

Acts Series Part 66

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[0 : 0 0] On the 13th of January, the Costa Concordia hit a reef off the coast of Italy. In one fleeting moment, a cruise became a crisis. How would those on board respond in the midst of the crisis? I think we all know about Captain Francesco Schettino, the man upon whose shoulders rested the safety and security of all, conveniently fell into a lifeboat. I think that's an accurate quote of his own testimony. And he fell into a lifeboat hours before all the surviving passengers had been evacuated from the vessel. You know the measure of a man in a crisis, and Captain

Schettino was found wanting. You will not have heard, I imagine, of Erika Soria, a young Peruvian waitress on the Costa Concordia on that fateful night. Her lifeless body was found on the sixth deck sixteen days later. The seventeenth confirmed fatality. She was found wearing the ship's uniform, uniform, but no life jacket. And that was a source of surprise and mystery to the divers that she would be found in that way. How could that be? How could she have been so careless? How could she have so cavalierly disregarded her own safety and not even put on a life jacket? Well, eyewitnesses later explain the mystery. Erika, having helped dozens of passengers into the lifeboats, gave her life jacket to an elderly man who had no life jacket. And in the giving of her life jacket she also gave. It tragically transpired her own life. You know the measure of a woman in a crisis, and Erika showed her true, noble, and heroic colors on that night in the Mediterranean. I wonder how would you shape up in a crisis. What colors would you show in the midst of a crisis? Well, some two thousand years ago, another ship plied its trade in the same Mediterranean Sea, as it made its way from Turkey, what we now know as Turkey, that's the modern name, to Italy. And that ship ran aground also. But miraculously, no lives were lost. And on that ship sailed the

Apostle Paul. Immersed in a crisis, he too showed his true colors. And as we encounter Paul in a crisis this evening, and as we were given an insight into the measure of the man, we would do well to listen to his exhortation to the believers in Corinth, that also is extended to ourselves. An exhortation that's recorded in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 and verse 1, where we read Paul expressing himself in this way, follow my example as I follow the example of Christ. And as we do shadow Paul on this occasion, on this journey and shipwreck, let's do so with that exhortation in our ears and mind. And that's what we want to do.

We want to shadow Paul on this voyage and highlight those occasions when Paul demonstrates what kind of man he is. And very particularly in the midst of a crisis. Now, given our purpose, we will leave untouched large sections of the account that do not directly speak of Paul. And particularly, we will leave aside in great measure the fascinating maritime insights found in the chapter. For those of you who may be interested, because the chapter is bursting with detail about the journey, and as I say, details that would be of particular interest to those who are interested in the sea and in sailing and that world.

And as I say, if there is anybody who would like to delve deeper, if you forgive the pun, into this particular aspect of the chapter, there is a book by a Scottish author called James Smith that goes right back to the 19th century. It was first edited in 1848. But it remains the definitive statement on this chapter with regard to that aspect of things. All the maritime details that even as we've read, maybe have been, you know, clear in what detail we are given by Luke of that aspect of things.

[5 : 42] The name of the book is *The Voyage and Shipwreck of Saint Paul*. Probably not bedtime reading, but maybe on a holiday on some Mediterranean island, perhaps, it would be suitable. Maybe even on a cruise, if anybody's bold enough to go on a cruise. Well, the journey to Rome begins on a ship sailing for Asia Minor. This journey of Paul and his companions begins, presumably from Caesarea, where we have left him in the previous chapter or some nearby port. And at the very outset of this journey, before the crisis erupts, we discover a revealing detail concerning Paul that will prove significant as the voyage progresses. We discover right at the very beginning that Paul was a man of many friends. Notice in verse 3, the next day, so this is just day two of the voyage, the next day we landed at Sidon. And Julius, who we've already been introduced to as the centurion, who was responsible for the care of Paul and the other prisoners, and indeed for the ship itself, in terms of the security, if you wish, of the ship. Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so that they might provide for his needs. Now, clearly, these were friends in Sidon, on land. So, he was allowed to leave the ship, perhaps accompanied by a soldier. But this is described as a kindness that was afforded to Paul. Now, I want to mention what I want to mention here quite swiftly, because I want to move on to the crisis, as it were. But there is something quite interesting here about Paul as a man of many friends. The question is, who were these friends that are referred to here in verse 3? His friends.

I think we just presume, probably quite rightly, that, well, they would have been the Christian community in Sidon. And I think we would be right to come to that conclusion. But the interesting thing is that in the original Greek, the phrase that is translated, or the part of the sentence that is translated there in verse 3 as, his friends, is actually, in Greek, the friends. You say, well, what's the big deal? And maybe there isn't a big deal. But there possibly is significance in that.

