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The Shipwreck at Malta

27: 27-44

Late 59 AD

The shipwreck at Malta DIG: Compare verse 31 with verse 11. What do you think the centurion feels about Paul now? About the God Paul serves? How do Paul's words and example serve to encourage the others? How would your estimation of Paul have changed during the two-week storm? What do you imagine the scene in verses 39-44 was like? What was said? How did people look? Feel? How do Paul's attitudes and actions compare with those of the sailors? To what would you attribute Paul'

REFLECT: What are some of the blessings you've experienced because of the wisdom and faithfulness of others? How would it affect your own daily battle with sin and selfishness if you knew that your obedience was as important to those around you as it is to you yourself? When have you reacted in crisis as Paul did - urgent forewarnings, maintaining hope, counseling, common sense, giving thanks, remaining calm, persevering to the end? What is the greatest pressure situation you're facing now? How can Paul's example and the principles you've learned from this story help you in your situation? What is your part and what is God's part in the resolution of your storm? When have you been tempted to bail out of a stormy situation, to sneak away in a lifeboat? What happened? What did you learn? What weaknesses of Jonah can you most relate to? What strengths of Paul do you most wish to obtain?

The tempest had driven **the** drifting **ship** for two weeks. **Now when the fourteenth night had come, as we (to see link click [Bx](#) - Paul's Vision of the Man of Macedonia: A closer look at the "us" or "we" passages and sea passages)** were drifting about 476 miles off course **across the Adriatic Sea. The Adriatic Sea** mentioned here is not to be confused with the modern Adriatic Sea, located between Italy and Croatia. In **Paul's** day, that body of **water** was known as the **Gulf of Adria**, referring to the central Mediterranean.⁶²⁴ **It** is bordered on the north by Italy, on the west by Sicily, on the south by Cyrene, and on the east by the island of Crete. Approaching the bay the breakers were

especially violent and noisy.

About midnight the sailors began to hear breakers and sense that they were nearing some land. The crew was afraid of running onto the rocks in the dark, **so they took soundings and found the water was twenty fathoms deep.** Standard practice as **the ship** approached land was to check the depth of **the water** at half-hour intervals. One **fathom** is six feet, so at that point they were 120 feet above the floor of the ocean. **A bit farther along, they took another sounding and found it was fifteen fathoms deep,** or 90 feet. Yes, **they** were getting closer to the land. But **fearing that they might run aground on the rocks, they threw out four anchors from the stern** to stop **the ship (27:27-29). Paul, Luke and Aristarchus (27:2) had been praying** (Greek: *euchomai*) to **ADONAI for day to come**, and the other **men** on board were probably **praying to their** various pagan gods as well.

Now some of the sailors were trying to escape from the ship and save themselves and get to land at the expense of the others on board. Evidently **they** didn't trust **their** gods to deliver **them** and decided to take matters into **their** own hands. **They had lowered the dinghy into the sea, pretending they were going to put out anchors from the bow.** This would have seemed to be a perfectly natural operation. **Anchors** from **the bow**, or the back of **the ship**, would have given **the ship** even greater stability, and it would have been necessary to set them out some distance from **the ship**, which could only have been accomplished by using the **dinghy**. **Paul**, however, realized **their** true motive and **said to the centurion, "Unless these men remain on the ship, you cannot be saved" (27:30-31).**

But hadn't **God** already promised that **would be no loss of life (27:22)**? Think of it this way; the prophecy includes **God's** foresight concerning decisions that are nevertheless made by free will. If **the sailors** had left the boat, would the centurion and **his soldiers'** lives have been saved? This is a hypothetical question that need not be answered, since that is not what happened, and we have no framework for dealing with such questions. **Once again we are reminded of Rabbi Akiva's summary of the paradox, "All is known, yet free will is given" (Avot 3:15).**

Moreover, in the Bible, even what appears to be an absolute prediction (X will happen) may be implicitly conditional (If you disobey, X will happen). **Jonah's** apparently unconditional prediction of **Nineveh's** destruction is a good example (see the commentary on **Jonah Ax - The Ninevites Believed God**). **The prophet** was wrong (and angry about it) because the people of **Nineveh** repented (which, rather than **the city's** ruin, is what **God** actually

wanted). Why did **the sailors** need to remain on board? It was a practical matter. Had **they** left, there would not have been enough skilled personnel left to **beach the ship** when the time came. Learning to respect **Paul's** direction, **the soldiers cut away the ropes of the dinghy and let it drift away empty (27:32).**⁶²⁵

