

**Acts 27:1-44, No. 52**  
**“How We Are Saved”**  
**November 6, 2016**  
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Paul had appealed his case to Caesar, as was his right as a Roman citizen. Festus, the new governor, unlike Felix, neither hoping for a bribe nor obliged to do the Jews a favor, sent him on to Rome for his case to be heard there.

**Text Comment**

v.1 As in the present day when famous military formations have their own name, so it was in the days of the Roman military. As you may have noticed, the next and final “we section” of the book begins here. To be sure, in all likelihood Luke had been present either with Paul or at least in the Holy Land throughout the previous two years, but had little opportunity to include himself in the narrative since through it all Luke’s account is about Paul defending himself before his judges. Luke did not figure in the events.

v.2 In other words, while this ship was not itself headed for Rome, at one of those ports along the coast of Asia they would find one that was. By the way, Luke’s narrative of this voyage is the most vivid and interesting account of a sea voyage in all of classical literature. [Stott, 385] There was a famous study of this chapter written in 1848 by James Smith, a professional soldier and avid yachtsman, and entitled *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*. It was a technical demonstration of the accuracy of Luke’s account in regard to the circumstances of sea travel in ancient times, typical Mediterranean weather, and so on. An old work, it is still a standard text so well has it held up in light of subsequent research. Smith’s conclusion was that Luke was definitely an eyewitness of the voyage but was himself a landlubber, who knew seafaring terminology only as an amateur. You may want to follow the course of the voyage on the map at the back of your Bible.

The only other member of the entourage with Paul and Luke was Aristarchus from the church in Thessalonica, mentioned already in chapter 19 as one of the Gentile Christians who had been traveling with Paul and who, like Luke, apparently had spent the last two years in Palestine.

v.4 With the winds south-westerly, “under the lee of Cyprus” meant sailing to the north of the island.

v.6 It was a ship carrying grain, as we learn in v. 38. Egypt, if you remember, was Rome’s granary.

v.8 Fair Havens is an open bay; a poor harbor to winter in.

- v.9 A Roman military writer tells us that sea travel was considered dangerous after the 15<sup>th</sup> of September and ceased for the winter from mid-November to mid-March. The year is almost certainly A.D. 59.
- v.10 Whether Paul’s advice was commonsensical or based on prophetic revelation, James Smith points out that it was undeniably sound. Gales at this time of year appeared and still today appear suddenly and can be terribly fierce. Once out of Fair Havens, if caught in such a gale, they would be helpless to prevent being driven out to sea.
- v.11 Remember, Paul was a very experienced traveler of the seas. We know of at least eleven sea voyages he had made before this one! They should have paid attention.
- v.14 This is the famous *Euroclydon*, a powerful east-northeasterly wind common in the south central Mediterranean Sea in the cooler months of the year. As Smith explains, “The sudden change from a south wind to a violent northerly wind is a common occurrence in these seas.” [102]
- v.16 Here again we encounter the “romance” of the New Testament. The “we” makes us think we can see Luke himself, in the pouring rain and lashing wind, among those dragging the trailing skiff aboard so that their one lifeboat would not founder or be dashed against the larger ship and destroyed. In the lee of the island the seas would be somewhat calmer and that made it possible to bring in the boat.
- v.17 The sandbars of Syrtis, off the coast of Libya, were a legendary danger to navigation in those days.
- v.19 “With their own hands” is an eyewitness touch. There was none of the lifting gear they could use in port to shift the heavy spars and sails.
- v.20 By this time the ship would have been leaking badly.
- v.21 On being without food, Smith recalls an account from John Newton’s days at sea. On a voyage from Cape Lopez, in West Africa, a storm overtook Newton’s ship and damaged her so much that she nearly sunk.
- “We found that the water having floated all our movables in the hold, all the casks of provisions had been beaten in pieces by the violent motion of the ship. On the other hand, our livestock, such as pigs, sheep and poultry, had been washed overboard in the storm; in effect, [everything we were able to save]...would have [kept us alive for only a week and that only if we were each given only a small allowance.] [118]
- v.24 The world has no appreciation of what it owes to the presence in it of righteous men and women.

- v.28 Smith did the calculations and found a remarkable correspondence between Luke's narrative and what would presumably be the course of ship driven by such a wind and the distance it would travel at that speed.
- v.29 They needed daylight to steer the ship safely aground.
- v.32 Readers of *Robinson Crusoe* remember that when his ship struck a reef some distance from shore the crew took to the boat and all were drowned except Robinson who made his way later back to the ship and reflected that all would have been saved if only they had stayed with the ship. But in the midst of a violent storm and fearing death one does not always make the wisest choices.
- v.33 There was no further need to preserve what little food they still had.
- v.37 A perfectly credible number. Josephus gives us an account of a shipwreck in a Mediterranean port in which 600 were aboard the ship.
- v.39 The traditional site is St. Paul's Bay on the northeast coast of Malta. At the entry to that bay there is a shoal, now sunk below its level in ancient times, which could well be where the ship ran aground.
- v.42 A Roman soldier who let a prisoner escape was liable to be executed himself!
- v.44 Fortunately Paul had made a very positive impression on the Centurion!

