

“TAKE HEART, FOR I HAVE FAITH IN GOD”

Acts 27:1–28:10

Key Verse: 27:25

“So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.”

Who do you listen to? They say that when we’re little, we listen to our parents; when we’re teenagers, we listen to our friends; as we grow older, we listen to no one. That’s kind of sad. In today’s Bible passage we learn the wisdom, at any age, of listening to someone who has faith in God’s promises.

In the last five chapters the author Luke has spent a lot of time describing Paul. He’s been in chains, testifying to the Jews, to governors, and to a king. And now Luke goes into great detail describing Paul’s voyage to Rome. Why does he spend six whole chapters describing Paul like this?¹ Luke is out to show that, despite his chains, Paul is a most credible witness of Jesus. In his respect for all kinds of leaders he reasonably explains his encounter with Jesus and even prays for them to have the best blessing, being in Christ (26:29). Now his voyage also shows how credible a witness he is. People in Luke’s time knew well the myths of sea voyages and their “heroes,” who were mostly conceited and vengeful.² But Paul’s voyage is not only factual; he’s a far better role model than those heroes because he’s a man of faith, an unselfish, humble, compassionate shepherd.

Still, grasping chapter 27 is hard. So much is here—various places, the time of year and weather patterns, shipping lanes and ways of ancient sailing, sea depths and kinds of beaches, all eyewitnessed by Luke and described with great historical accuracy.³ He’s showing this is no made-up story, but a real event. Beyond that, to understand this event we should focus on the people—the centurion, the ship’s owner and pilot, the sailors, soldiers, prisoners, and Paul himself—and especially the role of the storm. Most of all, we need to pay attention to the repeated theme: listening.⁴ Paul’s shipwreck tells us we need to listen carefully to a person of faith. Really listening to a person of faith leads us to faith. What does it mean to have such faith? How can we listen to people of faith? And what results? May God speak to us through his word.

Look at verse 1. When it’s decided in Caesarea that they should sail to Italy, Paul and some other prisoners are delivered to a centurion named Julius. They first board a ship traveling to ports along the coast of Asia Minor (2a). Look at verse 2b. Who is Aristarchus? About nine years earlier, through Paul’s ministry

¹ In terms of Greek word count, chapters 22–27 make up 22% of Acts.

² Most famous are Odysseus in Homer’s *The Odyssey*, and Aeneas in Virgil’s *The Aeneid*.

³ For its historical accuracy, see the seminal work of James Smith, *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*, 4th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1880).

⁴ Verses 11, 21, 31–32, 33–34, and 36.

in Thessalonica, Aristarchus came to know Christ. Then he became one of Paul's traveling companions, first to Ephesus, then to Jerusalem (19:29; 20:4). Now he somehow joins Paul on this trip to Rome. Later in prison, Aristarchus will turn out to be one of Paul's most loyal, steadfast companions (Col.4:10; Philem.1:24). He learned from Paul just by being with him. This was Paul's way, and Jesus' way, of raising leaders (cf. 4:13). Do you have anyone with you, learning of Jesus through you? Let's really pray for this.

Look at verse 3. After a day of sailing, the ship pulls in to the port at Sidon. Julius treats Paul kindly. Why? Julius likely knows the Roman governor had allowed Paul to have his friends come and care for his needs (24:23). He also knows Paul is no dangerous criminal. So when Paul asks him if he can go visit his friends, Julius agrees. Due to his ministry Paul has friends everywhere. After being in prison for two years, he may need a bath, a shave and haircut, some new clothes, and other essentials. His true Christian friends in Sidon care for him practically, with warm hospitality. Their hospitality is a model for all Christians.⁵

Look at verses 4–6. This traces their journey from Sidon to Myra (see a map). In Myra they board a much larger vessel that can travel on the open sea. Myra was the first stop for large ships bringing grain from the breadbasket of Europe—the land of Egypt—to the city of Rome (see a map for the route from Alexandria to Myra).⁶ Look at verses 7–8. This is the first leg of the grain ship's journey (see a map). This weather in late summer/early fall is known today as the Meltemi wind, which prevents ships from sailing westward above the island of Crete.⁷ So what should have taken three to four days takes nine days, and they go in the wrong direction, to the southern coast of Crete. Now, after the Fast (the Day of Atonement in September/early October), it's too dangerous to sail to Rome (9). Read verse 10. Paul, familiar with conditions on the Mediterranean, urges them to winter here at Fair Havens.⁸