And it's possible that what we have here is the beginning of a nickname, almost, for the Christians. The Christians were known as the friends. And why were they known as the friends? Well, because people observed the life that they lived and community, the way they cared for one another. And so, they come to be known, it would seem, or it is possible at any rate, as the friends. So, his friends are the Christians. And so, it's perfectly reasonable to speak of them as his friends. But there is this curious detail that what is actually said is that he was allowed to go to the friends so that they might provide for his need. And it's a small detail, but maybe one that would give us pause for thought.

Could the same be said of us? Is that what we are? The friends. Believers, but friends also, one with another. It's possible, and it is by no means conclusive, but it's possible that in the third letter of John, and in chapter 15, we have the same use of this terminology of the friends to describe the Christians. There in the final greeting, we read as follows, peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name. Well, Paul has friends inside him, but Paul, it would seem, is quick to make other friends. We've noticed that in verse 3 how the centurion affords him this kindness. The centurion was under no obligation, quite the contrary, to grant Paul the opportunity to go and see his friends, but he does. Now, that may have been because the centurion, Julius, was a kind man, and that perhaps in itself would be sufficient to explain his kindness. But I wonder, is it not likely that Paul had already, even in the brief time, that they had known each other?

Well, possibly just a couple of days, though there may have been some time before the voyage actually began, when they were already together. But a very brief time in any case. But is it not possible that even in that very brief time, Paul had already made a favorable impression on Julius? Paul's manner, Paul's courtesy, his respect, his friendliness towards Julius. And so, it would seem that we have here Paul as one who is quick to make new friends, with whom, in turn, he could share the gospel.

[10 : 44] Now, at the end of the chapter, of course, we realize that this friendship, if we can call it that, proved very significant, in that when the soldiers at the time of the shipwreck are concerned that the prisoners would escape, and their intention is to kill the prisoners, and of course that would have included Paul, it is the centurion who stops them and says, no, don't do that. And so, this friendship, if we wish to call it that, proved a very important one for Paul, not that, of course, that he had that intention as he began this relationship or friendship with the centurion. But moving on, the ship arrives in Asia Minor, and the centurion, Julius, is quick to secure a ship bound for Italy. And the designation of the ship secured is an Alexandrian ship. And that would suggest, and the chapter confirms that this is a reasonable conclusion, that this ship was part of a grain fleet that would make the route from

Alexandria and Egypt to Italy. We notice in verse 38, just to see how that is confirmed, that when the cargo is being thrown overboard, the cargo is identified as grain. And Egypt was the grain basket of Rome. And so, ships would ply their trade from Alexandria, they would sail due north to Turkey, and then across to Italy, hugging the coast, because to have crossed the open sea of the Mediterranean would have been too dangerous. And so, many ships would ply this route, Egypt across to Turkey, along to Italy, carrying grain. And the trade was so important that the empire essentially provided, or effectively provided, a form of insurance to the owners of the ships, so that if they were a shipwrecked, they would be compensated. The ships didn't belong to the empire, but there was this agreement, presumably because the empire was concerned that had they not given that security, maybe some ship owners would have not taken the risk of the journey. Well, we don't know the ins and outs of it. But it's one of these vessels that the centurion secures to continue the journey on to Italy. But as they continue their journey, bad weather soon begins to disrupt the plans, and they're forced to navigate to the south of Crete, where they find a harbor, hopefully named, a fair havens. We notice that in verse 8. And it is here that Paul reappears.

And we find him, as he reappears in the story, to be a man of wise words. We've already found him to be a man of many friends, but now we find him as a man of wise words. We read there in verses 9 and 10, much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous, because by now it was after the fast. This really gives us a time reference, which suggests that it was entering into winter, when it would be very dangerous to sail. So Paul warned them, men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous, and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.

It becomes clear to all that they are not going to make it to Italy. That is what they had hoped to be able to do. But everybody has agreed that that is not possible. Notice in verse 12, since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix, and winter there. So everybody's agreed that they're not going to make it to Italy, but the debate is whether they stay in fair havens, or they move along the coast to a more suitable harbor to spend the winter, presumably December, January, February. So this is the debate, and Paul gives his advice.

And Paul's advice is grounded in considerable knowledge of matters maritime. There are those who have calculated how many journeys Paul would have already made on the Mediterranean, Mediterranean. And the calculation, it's not something I've calculated myself, but others have, and apparently he would have had about 11 Mediterranean journeys already that we know of, with a total mileage of something around three and a half thousand miles. So he was somebody very familiar with the sea. And on the basis of that familiarity, of that experience, he gives his advice, advice that proves to be very wise advice. Some wonder, in the light of what we discover subsequently of Paul's words to the captain and to those on the boat, whether there is a prophetic element in the words that we have here in verse 10. But it seems to me that there's no indication that there is. This is Paul acting on the basis of his own wisdom, of his own common sense, of his own experience. All of these things, of course,

