

Derek French:

It's hard to imagine the frightened, cold, wet and hungry state of those on board ship with Paul. Two weeks of mountainous seas must have been a terrifying experience. But all is not lost, because Paul knew that God would save them all.

We are again in the book of Acts and Phillippa Chrispin will read from Acts 27 verse 27 to Acts 28 verse 10 for us, and then Gerard Chrispin will take us through what they describe.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'Now when the fourteenth night had come, as we were driven up and down in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors sensed that they were drawing near some land. And they took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and when they had gone a little farther, they took soundings again and found it to be fifteen fathoms. Then, fearing lest we should run aground on the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern, and prayed for day to come.'*

*'And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, when they had let down the skiff into the sea, under pretence of putting out anchors from the prow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the skiff and let it fall off.'*

*'And as day was about to dawn, Paul implored them all to take food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day you have waited and continued without food, and eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take nourishment, for this is for your survival, since not a hair will fall from the head of any of you."*

*'And when he had said these things, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat. Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves. And in all we were two hundred and seventy-six persons on the ship. So when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship and threw out the wheat into the sea.'*

*'When it was day, they did not recognize the land; but they observed a bay with a beach, onto which they planned to run the ship if possible. And they let go the anchors and left them in the sea, meanwhile loosing the rudder ropes; and they hoisted the mainsail to the wind and made for shore. But striking a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves.'*

*'And the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape. But the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, and the rest, some on boards and some on parts of the ship. And so it was that they all escaped safely to land.'*

*'Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta. And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold.'*

*'But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand. So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live." But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.'*

*'In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days. And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him. So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed. They also honoured us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary'*

Gerard Chrispin:

By now the ship has been driven and tossed about in hurricane-like conditions for two weeks. At midnight the sailors sense, but cannot see, that they are approaching land. They take soundings of the ocean depth and find it is getting shallower. A fathom is about two metres. The first sounding is 20 fathoms, then fifteen (or 40 metres), followed by 30 metres. They now fear grounding the ship on rocks, so they drop four anchors from the ship's stern. They pray for daylight when they can assess their position better, if they can survive till then.

Now the sailors try to escape from the ship, but Paul has seen them. He makes the first of his two important interventions. This one is vital. Paul tells the centurion and soldiers that everyone on board will be lost unless the sailors stay on board. The soldiers cut the ropes that are lowering the skiff. The skiff is lost in the sea but now all those on board the ship can be saved.

Paul takes command. He presses everyone to eat food. Perhaps sea sickness is one big reason why no one has really eaten over the last two weeks. He also assures them that they will live. The man for the crisis steps up again. At dawn he thanks God before them for the bread that they all will eat, and breaks it.

All two hundred and seventy six of them are encouraged by God's servant. They eat as much as they want and then lighten the ship again by throwing the wheat into the sea.

The early morning light reveals they are near land. They do not recognise it as Malta, which appropriately means 'a place of refuge'. They see the bay, now aptly called 'Saint Paul's Bay', and a beach.

The wisdom of Paul's advice to keep the sailors on board is now fully justified. Their expertise is now essential. They cast off the four anchors which had been deliberately slowing the ship's progress. They let go the rudder ropes; now the sea will determine where the ship goes. But as they progress toward the shore, they run aground where two seas meet. The ship's prow becomes immovable, but the stern is battered and broken by the heavy seas.

The soldiers know that it is likely that they will have to pay the price with their own lives if any prisoner escapes, so they plan to kill the prisoners, but Julius, the centurion, stops them. The reason Julius saves them all is that he wants to save Paul. He is obviously impressed, having seen something of Paul's saviour in his servant. There are other centurions in the Bible who come to trust in Christ and are blessed. We are not told if Julius became one of them, but who would doubt that Paul would have shared with Julius something of the death of Christ on the cross to take the punishment for his sins. And surely, as Paul explains to the centurion why his appeal to Caesar concerns the resurrection from the dead, he will point out that Jesus rose from the tomb and lives today to enter the lives of all who will come to him. One thing is sure; it is because of Paul being on board that all will be saved.

Julius is a good man for a crisis too. He now commands swimmers to jump overboard and swim to shore. With that wind behind them, pushing them to the beach, they will get there soon. The others are told to hang on to anything that floats. Though not very stylish, they will paddle or surf to safety. God's promise to Paul is of course realised, and so it was that they all escaped safely to land.

Even today, many tourists talk about the friendliness of the Maltese. Here they not only show kindness but unusual kindness to the escapees from the ship wreck. The kind locals light a fire for them. The great, but self-effacing apostle Paul is out gathering sticks to burn. As he puts them on the fire, a poisonous viper, hidden among the sticks, escapes the heat and fastens itself to Paul's hand. The Maltese observers conclude that Paul must be a murderer who has escaped the ship wreck, but that inevitable justice has now found him out. They know that victims of the island's poisonous vipers invariably swell up and die, or just die immediately. They expect Paul to be the next to fall.

But God wants Paul in Rome, remember? He shrugs off the viper into the fire. There are no ill effects. The people gaze at him for some time. He is still alive! They then change their verdict about Paul from being an escaped murderer to being a God. When with Barnabas Paul was wrongly regarded as a god, he went into mourning and tore his clothes. He is determined to obey the words of Jesus, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only you shall serve.' Paul's attitude is like that of John the Baptist who said of the Lord Jesus Christ, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' We should be like that too.

In Malta, Publius shows great hospitality and welcomes them warmly. Publius is believed to be the Roman governor of the island. He receives his guests and entertains them for three days. His father contracts fever and dysentery, a very nasty combination. Paul is obviously known as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. He could hardly have spent so much time with Publius, having come to the island as a prisoner, without explaining why he is there and what he is hoping to do.

Paul prays for his kind host's father. He lays his hands on him and God heals the older man. This opens a door to others on the island who suffer with diseases. They come to Paul for healing, and God heals them too. We do not read of any sermon being preached, but Paul will be making known to all his essential and vital message of Christ crucified and risen from the dead. He will make it clear that what he does is only through Jesus Christ, and that those who are healed need to trust Jesus personally.

Paul's new friends in Malta are obviously impressed with their Christian guests. They honour their visitors in many ways. They generously provide all their needs when they leave. God is so good to all who know and follow him He generously deals with us directly and often he also channels his kindness through others.

Derek French:

It's a wonderful fact that God's plans for his children are always fulfilled, whatever difficulties may come in the way. Here, God was determined to bring Paul to Rome and shipwreck was not going to stop him.

Elsewhere in the Bible we are told God's plan is to bring many sons, that is those who trust in Jesus, to bring them to glory. How blessed to know his plans always succeed!