With the thwarted attempt of **the sailors**, a **ship** badly battered by **the storm**, and no assurance **they** could get safely to **shore**, **Paul** once again rose to **encourage the shaky voyagers**. As day was about to dawn, **Paul** continually **urged them all to take some food**, saying: **Today is the fourteenth day that you have kept waiting and going without food, having taken nothing.** **Luke's** point in this hyperbole is that it had been a long time since **they** had had much to eat.⁶²⁶ **Paul** need **them** to strengthen **themselves** for the last hurtle, getting from **the ship** to **the shore**. **Therefore, I urge you to take some food** - literally, **for this is for your salvation** (Greek: *soteria*, meaning *salvation*). There may be a veiled symbolism in the use of this word, a reminder to the believing reader that the same **God** who delivered **the storm-tossed voyagers** from physical harm is the **God** who in **Messiah** brings ultimate salvation and true eternal life. The theme is not developed **Luke's** narrative, however, and remains implicit at most. There is in fact no explicit reference to **Paul's** witnessing in the entire voyage narrative from **27:1** to **28:16**, though one cannot imagine **Paul** bypassing the opportunity. The emphasis at this point is the physical rescue. **Since not one of you will lose a hair from his head (27:33-34)**. This was a proverbial expression for physical salvation seen in **First Samuel 14:45; Second Samuel 14:11** and **First Kings 1:52**, also in **the B'rit Chadashah** in **Matthew 10:30; Luke 12:7** and **21:18**. **God** had provided **their** physical **salvation** by means of eating.⁶²⁷



And when he had said these things, like a good Jewish father beginning a family meal, **he** set the example, **took bread**, and **said the b'rakhah** that **Jews** normally make over bread: **Barukh Attah, Adonai Eloheynu, Melekh-ha'olam, hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz (Praise be you, Adonai our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth, see Matthew 14:19)**. Then, **he broke it and began to eat**. Then

all were encouraged. And because **their** appetite had returned, **they took some food themselves. In all we were 276 persons on the ship. When they had eaten enough** - being revived both physically and emotionally - **they began to lighten the ship, throwing the rest of the wheat into the sea (27:35-38).** That way **the ship** would sit higher in **the water** and allow it to slide as far up **the beach** as possible before being **beached**.

Then when daylight came, they did not recognize the land because it was not on the normal sea route; **but** despite the stormy conditions, **they noticed a bay with a beach, where they planned to run the ship aground on the sand,** and avoid the rocks **if they could. The rudder** of the ancient ships consisted of four large paddles, one on each quarter. In a **storm** these would be lifted from **the water** and tied down. Now, to guide **the ship for the beaching, they** were untied and let back down into **the water.**⁶²⁸

They also cut off the anchors and left them in the sea. Then, hoisting the forward sail to the wind to pick up speed, they made for the beach. But, despite **their** best efforts, **the ship struck a sandbar between the seas and ran the ship aground** before it reached **the beach. The bow stuck fast and remained immovable, and the stern began to break up by the pounding of the waves (27:39-41).** When a swell reaches an island, its waves split to pass it, and they may meet head on at the far end of the island. At this place, **the sand** carried along by the currents from both directions are deposited as a **sandbar**, on which **the waves break** from two nearly opposite directions, sometimes even running straight into each other. Such a spot is very treacherous for ships.⁶²⁹ **The ship** was stuck in **the sandbar** perhaps fifty yards from **the shore,** giving even **those** unable to swim a good chance of survival. At that point there was nothing else to do but abandon **ship.**



Roman military discipline made **soldiers** personally responsible for **their prisoners,** and **those** who allowed **their** captives to escape could pay with **their** own lives. Acting without orders, **the plan of the soldiers was to kill the prisoners so that none of them would escape by swimming away. But** again, it was **Paul** who provided for the safety of **his**

fellow **prisoners**. **Julius, wanting to save Paul**, risked **his** own life by **keeping them from carrying out their plan**. Whatever **the centurion's** attitude to the other **prisoners** might have been, **he** was unwilling to put **Paul's** life in danger, especially in view of **his** leadership during the voyage.⁶³⁰ **So he ordered those able to swim to throw themselves overboard first and get to land - and the rest to get there on boards and pieces of the ship. And in this way all 276 were brought safely to land (27:42-44)**. Thus, **Paul's** prophecies of **27:22-24** and **34** were fulfilled.

