:10 describes Aristarchus as Paul’s “fellow prisoner.”

### Sidon (Acts 27:3)

The first stop for the merchant vessel was Sidon, the ancient Phoenician port about 70 miles from Caesarea. Julius allowed Paul to visit the disciples at Sidon so they might provide for his needs (27:3).

The church at Sidon probably began shortly after Stephen’s death (11:19). Paul had visited the churches in the area at least twice, and probably knew many of the disciples in Sidon (15:3; 21:4).

### The Winds were Against Us (Acts 27:4-8)

Paul’s ship left Sidon and sailed northwest toward Cyprus. It hugged the protective east coast of the island, which Luke called “the lee of Cyprus” (27:4). Contrary winds were becoming a problem, and the land mass offered some protection from the gales. The ship struggled across the open sea, and then crept along the Cilician and Phamphylia coast until it came to Myra in Lycia (27:5).

This ship would then be proceeding around the southwest coast of Asia Minor and north into the Aegean. The centurion therefore had to book passage on another ship, one bound for Italy. After making inquiries, he found an “Alexandrian ship” that met his needs (27:6). Luke didn’t mention what kind of ship this was, but he did later say its cargo contained grain (27:38). Since the vessel was heading from Egypt to Italy, historians surmised that it may have belonged to a fleet of imperial grain carriers.

The grain ship with Paul and company on board left Myra, but a buffeting wind slowed its progress. It finally reached Cnidus, the last port of call on Asia Minor before ships had to sail across the Aegean to the Greek mainland (27:7). The ship left Cnidus but was knocked off its intended course. It then “sailed to the lee of Crete” (a 160-mile-long island southeast of Greece) and arrived at the island’s eastern port of Salmone (27:7). Then the ship struggled halfway along the south coast of the island, finally making port at Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea (27:8).

### The Sailing was becoming dangerous (Acts 27:9)

Luke explained why the eastern Mediterranean was becoming difficult to sail: Much time had been lost, and the weather was becoming a factor. It was after the fast, the Day of Atonement (27:9). Navigation in this part of the Mediterranean was deemed perilous after September and impossible after October.

When the ship arrived in Fair Havens it was already the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). In A.D. 59, Atonement fell on October 5.

### **Paul gave a warning (Acts 27:10-12)**

The weather was terrible, and sailing out of Fair Havens seemed an unwise course of action to Paul. He warned the captain and owner against leaving the harbor. Paul thought the voyage was going to be disastrous and bring loss to ship, cargo, and lives. (27:10).

The pilot (“captain”) and ship’s owner, along with the centurion, likely discussed the situation. After weighing their options, they decided not to winter in Fair Havens (27:11). Their goal was to winter in the larger and safer Cretan port of Phoenix, about 40 miles west (27:12). They had apparently abandoned any plans of reaching Rome before spring.

### **Unexpected gale strikes (Acts 27:13-15)**

The ship’s officers were waiting to sail as soon as the wind changed in their favor. Soon the storm seemed to have abated and a gentle south wind began to blow (27:13). This is what everyone was waiting for, and the crew hastily hoisted the anchor and began to sail along the south shore of Crete.

But the ship never reached Phoenix. Without warning, the wind changed again. Luke tells us that a wind of gale force, called a “Northeaster,” swept down over the mountains of Crete (27:14). The ship was helpless in the open waters. It couldn’t keep its forward course and was driven southward away from land by the violent storm.

### **Fighting the storm (Acts 27:16-19)**

The ship was eventually driven towards the sheltered side of the small island of Cauda about 23 miles southwest of Crete. In the relative calm, the crew struggled to make the lifeboat secure (27:16). Normally, the ship’s lifeboat was tied to the stern and towed through the water. However, in a large storm the lifeboat might be cut loose from the ship and become lost. Or it the waves could batter it against the larger ship. To prevent this, the crew and passengers hoisted the lifeboat aboard the ship, and made it secure (27:16-17).

