

# Gamma

## Acts 27-28 (PG)

### Study 19 From Grievances to Glory

#### On the way to Rome

#### **1. 27:1-26. How does God give Paul encouragement during the voyage? How has God sustained you during tough “voyages”?**

First, God gives Paul two forms of Christian fellowship.

It is remarkable that both Luke and Aristarchus (cf. 19:29) were able to go with Paul, in the company with “*other prisoners*” (v.1). The second ship in particular was not a simple passenger vessel but was actually a state ship, under the direct authority of the Roman government for grain trade (see Bruce, p.503).

Why would the Roman centurion let two men simply “tag along” for along, costly, and dangerous journey? Some commentators have argued that Luke and Aristarchus must have travelled as Paul’s slaves:

“...not merely performing the duties of slaves... but actually passing as slaves.

In this way not merely had Paul faithful friends always beside him; his importance in the eyes of the centurion was much enhanced, and this was of great importance. The narrative clearly implies that Paul enjoyed much respect during this voyage, such as a penniless traveller without a servant to attend on him would never receive either in the first century...” (Sir William Ramsay, quoted in Bruce, p.501).

This is speculative, of course, but it shows us that, however Luke and Aristarchus did it, they overcame very great obstacles in order to be sure that Paul did not face this great trial alone. But in addition to these two companions, God provides a very unexpected episode of encouragement and spiritual refreshment at Sidon (v.3) when the centurion Julius allowed him to disembark and spend time with the Christians of the church in that town. Again, we don’t know the circumstances that led to this unusual privilege. How had Paul impressed the commander so much that he trusted his prisoner to leave and return? That does not matter. What is interesting is that the Christians in Sidon saw to “*his needs*” — which could not mean his physical needs. Surely Paul had sufficient food and other basic necessities. Rather, this must refer to the deep encouragement of Christian love.

The basic lesson of these verses is that Christian fellowship is a “need”, which we neglect to our peril. God provided both abiding fellowship (in Luke and Aristarchus) and intense fellowship episodes in order to sustain Paul through his ordeal.

Second, God again sends Paul a special word of encouragement (v.23-25) which we discuss under the next question. At this point, though it is important to see this pattern with God. Every few years, in times of extreme trial, God gives Paul a special word of encouragement direct to his heart. We saw that God did this in Corinth (18:9) and in Jerusalem (23:11). We have pointed out before that we do not need to read this as a promise that Jesus will give us dreams and visions. But it does show us that God will, by his Spirit, bring his Word home to our hearts in unusually vivid ways. (That is what Paul prays for the Ephesians in Eph.1:18-21 and Eph.3:14-29).

Therefore we have two basic ways for God to encourage us during times of ordeals — his Words (brought home to us by the Spirit), and fellowship with his children.

## 2. Compare Paul's predictions in v.10 and vv.21-25. Does he contradict himself here?

Have you ever experienced a disaster

- a. which was due to your refusal to take advice, yet
- b. was graciously eased and lightened by God?

Compare v.10 and v.22 predictions.

At first sight, Paul seems to be starkly contradicting himself, since in v.10 he says that he fears *"great loss to ship... and to our own lives also"*, but in v.21 he says very definitely that *"not one of you will be lost: only the ship will be destroyed"*. But two factors show us why Paul has warrant to change his mind on this.

First, the v.10 prediction is very vague — he does not say the ship will be destroyed or who will die, only that there will be *"disaster"* and *"loss"*. He actually makes no prediction one way or the other about the ship or the life of anyone. He is saying, "I foresee a disaster at sea if we continue — with terrible loss, perhaps even to all our lives." Here he claims no divine authority for what he is saying — he later called it just *"advice"* (v.21), and therefore we can assume that he is speaking as an unusually seasoned traveller in the Mediterranean. It is often overlooked that Paul had a previous terrifying experience at sea. He told the Corinthians in a letter previous to this event that he had once spent 24 hours in the open sea until he was either picked up or washed ashore (II Cor.11:25). We can imagine that anyone who has been through an experience like that is going to be extremely wary and cautious about seafaring for the rest of his life! Thus when they passed the date of the Fast, Paul's heart and intuition told him that they should stay put and stay on land. Therefore, Paul's original prediction, seen as a general warning, was absolutely right.

Second, in his v.21 prediction he explains that he has had a divine revelation through an angel, which revised his original intuition. Now he is told that there is going to be a definite loss of ship, but there is not going to be any loss of life, due to the *"graciousness"* of God (v.24).