Now *that* was an adventure! No one suggests in the New Testament that serving Christ will not bring with it difficulty and danger. What a grand story the Bible tells! But the significance of this text is not simply to demonstrate the adventure of the Christian life, the wisdom of Paul, or the Lord's faithfulness to his promise to get his apostle safely to Rome. The account of the shipwreck, given at such length and in such detail, has long been taken to be one of the Bible's principle illustrations of the economy or mode of operation of salvation itself. To be sure, the narrative we just read is not about salvation in the ultimate sense, the obtaining of eternal life. It is about the saving of life in the midst of a great storm at sea. But the principles revealed in the one are precisely those the Bible is everywhere emphasizing in respect to the other and those principles are memorably illustrated here in Acts 27. Indeed, if you want an illustration of the way we are taught to think about the way of salvation in the Bible you can do no better than Luke's narrative of the shipwreck.

We considered this same subject – the interplay of the divine will and human action – a few weeks ago in a more general way in respect to the promise God made to Paul that he would see Rome and the actions that were taken immediately thereafter by Paul and his nephew and then the Roman centurion to circumvent a plot by the Jews to murder Paul while he was still in Jerusalem. The fact that Luke has included two examples of the same interplay of the divine and human in God's providence makes it only the more obvious that we are being taught an important lesson. But in this case, the lesson is even clearer as an illustration of the way of salvation itself.

We know, of course, we are taught in a thousand texts, that God saves sinners, that it is his work, his achievement in all the links of the chain. We were chosen for salvation before the world began. Christ died for us when we were still his enemies. The Holy Spirit must by his mighty power give us new hearts so that we might trust and love God. In many places in the Bible salvation is described as if it required nothing from us; as if we had nothing whatever to do in order to obtain it; as if we were simply the passive recipients of the divine gift.

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked...But God, being rich in mercy, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” [Eph. 2:1-6]

And what did the angel say to Joseph before Jesus’ birth: “he shall save his people from their sins.” But, of course, as any reader of the Bible knows only too well, in text after text our salvation is at the same time suspended on decisions that we make, faith that we exercise, and obedience that we offer.

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live.”

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

“And to whom did God swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.”

“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God, must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

Precisely how those two very different views of salvation are to be reconciled with one another, how both can be true at the same time, the Bible never actually explains. Efforts to explain the relationship between divine sovereignty in salvation and human responsibility and accountability in salvation throughout the long history of Christian theology – and there have been many such efforts – have always ended up emphasizing one side at the expense of the other. And today, as you know, there are different theological parties in the Christian church divided over this very issue: one emphasizing salvation as entirely a divine work and divine gift; the other as the responsibility of man. The tension between these two emphases is very great, but then so is it between the unity and the triple personality of God, between the deity and the humanity of Jesus Christ coexisting in his one person, and so on. Our viewpoint is limited and must be. We cannot conceive of how both these things can be true at one and the same time; but they are. The human mind is very weak compared to the infinitely powerful mind of God. He can see the whole of reality while we can see only small bits and pieces. No wonder so much mystery confronts us in the Word of God! No wonder there is so much that we cannot explain or understand! And so it is that the Bible tells us that salvation is from start to finish the Lord’s work and the Lord’s gift and that it yet utterly depends upon the faith and obedience of men.

As the famous Anglican, Charles Simeon, reminds us, "...the truth is not in the middle, and not in one extreme, but in both extremes." And as the always insightful John "Rabbi" Duncan of 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Presbyterianism – a high Calvinist if ever there was one, a man of whom the Scottish pastor Alexander Moody Stuart once wrote, "More than any man I ever knew, he trusted in every word, revered every word, and loved every word in the book of God" – I say, Rabbi Duncan, who had a knack for putting things in a memorable way, put it this way: "That God works half and man the other half, is false; that God works all, and man does all, is true." [W. Knight (ed.), *Colloquia Peripatetica: Notes of Conversations with John Duncan*, Edinburgh, 1907, 29-30.]

Very often in the Bible, as you know, it is one or the other – divine sovereignty or human responsibility; only sometimes are the two emphases laid side by side as it were, and never is there offered an explanation as to how both can be true at the same time. Here in Acts 27 the emphases are laid side by side in a most illuminating way even if, here too, there is no explanation provided, no attempt to reconcile the two paradigms of causation.

We see the divine plan and purpose, the divine promise, the divine sovereignty in vv. 22-24. God had already, two years before this, promised Paul that he would get him safely to Rome. That eventuality was a certainty. *It was the promise of God!* It may well account for Paul's calmness throughout the storm. He knew he wasn't going to die! In an illustrative way, those 276 souls on board were God's elect and God guaranteed their salvation. Not a one of them would be lost. And, as it happened, that is precisely what came to pass: all were saved alive.