The crew feared that the ship could be driven to the southwest. If it were, it would eventually end up on the sandbars of Syrtis (27:17). This was the Greek name for an area of shallows in the Gulf of Sidra, on the coast of North Africa. The Syrtis was the “Bermuda Triangle” of its day.

In order to lighten the ship, some of the cargo was jettisoned the next day (27:18). The following day the ship’s tackle or gear—perhaps the heavy mainsail—was pushed overboard (27:19).

### **“Keep up courage” (Acts 27:20-26)**

The ship’s situation looked bleak. The storm had blotted out the sun by day and stars by night. Since these were the two “compasses” of the time and location, the navigator could not calculate the ship’s whereabouts or plot its course. The ancient sea vessels had neither sextants nor compasses. The ship was drifting helplessly and the crew was unable to determine whether they were heading for land, rocks or shoals. The ship must also have been leaking and threatening to break up. No wonder Luke wrote that they finally gave up all hope of being saved (27:20).

That’s when Paul got up and, in effect, told the crew, “I told you so.” He insisted they could have spared themselves the damage to the ship and loss of equipment and cargo—as well as being threatened with death in the sea. But he also encouraged them saying no one would be lost but the ship would be destroyed. (27:22).

Paul could be confident in such a hopeless situation because he had received another vision from God.

“Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and to whom I serve stood beside me,” said Paul. The angel told me: “Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand [trial] before Caesar; and God has granted you the lives of all who sail with you” (27:23-24). In a time of great crisis, Paul again received a comforting message—which he passed on to crew and passengers. So, the angel confirmed Paul’s earlier vision that he would reach Rome (23:11).

Paul told everyone to keep up their courage, and that he had faith in God that things would turn out exactly as he had been told in the vision (27:25). However, the ship would not get safely to port. “We must run [aground] on some island,” said Paul (27:26).

### **Driven across the Adriatic (Acts 27:27-29)**

For two weeks the ship had been driven across the central Mediterranean, then called the “the Adria” (central Mediterranean Sea). About midnight, the sailors began to sense that they were approaching land. They couldn’t see anything, of course. Perhaps by this time the storm had abated somewhat.

The sailors’ suspicions were confirmed when they took soundings. These were probably lines weighted with lead, which were tossed overboard and fed out until the lead hit bottom. The first time the line was fed into the water it measured the water depth as being 120 feet deep (20 fathoms). A short time later, the line was fed out a second time, and it indicated a water depth of only 90 feet (15 fathoms) (27:28). This indicated that the boat was approaching land. The sailors had no idea where they were. They feared that the ship might be broken up on a rocky shore or find itself stranded on an offshore shoal.

The crew decided to keep the ship where it was for the night. Luke says “they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight” (27:29). They hoped the anchors would serve as a brake. When daylight came, they might be able to determine what kind of situation they were facing.

### **Lifeboat cut away (Acts 27:30-34)**

The situation did not improve; the sailors panicked, and tried to leave the ship, hoping to save their lives. They pretended they were going to lower some anchors from the ship’s bow, but instead they planned to lower the lifeboat into the water in order to escape (27:30). The sailors’ action would have endangered their own lives, and made it even more unlikely that the passengers could make it to shore. Someone discovered their plan (perhaps Paul) and told the centurion.

Paul became the center of action by telling the centurion unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved” (27:31). This time the centurion heeded Paul’s advice and cut the ropes that held the lifeboat, letting it go. (27:32).

At the same time, Paul recommended that everyone have something to eat urging them to take some food to give them strength (27:34). The sailors had not eaten in two weeks dealing with all the high drama on the sea and with sea-sickness most likely!

### **Not lose a hair (Acts 27:34-37)**

Paul told the crew and passengers, not one of you will lose a single hair from his head. (27:34). This was a proverbial saying that God would save everyone from death. Paul assured the crew and passengers, in the name of the God of Israel, that their lives would be spared.