Have you ever experienced a disaster like this?

It is not hard to see the two features of Paul's disaster as being typical of many of our life events. First, many times we are caught in "life storms" because we failed to heed a very basic principle or command of God. The 10 commandments, lay down maybe the most basic — don't lie, be diligent and loving, don't have sex outside marriage, honor your parents. Though the world is filled with terrible suffering and evil that can overtake us even if we walk obediently, it is amazing how many of our "life storms" were due to failing to take the advice of God's Word. It is ironic that, since Paul has written so much of the New Testament — many of us have been in exactly the same "boat" as the sailors, with our lives coming apart because we failed to take Paul's advice. For example, one man I know ran aground because he incurred too much debt and ignored Paul's direction to incur few debts and pay off the ones you have promptly (Rom.13:8). Also, many people think Paul is a prude when it come to sex (a mistaken view), but have dismissed his advice to their peril and pain.

Second, most of us can also list the many times we invited disaster, but God *"graciously"* (v.24) lessened the consequences, and we escaped basically unscathed, just as he so kindly allowed the crew and passengers of Paul's vessels to escape. Many of us have taken stupid and selfish risks, or have mistreated others, or have lied and cheated, or have broken promises, but God mitigated the outcomes so they were not nearly as damaging as they could have been.

One minister has said, "Never, ever ask God for justice. You might get it." The theological principle behind this striking statement is helpful. We tend to keep a record of all the times and places where we did not get the good outcomes we thought we deserved. But we don't keep a record of all the times God prevented us from receiving the bad outcomes we deserved.

### **3. Compare the response to Paul's advice v.10 and v.30-32.**

**Why do they follow his leadership at the end but not at the beginning?**

**What does this tell us about leadership in general?**

**How did Paul's leadership save everyone's life twice (v.31-32; 42-22)?**

Compare the response of v.10 and v.30-32.

Why did the men listen to Paul in the storm at v.30-32 but did not listen to him in v.10? There are two reasons — one obvious and one not so obvious.

The obvious reason is that Paul was proved right about the danger of proceeding. Though many of the men were sailors, Paul had proven that his extensive experience had given him excellent nautical expertise. Therefore he had shown his seafaring wisdom to be the equal of theirs, if not superior. This certainly had an impact on the crew. Previously they had probably thought he was just another "landlubber"; now they realized his background and competence in these matters.

But there is a less obvious reason that they began to follow him. It is most interesting to see how Paul in v.21-22 uses the fact that he had been right and they wrong about the decision to sail. On the one hand, he does remind them that his judgment had been vindicated ("*Men, you should have taken my advice...*"). But Paul does not have a proud or "I told you so" attitude. The only reason he brings up this up is not to rub their noses in it, but only so that they will now listen to his assurance and comfort. "*You should have taken my advice... but now I urge you to keep up your courage*" (v.22). See his point? He says, "I only mention my previous advice so you will now take my current advice. Don't panic! I assure you that we will all be saved! Keep up your courage." (v.22) How interesting — Paul only commends himself to the extent necessary for them to listen to his comfort.

Why is this the second reason that they listen to him in v.30-32? If Paul had lorded it over them and mocked them for their stupidity, they would certainly not have followed his leadership later. He demonstrated his concern for them, and he probably got up and gave them this assuring speech at a time when nearly everyone would have been in despair of survival. We all know that the biggest skeptics and unbelievers are quite happy to have someone pray over them before major surgery, and in the same way, these pagan men were deeply grateful and strengthened by the words of this man, no matter what his beliefs.

What does this tell us about leadership?

Most modern students of leadership notice that there is a "task" dimension and a "relational" dimension to leadership. On the one hand, we must get our jobs done promptly and expertly. We have to reach our goals. On the other hand, we must show concern for the people we are working with, listening to their concerns and meeting their needs. Of course, the challenge of leadership is how to balance both. If we simply push forward to our goals without concern for people, we eventually will not get to our goals, because no one will listen to us or follow us. But if we focus so much on relationships with people that we do not reach our goals, then people will not follow us either, since we want leaders who are competent, who can produce.

Though Paul was only a prisoner, and he never sought to literally take the leadership away from the boat owner or the centurion, yet he so beautifully demonstrated both the two sides of leadership. On the one hand, he proved that he was not just well-meaning and kind, but competent. He knew how to get them home. On the other hand, he proved he was deeply concerned for all the men on the boat. If he had failed to show them either quality, they would not have listened to him at the moment of crisis. It has ever been so.