Let's allow **God** to open our eyes to the importance of faithfulness and obedience through a study in contrasts, by seeing the umbrella of protection or destruction in one person's hand can often cover many heads. The kind of cover these figurative umbrellas provide is not only determined by belief in **God** versus unbelief, but also by faithfulness versus unfaithfulness.

In **Acts 27**, **God** gave **Paul** an umbrella of protection because of **his** obedience in ministry. Whether or not the others on board **his** sinking **ship** realized it, many were gathering under his umbrella and found safety. But let's take a look at another kind of umbrella in **the storm**, on display in the familiar account of the prophet **Jonah**. You'll recall that **God** called him to go preach to the people of **Nineveh** (see the commentary on **Jonah Aj - The Word of the LORD came to Jonah: Go to Nineveh**), but **Jonah** ran the other way (see the commentary on **Jonah Ak - Jonah Flees From the LORD**), booked a passage to Tarshish and wound up in a whale of a mess (see the commentary on **Jonah Ar - The LORD Prepared a Great Whale to Swallow Jonah**). Consider the similarities between **Paul** and **Jonah**.

- Both were Hebrews, had Jewish backgrounds, and believed in the one true God.
- Both were preachers.
- Both were called to preach unpopular messages in pagan cities.
- Both boarded a ship.
- Both experienced a terrible, life-threatening storm.
- Both greatly impacted the rest of the crew.
- Both knew the key to the crew's survival.

Paul and **Jonah** had many similarities, didn't they? But let's consider a few contrasts between **the two**. **They** differed in the following ways.

- **Paul** was compelled to go to **Rome**; while **Jonah** was repelled by his calling to **Nineveh**.
- **Paul** faced many obstacles on his way to **Rome**, including imprisonment, injustices, inclement weather, and other difficulties; while **Jonah's** only obstacle was **himself**.

- **Paul** had to sit and wait for **the Lord**; while **Jonah** stood and ran from **Him**.
- **Paul** felt responsibility for the crew, although the calamity was not **his** fault; while **Jonah** slept while the others worked to survive the calamity **he** had brought upon them.

Paul and **Jonah** are great characters to compare and contrast because we can relate to both of them! Sometimes we respond with obedience like **Paul**. Other times we run from **God** like **Jonah**.

Let's ask a fair question based upon their examples: Does prompt obedience really make a difference? When all was said and done, didn't **Paul** suffer through a terrible **storm** although **he** had been entirely obedient? Didn't **Jonah** get another chance to obey, and an entire city was spared? So . . . what difference does prompt obedience or faithfulness make anyway?

God loves us whether or not we are obedient, but the quality of our lives as believers is dramatically affected by our response. There is a big difference between an obedient believer and a disobedient one, between obedient and disobedient times. **Yeshua** said: **If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and your joy may be full (John 15:10-11)**. Although **Jonah** was ultimately obedient and surprisingly successful, you will search in vain for a single hint of joy in **his** life. Although **Paul** seemed to suffer at every turn, **he** had more to say about joy than any other mouthpiece in the Word of **God**.

An attitude of obedience makes a difference both to the servant and to those close by. Servants of **God** can dramatically affect the lives of others positively or negatively. Under **Jonah's** umbrella in the storm, many experience calamity; under **Paul's** umbrella, however, many found safety.

Is the sky rumbling? Are clouds darkening? Is a storm rising in the horizon? Child of **God**, you will hold an umbrella in the storm. You will not be under the umbrella alone. Neither will I. Our spouses and children will be under the umbrella with us. Our friends, relatives, neighbors and coworkers will be there also. The flocks that **God** has entrusted to us will be there. Even the lost are often drawn to people of faith when the hurricane winds begin to blow. Child of **God**, all eyes are on us on **the bow** of **the ship** when **the storms** come and **the waves** crash. May the rest of **the crew** find an umbrella of blessing in our midst.⁶³¹