Paul took some bread and gave thanks to the one true God for saving them from the storm (though they had as yet not made it to land). Paul broke the bread and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. (27:36). Paul’s words quieted them and they believed they would be saved—but by the God whom Paul worshiped. Some commentators suggest that Paul’s action of breaking the bread meant that he was offering the Lord’s Supper (the Eucharist) for all 276 crew members & passengers of the ship. (27:37)

Paul’s offering of the bread was more than a simple “saying of grace.” The circumstances were too extraordinary for that; it should be viewed as a communion of thanks unto God.

### **Preparing to beach (Acts 27:38-40)**

After eating, the crew and passengers began to prepare to abandon the ship. They threw the cargo overboard to make the ship ride higher in the water. This, they hoped, would make it run ashore further up the beach. Some of the cargo had been jettisoned previously (27:18), but the rest apparently had been kept on the ship. If it was grain, then it was a valuable commodity to Rome, and perhaps the crew had tried to save it. When daylight came, the crew saw the land but didn’t recognize it. Luke would shortly tell his readers they had arrived at the island of Malta (28:1). What the sailors did see was a bay with a sandy beach, at which point they hoped to run the ship aground (27:39). They had no more use for the anchors, so they dropped them into the sea. The crew released the ropes that held the steering paddles (which served as rudders), apparently to allow the ship to be maneuvered more easily. Finally, the sailors hoisted a small sail. It caught the breeze and the ship began to move towards the shore (27:40).

### **Stuck in a sandbar (Acts 27:41)**

The unexpected happened as the ship entered the bay. The sailors hadn't noticed they were heading into something like a reef or shoal. The ship ran aground and the bow was stuck in the sand. Meanwhile the surf was pounding so hard against the ship that the stern was breaking up. The NIV translates "struck a shoal." (27:41).

The ship had travelled about 475 nautical miles from Fair Havens. And the ship had moved in the right direction—toward Rome! It had reached Malta—almost. But now the ship was mired offshore, and it was breaking up.

### **Kill the prisoners (Acts 27:42-44)**

Apparently it appeared to the soldiers that the prisoners were going to jump ship, try to get to shore, and escape. As mentioned previously (12:19; 16:27), military regulations stipulated that guards who let their prisoners escape could suffer the penalties their prisoners would have suffered. The soldiers were ready to kill the prisoners to prevent their escape. But the centurion stopped them because, according to Luke, he "wanted to spare Paul's life" (27:43).

Thus, Paul and the prisoners were saved. Julius freed the prisoners from any shackles and ordered those on board who could swim to jump into the water and make for land (27:43). The non-swimmers were to use any piece of the broken ship they could find and ride it into the beach. "In this way," wrote Luke, everyone reached land safely either by swimming (27:43) or by floating in on pieces of the ship. (27:44)

## **Acts Chapter 28**

### **Paul is Beached on Malta (28:1-7), Sails to Rome (28:11-22), Preaches in Rome (27:23-30)**

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#### **Safety on Malta (Acts 28:1-2)**

So, everyone either swam to the island or rode in on debris, and they all safely reached shore (27:43-44). The Maltese rallied around the victims of this ship disaster much as people lend a hand to those suffering from disasters everywhere. In the words of Luke, they showed an "unusual kindness" (28:2).

Malta is a small island, about 18 miles long and 8 miles wide. It is about 60 miles south of Sicily. The Romans had captured the island in 218 B.C., at the beginning of the Second Punic War with Carthage. In the Phoenician language, Malta was called *melita*, meaning "a place of refuge." For the 276 beleaguered crew and passengers of the doomed ship, it was certainly that and more.