How did Paul's leadership save everyone's life twice?

In vv.31-32, Paul forbid the sailors to abandon ship. If they had done so, they would have been lost in the little lifeboat, and the “landlubbers” on the ship would have been helpless in the storm and died on the boat.

In vv.42-45, the soldiers wanted to kill all the prisoners. Since the prisoners were their responsibility, they would be held accountable for any who escaped. In a ship wreck, of course, there would be no way to keep control of their charges. But the actions of Paul had deeply impressed many of the men, and especially the centurion. To save Paul’s life, the commander refused to let the prisoners be slain.

## **Rome at Last**

### **1. 28:1-16. This is the end of the story of Paul’s journey to Rome. Many people think this account was too long in proportion to its value. Do you? Why?**

Many people have thought that, because of the length of this narrative, it must have some “deeper, spiritual meanings”. F. F. Bruce and John Stott tell us of numerous attempts to read the voyage as an elaborate allegory. Stott tells us of one writer who interpreted the story as teaching that Paul’s boat is the Church, and as teaching that, though the church began in good condition at its origin in Jerusalem, it rode to its moral and spiritual destruction in Rome, that is, in the Roman Catholic Church! (Obviously, the interpreter was a somewhat overzealous Protestant.) Others have seen the ship owner as representing false teachers and leaders in the church, but have seen the centurion as representing those leaders who listen to the Bible (Paul). We hope it goes without saying that such fanciful interpretations undermine the credibility and the authority of the Bible.

Why then does Luke think this voyage so valuable for his readers to know about? Certainly (as we saw last week) there are numerous valuable insights that this account brings us. It a) drives home the historicity of the New Testament, b) it teaches us of the value of fellowship, c) it shows us something of the nature of leadership, d) it provides an example of how to respond in crisis conditions.

But probably the main purpose of Luke is to show the relationship between God’s providential control of history and the witness and mission of the church. All through the book of Acts, the primary theme has been the communication of the gospel through more and more of the world. The early chapters tended to show the gospel breaking through barrier after barrier with success after success. There is Pentecost (chapter 2), the healing of the crippled beggar (chapter 3), the bold defenses before the Sanhedrin and the apostles’ release (chapter 4 and 5), the public denouncement of Simon the Sorcerer (chapter 8), the mission to Samaria (chapter 8), the conversion of the church’s chief enemy, Saul (chapter 9), the conversion of Cornelius (10-11), the planting of the church at Antioch (chap 11), Peter’s miraculous escape from prison (chap 12), the striking down of Herod Agrippa I (chapter 12), and the highly successful missionary journeys of Paul (chapter 13 on). Outside of the death of Stephen, there is almost an unrelenting series of dramatic victories. If Luke had ended the book at chapter 20, the reader would certainly gotten the false impression that “if you serve God, he will give you victory after victory”. But the history of Paul’s imprisonment, trials, and voyage to Rome gives us a whole new perspective. Throughout these accounts (and especially in the story of the voyage) we are given the profound lessons: that God works out his purposes for the spread of his kingdom, even (and sometimes especially) through our weakness and ‘defeats’. In chapter after chapter we see how God controls history through apparent “accidents”, despite hostile behavior of his enemies, despite the sins and flaws of his people, and even through difficulties and sufferings for his best servants. The case study is right here — God gets Paul to Rome and opens doors for him to preach the gospel in the most strategic places, yet he does so through imprisonment, danger, and trouble.

John Stott says:

“Paul had expressed his desire to proceed straight from Jerusalem to Rome (Rom.15:25-29). Instead, he was arrested in Jerusalem, subjected to endless trials, imprisoned in Caesarea, threatened with assassination... then nearly drowned in the Mediterranean, killed by soldiers, and poisoned by a snake! ...We must remember that the sea, reminiscent of primeval chaos, was a regular Old Testament symbol of evil powers in opposition to God... But by God’s providence, Paul reached Rome safe and sound, but he arrived as a prisoner.”  
– Stott, p. 402

What does this mean to us? It means we must not set ourselves up for disappointment by assuming that God only gives his servants comfortable lives. It also means we must assume (even when we can’t see them) that there are ways that our trials and difficulties can make us more effective representatives of the kingdom than if our lives were going smoothly. And extreme example could be Joni Eareckson, a Christian woman who as a quadriplegic has been a help to many, but who, without the injury, might have never a) found God as she did, nor b) been such an instrument to help people.