How do they respond? Read verse 11. To the centurion Julius, it seems more prudent to listen to those who actually sail ships, and to the interests of the ship's owner, who's trying to get this last shipment of the season to Rome (where he can receive a much bigger paycheck for getting it there at this time).⁹ Read verse 12. The majority vote to try to get to Phoenix, which normally would be just a one-day trip (see a map). Phoenix was a significant and safe Roman port,¹⁰ and all these men no doubt want to spend the next several months in a bustling port town, not in tiny and boring Fair Havens. What happens? Look at verses

⁵ For Luke's theme of hospitality, see Luke 7:44–46; 10:33–35; 14:12–14; Acts 2:46; 16:15,34; 28:2,7; see also Rom.12:13; 1 Tim.5:10; Heb.13:2; 1 Pet.4:9.

⁶ For Egypt as grain supplier to Rome, see Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2:385–386.

⁷ Also called Etesian wind. See Encyclopedia Britannica, "Etesian wind," last modified May 19, 2024.

⁸ For Old Testament examples of listening to wise counsel, see Prov.12:15; 2 Kings 6:8–10; Jer.38:17–18.

⁹ See Suetonius, *The Life of Claudius*, sections 18–19.

¹⁰ Strabo, *Geographica* 10.4.3.

13–16. The wind called “the northeaster” pushes the ship away from the coast of Crete to the island of Cauda (see a map). They barely get their lifeboat up onto the ship. Look at verse 17. They’re still depending on their skills and technology to manage the situation. And they’re so afraid of being run aground on “the Syrtis” (see a map). In the ancient world even mentioning “the Syrtis” struck terror into people’s hearts, because it was notorious for where so many sailors and ships got trapped and were never seen again.¹¹ Look at verses 18–20. In such a violent storm, each day they grow more helpless and strip themselves of all they trust in. They can’t see the sun or stars for many days, and in the end, they utterly despair. Their smart leaders can’t help them. Their skills and devices can’t help them. Their money can’t help them. The situation is bleak. But God is using this storm. With no other recourse, now, they *might* be ready to listen. God still uses life storms to strip us of all that we depend on: our job, our wealth, seemingly strong people in our lives, even our health and abilities. When it’s all stripped away, we might actually start *listening* and learning real faith in God.

What happens? Read verses 21–22. This is not just a self-righteous “I-told-you-so.” Paul is trying to shepherd these people, but they’re thinking they know better. Hmm, sound familiar? Why is it so hard to listen to a person of faith? It’s because they think based on a different foundation. A person of faith thinks based on God’s ways of revealing himself. A person without faith thinks based on evidence, data, and secular reasoning. It’s easy, even for Christians, to ignore God’s word, the Holy Spirit’s prompting, and the advice of a humble believer.

Paul goes on to help them. Read verse 23. He shares another revelation he had from God, this time, through an angel. But what’s more important is what Paul says about God: “the God to whom I belong and whom I worship.” Paul belongs to God, and he worships God. It’s why these men should be listening to him. It’s why he has insight into what’s going on. Read verse 24.¹² No one and nothing can stop God’s plan for Paul—not his enemies, not the Roman leaders, and not this storm. The angel added: “And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.” Even in this raging storm God is going to use the prisoner Paul to save many lives. And God is about to teach the centurion and ship owner that human beings matter more than profit.¹³ The world still treats human beings as objects, a source of benefit, disposable. But the gospel teaches us to value people over money or our own agendas. We all need to keep learning this faith.

Paul concludes. Read verse 25. It’s the second time he says, “Take heart” (22). He’s speaking like a shepherd. When they’re exhausted and have lost all hope, to help them Paul says, “...I have faith in God.” His faith is rooted in who

¹¹ E.g. Strabo, *Geographica*, Book 17, Chapter 3; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 5.31.

¹² Paul already had a clear word from the Risen Jesus that he would testify in Rome (23:11); now this angel repeats it.

¹³ The ministry of our Lord Jesus stressed this (Luke 8:32–38; 12:16–21; 16:19–31; 18:18–25; 19:1–10); see also Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35.

God is. He's the living, almighty God. He's the God ruling over all, even the most violent storms. He's the God who sent his Son to save us from our sins and bring us back to his eternal kingdom. He's the God who loves and wants to save all the people of the world. He's the God who's able to keep his promises. It's not abstract faith, but relational faith. It's such faith in God that makes Paul confident and unwavering. Faith in God gives him inner peace even in a storm. In fact, his faith in God is stronger than the storm around him. Faith in God is like an anchor for the soul that makes us sure and steadfast (Heb.6:19). It's such genuine faith that makes us a trustworthy witness of Jesus, someone worth listening to.