#### **A viper strikes Paul (Acts 28:3-6)**

It was cold and raining on Malta, and the survivors began to gather brush and wood to build a fire. Paul pitched in as well. But as he was gathering firewood, he disturbed a snake, which clamped its jaws on his hand (28:3). When the natives who had gathered at the beach saw the snake hanging from Paul's hand, they said, "This man must be a murderer, for though he escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live" (28:4)

However, to their amazement, Paul shook the snake off into the fire and was unharmed (28:5). He seemed quite unconcerned about it. Paul was a divinely protected person, and Luke wanted his readers to focus on this point. That is why he told the tale in such vivid detail. Paul, the servant of Jesus, was coming in the same spirit and power as his Master. He proclaimed God's kingdom, and in the process was victorious over all, even the forces of nature.

The natives began to get some sense of Paul's divine "connection." At first they were merely stunned by Paul not dropping over dead. Then their attitude toward him changed. "After waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god," Luke wrote. (28:6)

#### **Publius, the chief official (Acts 28:7-10)**

The scene in Acts abruptly switches from the beach to a situation at the home of a man named Publius. Luke called him "the chief man [official] of the island," which in Greek meant "the first man of the island" (28:7).

Publius welcomed the survivors to his estate, in which they were housed for three days (28:7). During this time he would have made arrangements for them to find suitable winter lodgings elsewhere on the island.

Of all the incidents that must have occurred during Paul's three-months stay on Malta, Luke described only one dramatic situation. In this case, Luke showcased Paul's ability to heal the sick, which again showed that Paul came in the spirit and power of Jesus. It all began with the father of Publius, who was sick in bed suffering from fever and dysentery (28:8).

Paul went to Publius' father, prayed and placed his hands on him—and he was healed (28:8). When the islanders saw what happened, “the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured” (28:9). Paul's presence on the island proved a wonderful blessing to the Maltese. They responded with kindness to the survivors. “They presented many gifts to us and when we were ready to sail, they put onboard whatever [supplies] we needed” (28:10).

Malta prepared Paul for his witness in Rome.

### **After three months (Acts 28:11)**

Luke ended his narrative of events on Malta by saying, “After three months we set sail ...” (28:11). Note the use of “we,” indicating Luke was still with Paul on the final trip to Rome.

Paul boarded a ship at Malta for the final leg of his voyage to Rome. It was Alexandrian ship (presumably also a grain carrier) with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux (28:11). The vessel had wintered on Malta itself. The twins were the sons of Zeus, whom he had transformed into gods represented by the constellation Gemini. They were considered by sailors as patron “saints” of navigation and a sign of good fortune.

### **On to Italy (Acts 28:12-13)**

After sailing from Malta, the ship reached the important port of Syracuse, on the east coast of Sicily (28:12). Sicily was about 90 from Malta. Though originally a Greek city, Syracuse had been ruled by Rome since the Second Punic War, in 212 B.C. The next stop was Rhegium, an important harbor on Italy's “toe”.

The next day, riding a favorable wind, the ship set out to sea again. In two days the ship travelled roughly 200 miles up the western coast of Italy to Puteoli, in the Bay of Naples. (vs.13). Puteoli was perhaps the most important port of southern Italy.

### **Meeting with other believers Arrival in Rome (Acts 28:14)**

Even though Paul was still in Puteoli, 140 miles from Rome, Luke wrote, in almost over-anxious words: “...And so we came to Rome” (28:14). Luke was moving his story along very rapidly since Paul left Malta. Perhaps Luke was eager to get to the finale—Paul's work in Rome. He is announcing the conclusion before he has narrated the story!

Behind all of Luke's reasons for writing his work was to tell how and why Paul came to Rome. The statement “so we came to Rome” marks the fulfillment of prophecy (23:11; 27:24).

### **They had heard (Acts 28:15)**

Apparently, two delegations of Christians from the church at Rome went to meet Paul (28:15). They had heard of his arrival during his week-long stay in Puteoli. A number of Christians set out from the Rome, traveling south along the Appian Way to meet Paul and escort him to the capital city. This made it something of a triumphal entrance into Rome for Paul.

