

Text: Ac 27.1-12

In the early eighties, Gary Friesen published a controversial book, *“Decision Making and the Will of God.”* The book caused quite a stir, but our subject today is only tangentially related to the book. I’ve decided to use its title as the title of our message today, as we see the apostle Paul, and all those traveling with him in a place where they have a difficult decision to make. As we think about their decision, we can gain insight for our own decision-making.

Decision Making and the Will of God

What I would like to do to get started in our message is work through the travelogue a bit. We have maps! I’d like to help us understand how sea travel happened in the 1st century.

Read Ac 27.1-7a

The ships involved:

The first ship is called, “a coasting vessel,”¹ a smaller ship that would travel along the coast of the Mediterranean, carrying passengers and freight.

- Likely not much larger than 60 ft long and 20 ft wide
- Not meant for open sea transport (unlikely even for larger ships)
- The only type of vessel likely available in Caesarea

The second ship, the “ship of Alexandria” was a much larger grain ship, carrying grain from Egypt to Rome:

- Well over 100 ft, some as long as 180 ft, up to 50 ft wide
- Could easily carry the 276 persons mentioned in v. 37
- Josephus mentioned being on one carrying 600 people
- Used to ship grain to Rome:

“Egypt was the chief granary of Rome, and the regular trade in grain between Alexandria and Puteoli or Ostia was of the highest importance; the political stability of Rome depended on it. The service of ships devoted to this trade was organized as a department of state. The corporation of owners of these ships received special recognition from the Roman state, for they were in practice its agents and

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 477.

concessionaires. That the ‘ship of Alexandria’ which was in harbor at Myra when the centurion and his party arrived there belonged to this fleet is confirmed later in the narrative, when the ship’s cargo of wheat had to be jettisoned (v. 38)—something to be done only in the last extremity.”²

The principle people involved:

- Paul, as a prisoner, but not the same as “some other prisoners” (1)
- Julius, the centurion (1), some confusion in the commentaries, but one suggestion makes some sense:

“he may have been a special officer representing the emperor and detached from any particular legion”³

In consequence, he appears to have the highest rank on the ship: he is the decision maker.

- Luke (see “we” of v. 1)
- Aristarchus, another believer (2) — named in Col 4.10 and Phile 24 as in Rome with Paul during his imprisonment
- The ship-pilot, a navigator (10)
- The ship-owner (or his agent), “captain” (10)

Now for the **map of the journey**, showing the course Paul took. I will outline the steps along the way.

The course of the journey:

- The first stop was Sidon, where Christian friends aided Paul along his way (3)

“... probably refers to their furnishing him with food and supplies for the voyage. In ancient sea travel passengers were often expected to provide for themselves.”⁴

- They sail east and north of Cyprus, “because the winds were contrary”
- They land at Myra in Lycia, a prominent port for grain ships from Egypt.

² Bruce, 479.

³ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 515.

⁴ Polhill, 516.

“Since Myra was the main site for Egyptian grain ships to port on the way to Italy (BASHH 134), it was likely the centurion’s plan all along.”⁵

Sometimes such ships were owned by the government, other times they were under contract to the government.

- This ship means to sail on to Rome, but the sailing is slow ... “with difficulty”

They are off a place called Cnidus, which had a good port, and a good place to wait out the winter. We will note later why this was done.

The alternative was to make for Crete, and sail under it as a protection from the winds.

It appears they *had* to take this option, as they apparently do not land in Cnidus at all.

Bonus on our map: the route grain ships would normally go

- And an alternate route if they wanted to unship and reship at Corinth.

Now read Acts 27.7b-12

Proposition: Decision-making requires weighing all circumstantial, moral, and spiritual factors, then trusting God when you come to a final decision.

I. The difficult circumstances emphasized

- A. The winds were contrary (4)
- B. Forced to sail “under the shelter of Cyprus” (4)
- C. “Sailed slowly for a good many days” (7)
- D. “With difficulty ... arrived off Cnidus” (7)
- E. “The wind did not permit us...” (7)
- F. “With difficulty sailing past it [Crete], we came to ... Fair Havens” (8)

As the story proceeds, the travel seems beset with difficulty almost from the beginning.

⁵ L. Scott Kellum, *Acts*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2020), 298.

- The big question of difficult circumstances: “Does God want us to stop or strive?”

Circumstances alone cannot be a determining factor, but the negative circumstances here underscored the danger they would ultimately face.

