

Acts 27 and 28

Aim of Lesson

To show the quality of Paul's character during a time of stress and danger, and his complete trust in God. To show that Paul faithfully continued with the work God had set him to do, even when a prisoner in Rome.

Background study

2 Corinthians 11:24-27 and 12:10. Isaiah 6:9-10; Romans 1:15; 1 Corinthians 15:58; 2 Corinthians 11:24-28; 2 Timothy 2:8-10; 4:6-8. Find information about the kind of ships in which Paul would have travelled, and Mediterranean sailing conditions. Study Roman history of the period (Nero).

Suggested outline of lesson

This chapter contains a graphic description of one of the most exciting adventures in the New Testament. Not only are we told a great deal about ancient seamanship but we are also given a portrayal of Paul in circumstances that reveal his strength of character. It is under great pressures and trials that heroes sometimes emerge, and Paul is the hero of this story.

Make use of a simple map of the Mediterranean area, but do not refer to all the place names given in the account as these may detract from the main point of the story. A picture or model of an early wooden sailing ship would also be useful.

Begin the narrative simply, allowing the suspense to build up gradually. Immediately, Paul won the respect of Julius, the centurion in charge of him during the voyage, and Julius trusted Paul sufficiently to allow him ashore at Sidon to visit his Christian friends. By the time they reached Crete, the weather had turned against them, and a gale was blowing. Sailing became dangerous in the Mediterranean after the middle of September and was avoided altogether after early November. The crew realized it was getting late in the year for safe sailing, and Paul strongly advised against going on (God had shown him what would happen, verse 10). But Julius, the chief officer on board, decided to accept the advice of the ship-owner and the helmsman, and to press on to Phoenix, a more sheltered harbour of Crete. It is interesting to note the repeated use of the term "we" in this account, showing that the writer, Luke, was an eye-witness and fellow traveller. This is why the description is so detailed and vivid. Use these details to bring the story to life.

The children's appreciation of the reality of the scene will depend upon your well-prepared and imaginative choice of words to describe a storm at sea. Include in this the desperate measures taken to avert the break-up and capsizing of the vessel. Convey what it would have been like to be storm-tossed for two whole weeks with no sight of the sun or stars, their only means of navigation. They had no way of knowing in which direction they were being driven or how near they were to the treacherous quicksands. The sailors were terrified and abandoned all hope of being saved; Paul and his Christian friends were the only ones on board who were confident that they would survive. Paul stood out as the one man who could take charge of the "hopeless" situation and inspire his fellow passengers with hope. He assured the men that God was with them.

For two weeks they had been without food, no doubt for several reasons such as sea-sickness, difficulty of cooking, contamination of food by sea-water, etc. Paul urged everyone to eat in order to gain strength for their coming ordeal, and he led the way by thanking God and then eating bread himself.

Paul had become a tower of strength to everyone on board and, with food in their stomachs and words of encouragement in their ears, they lightened the ship and prepared to beach her. It was because of Paul's command of the situation and the impression he had made upon Julius that the centurion forbade the killing of the prisoners, and no lives were lost. God had kept his promise.

Although no lives had been lost, all were suffering from exhaustion and exposure. Vividly describe the scene as the islanders, who had seen the ship run aground, gathered on the beach to help the survivors ashore on that stormy night. Some of the travellers lay exhausted near the fire and some, like Paul, busied themselves by gathering sticks to replenish it as it warmed and comforted their shivering bodies and also served as a beacon to which everyone was drawn. It seemed that everyone was safe, and relieved that their ordeal was over. Consider the distress, then, when a new danger presented itself.

Help the children to imagine the suddenness of the viper's attack, and the shock on the faces of the onlookers as they expected Paul to collapse. It would seem that the islanders were superstitious people, for they thought that the snake must have been sent as a personal punishment. When Paul remained unharmed, their eyes widened and their attitude changed to one of awe. It was evident that God was still protecting Paul from harm.

Because the storms were so severe, there was no hope of setting sail until winter was over. During the three months' stay, Paul was able to preach and heal and use this unexpected opportunity to bring the knowledge of the true God to this pagan island.

On the map, trace the rest of the journey to Rome and point out that the Appian Way along which they travelled is still recognizable today. Paul would have had mixed feelings as he approached the capital of the Roman empire. He was apprehensive about his trial, yet confident that God had brought him safely thus far because he had work for him to do there. How encouraged he must have been to be so warmly welcomed by the Christians.

Try to convey Paul's situation. His imprisonment would appear to have been a form of house arrest. His freedom was curtailed and he was kept in chains, but he was allowed to receive visitors and to communicate with all his friends. As was his usual practice when arriving at a city for the first time, he gave his attention to the Jews who, it appears, had heard nothing of his mission. How patiently and tirelessly he explained to them from their Old Testament scriptures how Jesus was the fulfilment of the law and the prophecies. Some believed, but many could not accept that their Messiah had come. Again, to Paul's great sadness, he had received only a limited response from his fellow Jews and so, in obedience to God's directive, he reached out to the Gentiles and taught all who came to listen.

Paul had not forgotten the many who, during his missionary journeys in Greece and Asia, had believed the gospel. He was constantly concerned about their physical and spiritual welfare and it was at this time that he wrote letters to the Christian communities at Ephesus, Colossae and

Philippi and to his friend Philemon. Ask the children to find these books in their Bibles and talk a little about the original letters, which would have been written in Greek on parchment, and delivered by hand. Help them to visualize the joyful reception of these letters and the way in which they would have been read and re-read, copied meticulously, circulated and treasured. They were kept with such great care that we are able to read them today.

Relevance to the children's lives

In this lesson we have seen plenty of evidence of Paul's active faith and courage (read Paul's words from 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 and 12:10). What did Paul mean when he said: "For when I am weak, then I am strong"? When we are afraid, what should we do?

Worksheets

The solution to the code is 'Boldly he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ'.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we are sometimes afraid like the sailors on Paul's ship. Please help us to remember that wherever we are, you are there. Amen.

Memory verse

"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him" (Romans 8:28).