[15 : 53] God-given, but nothing prophetic in the advice that he has given. I think that would be confirmed by the fact that some of what he says here will prove to be mistaken. Notice that in verse 10, he suggests, or states that if they do sail on to this other harbor in Crete, that their very lives would be in danger. Now we know subsequently from what Paul himself says that that wasn't the case, that they were all to be spared and protected. So that certainly, I think, would confirm that when Paul is speaking here, it is wise advice, it is sound counsel, it is good common sense, but there's nothing prophetic about it. Well, his words were wise, even though they were ignored. I suppose much blame can't be attributed to the centurion. He has to choose between what Paul says, who's a prisoner, a passenger, and he has the pilot and the owner of the ship saying, it's no problem, it's just a short hop to this harbor. We can do it easily. But Paul, we discover, is a man of wise words. Now the voyage continues, and though the journey to the next harbor along the coast, the next one, but the one that they were aiming for, was a very short journey of just a few miles, but everything goes horribly wrong.

We read there in verse 14, before very long, a wind of hurricane force called the Northeaster swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind. So we gave way to it and were driven along. The captain and the crew and even the passengers in what follows, in what is described, in what follows, do all that they can to avert disaster. But in the end, all hope is lost. Even Luke, who is accompanying Paul, as we've already noted, would seem to have come to the same conclusion that all hope was gone. There in verse 20, having struggled for several days, we read, when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

There was no gear. It had been thrown into the sea. No sun, no stars, no hope. And in the midst of this somber, desperate, and hopeless setting, we find Paul to be a man who brings hope and help in the midst of a crisis. This is what we're particularly interested in noticing. Paul is a man who brings hope and help in the midst of a crisis. In verse 21, following a gentle, I told you so, there, a man, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete. Paul wasn't averse to maybe falling to the temptation of an I told you so. We all like an I told you so. Well, this is seemingly what Paul is doing here. I told you not to sail, but you did. However, it's a gentle rebuke, I think.

But what he goes on to bring them is words of hope in the midst of a crisis. What are the words that he brings? Well, he encourages them to keep up your courage. Keep up your courage. All hope seemingly is lost, but Paul says to them, keep up your courage. Don't give up.

All is not lost. There is hope. But what can we say of this hope that Paul brings? You know, are they just nice words, encouraging words, cheerful words, but really words that don't have any weight behind them? Well, not at all, because this hope that he brings is grounded in the promises and character of God. Grounded firstly in the promises of God, if we look back a little, we know that Paul had already been promised that he would reach Rome very directly by God Himself. In chapter 23 and verse 11, the Lord stood near Paul and said, take courage as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome. So there was a historic promise that he could ground his hope in. Now that does rather beg the question, how perhaps earlier in the voyage had he forgotten that promise? Had he begun to doubt himself when he spoke of the danger of lives being lost, presumably including his own, certainly as a possibility. Well, even the promise that he did have gave no guarantees for his traveling companions. Even if Paul had clung to that promise and said, well,

[20 : 56] God has said I'm going to get to Rome, so I'll get to Rome, there was no promise for those who accompanied him. But in the midst of the storm, Paul enjoys the visit of an angel who brought a very specific and broader, more inclusive promise concerning Paul and all those aboard. We read that in verse 24, do not be afraid, Paul, you must stand trial before Caesar, really a repetition of the promise he had received previously, but then there is another element, and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you. So this hope that Paul brings in the midst of a crisis is grounded in the promises of God, but it's also grounded in the character of God. Because notice what Paul goes on to say as he encourages his fellow travelers, so keep up your courage, men, there in verse 25, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.

The promise that he has given is credible because of the character of God. Paul knows that God keeps his promises, and so if God has given him this promise that he's not only concerning himself, but now has been extended to include all his fellow travelers, then on the grounds, not only of the promise, but on the grounds of the character of the God who grants the promise, Paul is able to bring these words of hope in the midst of a crisis. And so Paul could, with seemingly bizarre confidence, given the circumstances, bring hope in the midst of a crisis. Now that's perhaps a description of what is happening, but the question does arise, well, what lesson is there there for us? We too may face a crisis of one kind or another, but when we do, we are unlikely to have the benefit of an angel assuring us as to the ultimate outcome. But though that is true, and we recognize that to be true, if we take a step back and remind ourselves that while in a particular crisis we may have no way of knowing what the outcome will be, we do have, with Paul, a message of hope for a hopeless world, for a world that in great measure is in crisis. And it is a message of hope that is grounded in the promises and in the character of God. And so we too can, with confidence, declare to lost men and women, if you will but look to Jesus and put your trust in Him, to use the words that Paul uses here, not one of you will be lost. Paul is a man who brings hope in the midst of a crisis, but he also brings help. And it is help that evidences his love for the helpless. Notice that the certain hope of a victimless outcome, which is very clear, nobody is to die, does not mean that Paul can now sit back and do nothing. He must, and he wants to help. Before we do note the manner in which he does help, and we'll do that very fleetingly, we maybe should just remind ourselves of where they are on the voyage. Following the storm off Crete, the ship has been drifting aimlessly across the Mediterranean in the direction of Malta, though nobody on board knows that that is where they're heading.