Note: Now to Map 2, showing the actual journey around Crete to Fair Havens

II. Competing counsel weighed

A. After “considerable time” the men had to decide about further progress

1. The already mentioned contrary winds
2. The time of year: “the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over” (9)
 - a. They began their journey in a “shoulder season” — before the “wait and hunker down” season
 - b. “The fast” refers to the Day of Atonement (9)
 - 1) Calculated by phases of the moon, the date varies on our solar calendar each year
 - 2) In AD 59, the Day of Atonement occurred on our Oct 5 (traditionally, the Caesarean imprisonment is dated AD 57-59)
 - c. In the 1st c., ships simply did not sail between early November and early February (at the very earliest) [due to winds]

“mid-September to early November was considered a dangerous time for traveling the open sea”⁶

“According to Vegetius, *De re militari* 4:39 sailing became dangerous after 15 September and ceased after 11 November.”⁷

⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 518.

⁷ C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 1188.

The question now: Should we winter at “Fair Havens” or not?

B. An “all hands” conference

“The owner often commanded his ship, perhaps with the assistance of a professional steersman or navigator; but in doubtful situations the passengers might share in making decisions (Acts 27:9–12).”⁸

1. How is Paul, a prisoner, involved in this meeting?

- a. Paul may have simply made his recommendation to the centurion privately (see Bruce)
- b. Paul seems to be a unique prisoner: C. K. Barrett notes that when Luke mentions “other prisoners” he uses the word meaning “other of a different kind”

Barrett adds: “it must be remembered that though under guard, and not free, he was in a sense a privileged person, who must be delivered to the Emperor. He had not been found guilty of any crime, and it was the opinion of the governor that he was innocent.”⁹

- c. The natural implication of Luke’s language is that Paul was involved in the general discussion

2. The nature of Paul’s observation: opinion or prophecy?

- a. Note that Paul says “certainly ... loss ... of our lives” (10)
- b. In the end, it turns out that there was no loss of life, even as Paul later predicted as a prophecy

⁸ D. J. Wiseman and K. L. McKay, “Ships and Boats: In the New Testament,” in D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1096.

⁹ C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 1187.

Ac 27.23-26 “For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, ²⁴ saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.’ ²⁵ “Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ “But we must run aground on a certain island.”

- c. At Fair Havens, Paul gives no indication he has any insight from God: he offers his opinion as an experienced traveler (and his opinion, in the main, was right)
3. The centurion is persuaded, however, by the pilot and captain (or owner) of the ship (11-12)
 - a. The harbor at Fair Havens unsuitable
 - b. Hoped to reach Phoenix [show map inset]
 - c. If they could reach Phoenix, they would winter there

Expertise of the sailors and knowledge of the ports weighed heavier than Paul’s advice.

Note: The difference between harbors was the way they faced the wind, Phoenix deemed safer than Fair Havens.

III. Evaluating the decision

- A. In terms of practical results, Paul’s advice was right
 1. They didn’t make the safe harbor
 2. They suffered the loss of their entire cargo and their ship
 3. They barely escaped with their lives
- B. Note the nature of the decision: non-moral
 1. The question was one of prudence, not morality

When you are making moral/spiritual decisions, let the Bible be your guide. Some activities quite clearly are off-limits for Christians. *Study your Bible!*

2. They did not intend to challenge the whole Mediterranean Sea, just a few more miles to a safer harbor

Pragmatism over-road caution: "It's just a little bit more risk..."

Often prudence is a better course. Often it is better to wait than to rush forward.

Perhaps we should say, "Usually" or "Almost always" rather than "Often"

C. Once the decision was made, they trusted Providence

1. The Romans believed in Fate, though they tried to manipulate it
2. Paul believed in God, was in the hands of the Romans, and trusted God

When a decision is made, especially when the believer has no control over it, the believer must simply trust in God.

- Many government decisions are like this — we can't control them, we may not like them, but we must still trust God in our daily lives.

Conclusion:

Our message is unusual today. Our passage is unusual!

What can we make of it? I think we can watch a decision being made (not a totally bad decision on its face, but bad in its outcome), and gain some wisdom for our own decisions.

The most important lesson is that we must put our lives in God's hands.

Proposition: Decision-making requires weighing all circumstantial, moral, and spiritual factors, then trusting God when you come to a final decision.

And sometimes...

... sometimes it's God's will for you to go through a violent storm.

Trust God, put your life in his hands.