## **2. 28:17-28. What does Paul’s movements in these verses tell you about his ministry strategy?**

First, he’s a man of consistency. He continues to go to the Jews first with his message (see Romans 1:16-17). He does so because of his loyalty to his own people, and because the Messiah has come to fulfill the hopes of Israel, and therefore they above all others should be able to rejoice in and appreciate it.

Second, he’s a man of integrity. It is amazing that, considering what the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had done to him, that he was willing to call the Jews of Rome together and tell them of the charges against him! This shows that Paul did not deceive, he was a man who operated “up front”. He let people know what he was about. (We must remember, however, that we have seen numerous times how much Paul adapted his communication to audiences, being careful not to needlessly offend.)

Third, he is a man of forgiveness and compassion. He says, *“not that I had any charge to bring against my own people”*. Despite the great abuse Paul received, he says that he has “nothing against” his people’s leaders. Though he does not mince words (see his application of the prophecy of Isaiah 6 to his listeners in vv.26-27!), yet he clearly must love his people. (See Romans 9:2-3)

Fourth, he’s a man of incredible relentlessness. Again and again he has seen that his preaching to Jews divides them and brings many to persecute him. Yet he does so again and the same thing happens (v.24-25). Why does Paul keep it up? Because of the three traits named above — his consistency, his integrity, and his compassion. If we are not patient and long-suffering with people, it is because we lack one or more of these.

## **3. 28:30-31. Why does Luke leave us hanging like this? Does this seem like an appropriate ending to the book? Why or why not?**

Many have complained that the ending of Acts is anti-climactic. All we are told is that Paul was under house arrest and for two years was able to freely conduct a personal ministry of evangelism and discipleship. But why end there? And why tell us that he did it for two years — what happened then? We are never told if Paul meets the Emperor face to face (who was Nero), and we are not given any description of that dramatic encounter. Why not end with it? However, the “two years” statement might be more significant than it looks. Some commentators point out that, since two years was the normal statutory period within which a prosecution could state its case, that Luke is telling us that no one ever appeared to bring a charge against Paul before Caesar. This is very likely what happened. *“Roman law was apt to deal hardly with unsuccessful prosecutors, especially if their charges appeared under examination to be merely vexatious.”* (F. F. Bruce, p.535). It is difficult to imagine that the Sanhedrin wanted to travel to Rome to lodge charges before Caesar that they had not been

able to substantiate before Claudius Lysias, Felix, or Festus. Most probably, the leaders of Jerusalem did not think it wise or practical to try to pursue Paul farther, and finally Paul was released by default of his accusers.

Also, the statement "*boldly and without hindrance*" is more significant than it looks. It means that there in the capital, the leading proponent of the Christian gospel was able to minister with the full awareness of Roman authority, under whose eye Paul worked. It really is a climax. Through great suffering yet through the help of God, the gospel arrived in the heart of the empire and took deep roots.

We are left with a final question — did Paul ever share the gospel with Caesar?

Even if the Sanhedrin never sent a prosecutor, the Emperor could have had a hearing, as did Festus and Agrippa. Did he? It is hard to know, because there is a good argument to be made on both sides. On the positive side, we have Jesus's promise to Paul that "*you will stand before Caesar*" (27:24). On the other side, we know that Nero in his early reign very seldom personally heard court cases, but usually delegated them and confirmed them afterward. Since Luke's mention of "two years" signals that there was never formal charges brought, why would Nero have heard Paul. And if he had, why would Luke leave it out?

On balance, I think Stott is right. If Jesus' assurance that he would reach Rome came true, why not his assurance that he would stand before Caesar. So Paul shared the gospel with Nero — something that would never have happened if not for his sufferings.

Note: Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus are also written from prison in Rome, as are Phillipians, Colossians, and Ephesians. But statements in Timothy and Titus about Paul's journeys do not square with anything we know about Paul from the book of Acts. Therefore, we believe that Paul was released after the first imprisonment (during which he wrote Ephesians, *et al*), and probably travelled for at least a couple of years before being imprisoned and tried again, and executed in 64 AD under the first great persecution of Christians by Nero.

**4. Try to put the theme or message of the book of Acts into one sentence.**

**5. Looking back over the book, what major lessons stick out to you? What verses or incidents were the most personally significant for you? Why?**