

Faith Under Fire Study 5: *Shipwrecked Sailors*

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The Story

Julius' hands were tough, like splintered wood. He gripped the beam he was clinging to harder. Although it seemed impossible, he had been through much worse. Marching hours without break through the desert as a young man had made him resilient. He had been in as many battles and skirmishes as anyone could count. The cold winter nights when the Roman emperor Claudius had tried to invade Britain had been the worst. Being shipwrecked was unexpected, but not surprising. Even sailors will admit that they cannot predict the oceans. Paul did. Paul predicted the weather. He saw this coming. Paul was unlike any person Julius had ever met before.

Julius thought about Paul's final prayer. He had seemed so calm. He had predicted the shipwreck, had warned the ship's captain and owner about it, and no one had listened. Yet, when the sailors recognized that the ship was not holding anymore, and that their efforts to bail water were futile, Paul remained calm. He was a strong man though, and without fear this prisoner reminded the captain that he should have listened to his advice. After having said that, he encouraged the weary captain and the crew. "I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only the ship." He explained that an angel of his God had given him that message. This time everyone listened.

Paul instructed the crew to eat for strength because they had not eaten in days, and he instructed the ship's captain to run the ship aground. Before eating, Paul had blessed the food. Even though many of the men were anxious to begin the process of running the ship aground, and finding pieces of wood or anything that would float, he wouldn't have it. The crew would pray, eat, and then run the ship aground. Everyone listened.

Finally, as Julius sank again into the trough of a wave, he felt his foot brush against something coarse. It was sand. Before Julius could steady his feet on the ground, the following wave lifted him high above the ground again, but he knew it would soon be over. Letting go of the wood, he began to swim to shore. His arms were weary, but his heart was amazed as he began to see each of the sailors, crew, and even the boat's prisoners wash up on the shore. No one had a scratch.

"Julius! Is that you?" A hand was extended to him and he grabbed a hold. "Paul, you were right. Each person was safe, not a single soul was lost." Julius could not hide his astonishment. Paul could have run. He was a prisoner under Julius' care, and he could have been free. Julius had been the one to convince the other soldiers to not kill the prisoners under their guard. He had wanted to save Paul, but he had not realized that Paul would be so honest. There was something different about him. It was enough to shipwreck a sailor.

The Scripture

Acts 27:9-12(NIV)

9 Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement. So Paul warned them, 10 "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." 11 But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. 12 Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest.

13 When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. 14 Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. 15 The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along.

When the Professionals Fail

Even professionals get it wrong. This could not be more true in the case of Paul's trans-Mediterranean journey. The sailors and ship's captain thought the journey was doable. They made these judgments based on their past experiences. They made these judgments based on their knowledge of the weather and of the boats capacities. They were wrong. It must have been awkward discovering that a prisoner knew more about the ocean than they did. The truth is that Paul did not have some super-human sailing ability. Paul had a connection with God. Not only did that connection give him the ability to predict the storm and impending doom of the ship, it also gave him the courage to remain faithful to his captor, even when he had a chance to escape.

Face Your Giant

What kind of witness do we give? As I reflect on the bravery and courage that Paul had, I wonder what the stronger witness to Julius was. Was it his prediction of the storm, or his loyalty to his word and to Julius? It's the little things that prove to be our biggest giants. Those are the giants that are truly God's specialty. The storm might seem like the biggest giant at first read, but I think choosing to stay with a captor rather than run for freedom was the real giant.

The truth is that whatever adversity may stand before us, with God, it is surmountable. The greater truth is that a small act of faithfulness might be bigger than our greatest giants. Again, with God it is still surmountable. With God you can face a storm, and with God you can also face your heart.

But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Acts 27:22