But how did that happen? In vv. 30-31 we read that the sailors made an attempt to affect their own escape. The ship had run aground offshore and they calculated that their best chance of survival lay in reaching shore in the lifeboat. They were concerned only with themselves and were indifferent to the fate of those left on board. That attempt to leave the ship was prevented by Paul's warning the centurion that if the sailors were allowed to leave, *everyone on board would perish*.

Then, again, in v. 34, we read of Paul urging them all to take food. Those on the ship were spent. Two weeks of battling the storm, with little food, some of them perhaps still seasick, had left them utterly exhausted. "You need this food to survive," Paul told them, even as he assured them that they would, in fact, all survive. Paul apparently knew that their safety would require swimming ashore and that they would need the strength that food would give them to swim that far.

And so it was. The sailors were prevented from leaving the ship by the soldiers – they would not have survived their effort to reach shore in the lifeboat – and the ship's company, all 276, had the energy necessary, because they had eaten, to make the swim ashore. They had hoped to run the ship onto the beach, but hadn't planned on its getting stuck on a reef some distance from shore. But in this way they all made it safely to dry land.

So it was and so it always is. God had a plan, he had made a promise, but that plan and the fulfillment of that promise came to pass through the warnings and the urgings of the Apostle Paul, through the Centurion's confidence in Paul's advice, through the orders given by the

Centurion, and through the obedience of the ship's company. Without those "means" the "ends" would not have been realized. Paul says so explicitly in v. 31: the sailors will not be spared if they leave the ship in the lifeboat. The same is implied in v. 34: everyone must take food to survive.

We might have expected that someone, perhaps the Centurion, apparently a thoughtful man who had some sense that Paul's words had real authority, would have objected to Paul's warning. He might have said to Paul: "Wait a minute! You said everyone was going to survive; that the Lord has granted you all those who sailed with you. How can you now say that some will die if they leave the ship? Did God guarantee our salvation or not?" To be sure, God made that promise *and the promise was kept*. But it was kept *by means of* Paul's warning then Paul's encouragement, sufficiently persuasive that all, taking then to heart, made it safely to dry land.

And this is an exact parallel to salvation itself. It is God's plan, his purpose, the gift he gives to his chosen people. Their names are already written in the book of life! There is no way they could possibly be lost. But to get them safely to heaven, to what Samuel Rutherford quaintly calls "the other side of the water," they are required to believe in Jesus Christ and to follow him, persevering even through doubt and trial. And to that end, the Bible is chock full of warnings and encouragements to believe, to repent, and to obey lest one fail to obtain salvation.

I am willing to put this controversially, in order to make the point, just as it might be said to be put controversially here in this chapter by Paul in v. 31. Election won't save an unbeliever and true faith will save a person whom God did not choose for salvation. Now such a thing will not and cannot happen. You understand that. Election produces faith and living faith in the sure sign of election. But read Paul in v. 31: is that not the way he puts it. And, for that matter, is that not the Bible's way of putting it times without number. Sovereign grace is not fate. In a modern instance of what we have here in Acts 27 we might say: wear your seatbelt because it will save your life, whether or not your number is up! At the same time, a Christian knows to say that he or she survived a car accident because God saved him or her. We can neither deny the certainty of Paul's prophecy of everyone's eventual salvation nor that disobedience on the part of the passengers and crew would have condemned them to death. Here and everywhere that is the Bible's plainest teaching.

All things transpire according to the will of God; Christ redeems the people the Father has given him and no one can snatch them from his or the father's hand and he will raise every one of them up at the last day; and all who are appointed to eternal life believe and are saved. The Bible is willing to make this point in the most controversial of ways so that we do not mistake it: in regard to distinction between the saved and the lost Paul did not scruple to say in Romans 9, in speaking of all human beings, that God made from the same lump of clay vessels for honor and vessels for dishonor.

On the other hand, addressing the Christians in Corinth Paul writes: "let him who thinks he is standing take heed lest he fall," and even say of himself, "I beat my body and make it my slave, lest having preached to others I myself be disqualified for the prize."

No wonder the absolute, unqualified assertions of divine sovereignty in salvation that we find repeatedly in the Bible. And, at the same time, the urgings and the arguments and the warnings found everywhere in the Word of God, all meant to ensure that we will do what we must do if we would be saved.

So, when you find yourself confused by these contrary emphases – and emphases they certainly are; *the Bible rings the changes on both divine sovereignty and human responsibility* – or when someone else brings up to you the problem of reconciling God's part and man's part in salvation, take them to Paul's shipwreck and show them how both of them, working together, delivered 276 people from an otherwise certain death!

And then, do this: give all glory to God for your salvation and strive to remain steadfast in your faith in Jesus Christ!