One delegation from Rome got as far as the Forum of Appius (28:15). It was a market town and a traveler's resting place about 40 miles south of Rome. A second group from the church at Rome traveled as far as Tres Tabernae (“the Three Taverns”). This town was another halting place, about 30 miles from Rome.

When Paul saw the disciples, Luke said Paul “thanked God and took courage” (28:15). He knew that God was with him and that he was going to Rome to witness to Christ. About what, then, was Paul thankful and encouraged? Perhaps he had some doubt about how he was going to be received by the church members in Rome. Remember Paul had a number of difficulties previously with conservative Jews dividing the church, distorting the gospel, and causing uproars. So, he was encouraged by the warm reception.

### **“When we got to Rome” (Acts 28:16)**

Paul had arrived in the capital city of the Empire, which Luke acknowledged with another “we” statement: “When we came into Rome...” (28:16). This is the end of the last “we” section in the book. Though Luke and Aristarchus

(even earlier) disappear from the account, it's possible that they remained with Paul through his prison days at Rome (Colossians 4:10-14 and Philemon 23-24). Paul had many visitors during those two years, including Timothy, Tychicus, and Mark. And we know that Luke was with Paul near the end of his life (2 Timothy 4:11). Luke now turned his complete attention to Paul. Paul's wish and God's purpose for him to come to Rome were finding their fulfillment. Thus, Luke portrayed Paul as entering Rome in triumph, tempered by the fact that he was here only by the grace and protection of God.

### **Paul lived by himself (Acts 28:16)**

Once Paul was processed, he "was allowed to stay by himself, with a soldier to guard him" (28:16). Paul was not kept in the *Castra Praetoria*, the camp or barracks of the Praetorians. He received permission to stay in his own rented house (28:30), or as some commentators translate the phrase—"at his own expense." As a result of having a source of income (Philippians 2:25; 4:18) he was able to pay for his own lodging.

Thus, Paul enjoyed a measure of freedom, being under what we might call "house arrest."

### **Paul's defense (Acts 28:17-20)**

Paul began by asserting, "though I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our fathers, I was delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans" (28:17). Paul went on to say that after the Roman authorities examined him, they wished to release him because there was no reason for the death penalty. Since the Jewish leaders objected to his release, he had no alternative but to appeal to Caesar (28:19).

Paul wanted to assure the Jewish leaders that he wasn't in Rome to present charges, but merely to defend himself (28:19). He was here to have himself cleared of all charges, not to make accusations against the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem. The reason he was in chains was "because of the hope of Israel"—that is, the resurrection (28:20). This echoes Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (23:6). Paul insisted that he had run afoul of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (most of whom were Sadducees) because of telling people about the promise made to the patriarchs regarding the resurrection of the dead. Paul maintained that this hope had been realized in Jesus.

### **No letters received (Acts 28:21)**

The Jews responded to Paul's defense: "We have received no letters from Judea concerning you," they said, "and none of the brethren coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you" (28:21).

The response was diplomatic. The Jews in Rome were in too precarious a position to pick a fight with Paul or Rome's Christians. The Jews had returned en masse only a few years earlier when the emperor Claudius died, and after being banished from the city. The Jews were not in a position to condemn Paul, and they didn't want to get involved in a controversy over which they might be expelled again.

It is far from certain that the Sanhedrin had any intention of proceeding with the matter. They had been singularly unsuccessful in prosecuting Paul before Felix and Festus, and Festus and Agrippa had actually pronounced him innocent of any crime. The prospect of gaining a conviction in Rome was not good, and the Roman authorities sometimes dealt harshly with accusers who failed to substantiate their case.

