

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

PART TWENTYEIGHT - Chapters 27 and 28

For the moment the long series of court appearances was over for Paul. Ahead was a sea voyage but by no means a luxury Mediterranean cruise! Paul was one of a number of prisoners being transferred to Rome no doubt in conditions which were hard and uncomfortable. He was accompanied by several friends including Luke and Aristarchus.(Col.4:10) The role of the Roman officer in charge of the prisoners would prove vital as the voyage progressed. As always God chose carefully; this time it was a centurion named Julius who had no idea how he would be an instrument of the divine purpose.(27:1) It is fascinating to study the spiritually sensitive centurions of the New Testament.(Matt.8:5; Lk.23:47; Acts 10:1)

As often before, Luke gives us careful detail of the voyage, the ship's home port, the course and the weather conditions. All this was part of the 'exact truth'(Lk.1:4) that he wanted his readers to have as the basis of their faith in situations which were often a matter of life and death. If we are to trust Jesus in tough times we need to be sure of who He is and what He is like.(27:2-8)

Wind conditions and the time of year were not ideal for sailing in a small wooden ship across notoriously unpredictable seas. The centurion and the ship's captain did their best to weigh up the wisdom or otherwise of setting sail at this time. Personal and financial circumstances probably had a big effect on their decision to go. This story illustrates very well how unbelievers make decisions and the limitations of doing so without God. Paul forecast disaster if they sailed then, not because he knew more about the sea than the captain but because he knew the God who created and controlled it. To them an open or closed door is one of circumstance; to Paul it is a matter of revelation.(27:9-12) The majority decided - and were wrong!

At first conditions seemed to say they were right, but very quickly changed to a threatening situation they struggled to control by all the means they knew as experienced sailors. Day by day things got worse. As normal seamanship proved inadequate they resorted to desperate measures which would lose them money but they hoped might save their lives. As the cargo and the tackle went over the side, hope went with it.(27:13-20)

Paul discreetly waited until the right moment to open his mouth. When he did it was first to rebuke them gently for not listening before. But then he immediately offered them hope. He had at first warned them they would die if they ignored him(27:10). Now he promised that they would be saved. Why the change? Presumably during the days of terror for the rest, Paul had been praying not just for himself but for his shipmates, and God had granted his request for their lives. For Paul this new insight from God would be no surprise because he had known for a long time that he would stand before Caesar. God's plan for us will not be thwarted by the stupidity of unbelievers.(27:21-25)

It is apparent that some aboard were beginning to listen to Paul not just because he had been proved right but presumably because of his God-given calmness in conditions that had panicked even the experts. The sailors however, while their confidence had been restored, saw only an opportunity to save themselves. There had been as yet no change of heart.(27:27-30)

At this point a remarkable event occurred. Paul, the prisoner, took command of the ship! First he instructed that the sailors be prevented from abandoning the rest. The soldiers obeyed. Then he urged everyone to eat, to be strengthened for what was ahead. Again they did as they were told. He even led them in

prayer before they ate. Meekly they accepted his lead. He did not seize power by force but exercised a loving authority because they recognised that God was speaking through him.(Matt.7:28,29; Lk.4:22,32) No-one resisted, not even the sailors.(27:31-37)

As land came near and it was apparent that they could reach it safely the soldiers again handled the problem their way. Forgetting quickly that but for Paul they would not have made it they prepared to kill him and the other prisoners, because escaped prisoners meant dead guards in the harsh Roman system.(12:19) The centurion took Paul's side obviously deeply convicted that this was no ordinary prisoner. Paul was going to get to Rome! (27:38-44)

28:1,2 Q.1 Where had they been wrecked? Check the map to see how far they had been driven in the storm. How were they received on the island? Why was this?

28:3-6 Q.2 How did the natives interpret Paul's snake bite? And his miraculous cure? In what way are such patterns of thinking typical of the way most people still think today? How are we as Christians meant to understand such events?

28:7-10 Q.3 Why do you think God chose to accomplish many miracles of healing on the island? For whose benefit did the Lord do these things? Do you suppose Paul allowed the people of the island to think he was a god? How would he have stopped them?

28:11-15 Q.4 Notice again the detail Luke supplies of the ship, the wind and the ports of call. What means did God use to encourage Paul on his arrival in Rome? Do you think he might have been feeling the burden of his situation at this moment? How could that happen to someone who had encouraged a whole ship load of people in a storm?

28:16-22 Q.5 Having already met some of the Christians, whom did Paul want to meet next? Why was this so? What was his approach to them? Why was it so appropriate? How can we learn from his example?

28:23-29 Q.6 How did Paul attempt to persuade the Jews of the truth of the gospel? What was their response? What was the context of Paul's final words to them?(Isa.6:9,10) How had Jesus used the same quote on another occasion? (Matt.13:14) Why was He so tough on them?

28:30,31 Q.7 What did Paul do with the next two years under house arrest waiting for his case to be heard? Why was he not in a hurry to get justice before the Emperor? Why does the book of Acts not end with some dramatic event or at least a closing prayer?