Paul adds, "...it will be exactly as I have been told." He believes what God has told him through the angel. He's holding onto two specific promises of God: first, he himself is going to stand before Caesar, and second, God is going to spare every human life on this ship who stays with him. Most likely, none of us has the personal words of an angel; but we do have many promises of God in the Bible, if we're actually listening to them. In Acts, the Risen Jesus has been telling us, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses..." (1:8) It's God's promise to each person who believes in Jesus. There are so many other promises in the Bible for us (2 Cor.1:20). We need to listen to and accept even one promise of God, and hold onto it in life's storms. Then our faith gets real. We don't need a charismatic personality, a formal title or position, a special gift or human ability. We just need to hold onto God's promise personally. When we do, we become a real witness of Jesus.

Look at verse 27. On the fourteenth night of the storm, the ship is being driven across the Adriatic Sea,¹⁴ and the sailors suspect they're nearing land. (see a map). They start taking soundings to see how shallow the water is getting (28). They see a rocky coast ahead and fear they're going to crash, so they let down four anchors from the back of the boat and start praying for day to come (29). But some sneaky sailors try to save themselves (30). Read verse 31. At Fair Havens, the men on the ship didn't listen to Paul. Later in the storm, when Paul spoke to everyone about his faith, we're not sure how they responded. Clearly these sailors were not listening. But now, as he gives direction to the centurion and soldiers, what happens? Read verse 32. Finally they're listening. Julius the centurion is listening. As they're listening, they're learning Paul's faith, faith to depend not on a lifeboat or "Plan B," but faith to depend only on God.

Look at verse 33. They've been up all night, and as day is about to dawn, Paul speaks. He knows they've been in suspense and have not eaten anything. He knows they're weak from hunger. He knows the storm is still raging and they're moving quickly to the shore. But he urges them to take some food. It seems like a weird time to do this. But Paul wants them to gain strength to get to

¹⁴ Known as the "Adria," ancient people considered it going further south than at present; see Ptolemy, *Geographica* 3:4; 3:14–16; Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus* 3; Strabo, *Geographica* 7.5.9.

land safely after the ship runs aground. He adds, "...for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you" (34). These people may seem like just a bunch of sailors, soldiers, and prisoners. But to God, they are precious human beings. Paul again plants faith in God's promise in these men. Read verses 35–36. This, too, is an act of faith. Paul gives thanks even before God delivers them. And in faith he gives these men something to eat, even the sneaky sailors and the soldiers guarding him. In this, Paul is like a compassionate mother. He has the image of Jesus. Because of Paul, they're all encouraged and eat. Genuine faith always results in serving people with compassion, even in life's storms. Then they dump all that Egyptian wheat into the sea, to lessen the ship's impact (37). Human beings are cared for, while their seeming means of profit is lost.

Look at verses 38–41. In the morning they catch sight of a sandy beach, the ship strikes a reef, gets stuck, and then is broken up by the surf. Suddenly the soldiers plan on killing all the prisoners (42). What happens? Read verse 43a. During this journey, just by being around him, Julius has come to see Paul as God's servant. He's learned to really listen to him. So he helps everyone who can swim to jump overboard and make it to shore, and those who can't swim, to grab a plank or piece of the ship to get safely to land. By listening to Paul, Julius coworks with him and helps every person on that ship to survive, and thus, God's will is done. We all may have a Julius in our lives, at school, or work, in the neighborhood, or in our family. We learn from Paul how to be a witness of Jesus to that person. It's not by talking a lot, or by pushing; it's by holding onto God's promise personally, even in life's storms, speaking up about our faith when we need to, and living out our faith in compassionate service. May God make us authentic witnesses of Jesus to the Juliuses around us.

In their landing on Malta, we see how God also used the storm to bring Paul and his team to bless many Gentiles on Malta. The word for the native people on this island is literally "barbarians" (28:2,4). Despite the word's stigma, these people are unusually kind and welcoming. And they are in great need of being set free from their superstition (6). Paul humbly serves among them by gathering sticks for the fire. Then he shakes off a deadly viper, with no harm. It's more evidence that Paul is a credible witness. In compassion he heals the father of the chief man of the island, Publius, and the rest of the people with diseases. It shows Paul faith, as a witness of Jesus, to do the works Jesus did (John 14:12).

So, who do you really listen to? Are you willing to listen to a person of faith? Do we believe God's promises, even in a storm? Read verse 25 again. In all of life's challenges, may God help us believe his promises and help others do so, so that we can grow in real faith as witnesses of Jesus.