### **Against this sect (Acts 28:22)**

The Jews did admit that the Christian movement was being described in less than complimentary terms. "We desire to hear what your views are," they told Paul, "for with regard to this sect] we know that everywhere it is spoken against" (28:22). The Jews must have been familiar with the Christian movement in Rome. It had probably come there soon after the first Pentecost. Jews from Rome, attending the festival, had become converted (2:10). No doubt many of them returned to Rome to spread the faith. By the late 40s the Jews were so incensed about the growing Christian community that they were rioting in protest. The emperor Claudius was forced to issue an order banning Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2).

In Paul's case, the Jewish leaders presented themselves as neutral bystanders. Yes, they had heard about the "sect of the Nazarenes," but they wanted to hear Paul's explanation of what it was about. The leaders appeared to be evasive, not wanting to really commit themselves and reveal their attitude. "People everywhere" may have been talking against the Christians, but they were waiting to hear Paul's views.

### **Kingdom of God (Acts 28:23)**

In a second, more official meeting, an even larger contingent of Jewish leaders met with Paul at the house he was staying (28:23). It would be an all-day encounter. Paul used the opportunity to preach the gospel, in his usual manner. Luke said: “He expounded the matter [witnessed] to them from morning till evening, testifying to the kingdom of God, and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the prophets ” (28:23).

In this final chapter, Luke emphasized something he seldom mentioned in Acts. Paul, in his preaching, explained the meaning of *the kingdom of God* (28:23). Luke had begun Jesus’ ministry with his assertion, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose” ([Luke 4:43](#)). Paul, the disciple and witness, was like his Master who carried on the work begun by Jesus. From the beginning of his account to the end, Luke told his readers that the gospel included an understanding of the true nature of God’s kingdom.

### **The final condemnation (Acts 28:24-28)**

Some of the Jews were convinced by Paul’s message, but others refused to believe him. In disagreement with each other—and confused about Paul’s message—the Jewish elders began to leave. As in virtually every city Paul preached in, the bulk of the Jews rejected the message of salvation in Jesus. Though some seemed at least superficially persuaded, Luke gave no indication that they were sufficiently moved to repent and seek baptism. Nor does it appear that they returned at a later date for further instruction.

As the Jewish elders of Rome began to leave, Paul lashed out with a searing rebuke from the prophet Isaiah (6:9-10). He said the Holy Spirit had spoken the truth to their forefathers—and his words applied to them: “Go to this people and say, ‘You will indeed hear but never understand; you shall indeed see but never perceive...’” (28:26-27)

With such words from Isaiah, Paul cited the Jews’ spurning of his gospel message as a fulfillment of prophecy. The rejection was to be expected, because it had been spoken of ahead of time. In Luke’s view, the rejection in Rome was the definitive one. As the Jews turned their backs on Paul, refusing his message and perhaps irritated at his prophetic condemnation, he stressed his role as the apostle to the Gentiles. “Let it be known to you”, he must have shouted to the departing Jews, “that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” (28:28). Paul had already announced a turning to the Gentiles, once in Pisidia Antioch (13:46), and again at Corinth (18:6). **This time Paul announced his turning to the Gentiles with a note of finality.**

----> See note on Verse 29 (omitted text)

### **For two years (Acts 28:30)**

For the next two years Paul stayed in Rome “in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him” (28:30). Luke gave us no details about what happened during those two years. Neither did he tell us what Paul’s fate was *after* that period of time ended. Many commentators think that Paul wrote the New Testament letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon during these two years. These letters (the so-called “Prison Epistles”) are among the most hopeful and encouraging he wrote. Their upbeat and encouraging message contrasts markedly with Paul’s physical condition.

From his letters we get a picture of a joyful Paul striding around some small room in Rome, perhaps in the presence of—or even chained— under the eye of a Roman soldier. He isn’t downcast, but very upbeat about the Christian life. Why? Because he was welcoming all those who came to him. He preached & he taught; he loved it.

### **Preaching & teaching unhindered (Acts 28:31)**

In the final verse, Luke said Paul was preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ openly and unhindered (28:31). This was Luke’s final summarized his most important apologetic point. The fact that Paul would continue his work!