It is during that drift across the Mediterranean that Paul has given his words of hope. We're told that many days had passed before he addresses them in this way. And now, as we come to consider the help that he provides, we're told very clearly that 14 days have passed from the time of the storm off Crete as they are now approaching the Maltese shore. Well, what is it that Paul does? Well, he does a couple of things as he would help his fellow passengers. First of all, he ensures that they remain united in the crisis that they're facing altogether. We see that in verses 30 to 32, and as we see what we read there, we're reminded that Captain Scatino, of whom we spoke at the beginning, is not alone. Looking after number one is not a modern phenomenon.

What we're told in these verses is that the sailors, even though they were so close to the Maltese shore, the danger is still very imminent. And so what do they do? Well, they try and deceive the others as to what they're doing, when actually they're trying to get into the lifeboat to make their way to the shore, abandoning those on the ship. But Paul is wise to the sailors' intentions, and he warns the centurion.

But notice that the reason he does so is his concern for the welfare of all those aboard. Verse 31, then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved. So he keeps them united, but he keeps them also fed. We've read the verses that speak of how he encourages them to eat because they've passed so many days without doing so. It's on the following morning. Paul continues concern for their welfare.

[26 : 33] We wonder how they could have survived so many days without eating, and what the reasons would have been. Maybe seasickness, the panic of the storm, a shortage of supplies, maybe a number of these reasons combined. But this enforced fast must come to an end. Their own physical integrity requires that they eat, and Paul takes the initiative and gives the example. He helps them. But there is one further thing that Paul, I would suggest, had done to help his fellow passengers that isn't explicitly mentioned, but is hinted at, and I would say underpins all of Paul's conduct. And to notice what Paul had already been doing, or at least there is a very clear indication that he had been doing, does involve us backtracking just a little. And really what I want to suggest is that Paul had been praying for his fellow passengers. Remember how chapter 26 ended, when Paul is before Agrippa, and he states very passionately, short time or long, there in verse 29, I pray God that not only you, but all who are listening to me may become what I am except for these chains. He expresses this heartfelt desire for the salvation of those who are listening to him. And now he moves on to this ship, and has his attitude changed? Well, of course, it has not changed. That burden that he had for those who were there with Agrippa is the same burden that he has for those who are traveling with him to Rome.

And so he had been praying for them, and I suggest that he had been praying for them, because it seems to me, though we can't state this with certainty, that the words of the angel in verse 24 sound very much like God delivering to Paul an answer to prayer. Notice there in verse 24, we've already read the verse, but not in this context.

We have the message for Paul delivered by the angel from God, you must stand trial before Caesar. And then the second part, and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.

Now, we don't know, but it does seem to me reasonable to at least suggest that this giving of the fellow passengers and fellow travelers to Paul was in answer to Paul's prayer for them.

I wonder if indeed that is the case. We can't state that with certainty. But if it is, I wonder what about ourselves? Whose lives might God graciously give to us in answer to prayer?

[29 : 19] Well, as we draw things to a close, Paul, a man of many friends, a man of wise words, a man who brings hope and help in the midst of a crisis. What about you? What about me?

In the midst of a crisis, what true colors would you reveal? I think if we're honest with ourselves, sometimes in very small problems that we face, a mini crisis, I wonder what comes out in the attitudes that we show, in the words that we use.

We can all examine ourselves. The true measure of a man, the true measure of a woman is often evidenced and seen in the midst of a crisis.

But what about Paul? Why is it that Paul acts in the manner that he does? Why is it that Paul shows this love and courage in a measure and of a quality that is so different to all those who surround him?

Is the answer, well, that's just the kind of guy that he is? Well, that is not the answer. Because Paul was not always this kind of guy. Paul was a man transformed.

[30 : 37] In the previous chapter, he's recorded for us how it is that God grabbed hold of him and how God transformed him. Indeed, even in the manner in which he speaks of God in this chapter, we are really given the explanation as to why Paul is the kind of man he is.

In verse 23, Last night, an angel of the God whose I am. Paul is who he is because of the one to whom he belongs.

The God who has been and continues to transform him into the image of his Son, Jesus. Well, we too, as Christians, as those who have put our trust in Jesus, we too belong to God.

And so, as those who also belong to God, let us again listen to Paul as he exhorts us. In the light of what we've thought about this evening, follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.

Let us pray.