

Saint Paul the Sailor

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Chapter 27 of the Book of Acts is one of the most exciting, vivid sections of the New Testament.

The chapter describes Saint Paul's sea voyage to Rome, after defending himself in front of King Agrippa against charges brought by his enemies. He has appealed to Caesar because he is a Roman citizen, and so, as the governor Festus tells him, "You have appealed to Caesar; to Caesar you shall go."

Paul, accompanied by Luke and Aristarchus, is put on a ship that will sail to the ports along the coast of Asia. He is a prisoner under the watch of soldiers led by a pagan centurion named Julius. This man, seeing that Paul is trustworthy, allows him to get off the ship at Sidon so that he can "go to his friends and be cared for." Julius has no fear of Paul running away.

The next day the voyage continues, slowed by raging winter winds. At Myra in Lycia, the group boards another ship, still buffeted by the "tempestuous wind, called the northeaster." When they reach a port south of Crete, Paul urges them to remain there because of the weather. But the centurion agrees with the ship captain, who wants to continue.

They set off, and at first all seems well, because the sea is calmer. But before long the ship is "violently storm-tossed." For days, the crew cannot see sun or stars, and "all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned."

But Paul stands before the others and, after rebuking them for not taking his advice, tells them that God has sent an angel to reveal to him that nobody on the ship will die, though the vessel itself will be lost.

On the fourteenth night, the sailors sound the depths and suspect that they are nearing land. Fearing that the ship will crash to pieces on the rocks, they try to sneak away in the lifeboat. Paul tells the centurion: "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." So the soldiers cut away the ropes tying the boat to the ship, and let it drift away.

Despite the sailors' treachery, Paul compassionately urges them to eat, knowing that meals have been poor and irregular as they battled the winds over the days and nights. He assures them that "not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you." Then he takes bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he breaks it and begins to eat. These gestures and words, so reminiscent of those of Christ, give the comfort of familiarity to the Christians on the ship. To the pagans, they show that Paul is the follower of a God who can save them and also knows their most basic needs.

Paul made many sea voyages; this journey to Rome would be his last. Despite all the dangers, discomfort and fear, he never failed to trust God, and always urged others to do the same.