

Acts 27

God's decisions and ours – a puzzle!

(God's sovereign plan and our personal choices present questions that are at the heart of theological speculation.)

1. We find ourselves in a chapter that, at first glance, seems to have little value in teaching us lessons of a spiritual nature.
2. The chapter does illustrate the historical detail that authenticates Luke's account. This is not insignificant in responding to historical critics who would want us to believe that Acts is a series of unhistorical myths concocted to support a fanciful myth concerning Paul's life.
3. The chapter also illustrates two principles of life that challenge disciples of Christ. 1) God is sovereign and knows exactly what will happen. 2) We act as "free agents" and make decisions that effect the future. (see Aptoteach.org theology notes on Openness of God #309)

Luke gives us great detail as to what happened.

"¹ And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius. ² And embarking in an Adramyttian ship, which was about to sail to the regions along the coast of Asia, we put out to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica. ³ And the next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul with consideration and allowed him to go to his friends and receive care. ⁴ And from there we put out to sea and sailed under the shelter of Cyprus because the winds were contrary. ⁵ And when we had sailed through the sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. ⁶ And there the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy, and he put us aboard it. ⁷ And when we had sailed slowly for a good many days, and with difficulty had arrived off Cnidus, since the wind did not permit us {to go} farther, we sailed under the shelter of Crete, off Salmone; ⁸ and with difficulty sailing past it we came to a certain place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

1. Luke goes into great detail to tell the story of Paul's peril in sailing to Rome including names and places.
2. The historicity of the NT has often been questioned. There is strong evidence to support the fact that it is an accurate record of what actually happened.

It is reasonable to believe that the New Testament Writers told the truth.

(This list is from *I don't have enough Faith to be an Atheist* by Geisler and Turek, pp275-293)

1. The NT writers included embarrassing details about themselves.

- They often failed to "get it" with respect to Jesus' teaching. Mk.9:32, Lk.18:34, Jn.12:16
- They seem disengaged. Mk.14:32-41 (They fell asleep at critical times.)
- They are rebuked by Jesus. Mk.8:33
- They were cowardly. Matt.26:33-35
- They were doubters. Jn.2:18-22, 3:14-18, Matt.12:39-41, 17:9,22-23

2. The NT writers included embarrassing details and difficult sayings of Jesus.

- Jesus is considered “out of his mind.” Mk.3:21,31
- Jesus is not believed by his own brothers. Jn.7:5
- Jesus is thought to be a deceiver. Jn.7:12
- Jesus is deserted by many of his followers. Jn.6:66
- Jesus “turns off” Jews who had believed him. Jn.8:30-31,59
- Jesus is called a drunkard. Matt.11:19
- Jesus is called “demon possessed.” Mk.3:22, Jn.7:20, 8:48
- Jesus is called a “madman.” Jn.10:20
- Jesus has his feet washed by a prostitute. Lk.7:36-39
- Jesus is hung on a tree (under a curse). Deut.21:23, Gal.3:13
- Jesus declares, “The Father is greater than I.” Jn.14;28

1. The NT writers left in demanding sayings of Jesus. Matt.5-7

2. The NT writers distinguished Jesus’ words from their own. I Cor.7:10-12

3. The NT writers include events related to the resurrection that they would not have invented.

- Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, (member of the Sanhedrin).
- Women were the first witnesses to the resurrection.
- Priests were converted.
- The Jewish explanation of the empty tomb.

4. The NT writers include more than thirty historically confirmed people in their writings. If these references were not accurate they would have been exposed by early critics of Christianity.

5. The NT writers include divergent details. The Gospels contain different but not contradictory details suggesting that they did not copy each other or try to smooth out differences. Critics claim that the Gospel’s similarities indicate that they copied from each other and that their differences indicate that they cannot be trusted. How can the critic have it both ways?

6. The NT writers challenge their readers to check out verifiable facts, even facts about miracles.

- Luke’s overt assertion of accuracy to Theophilus in Lk.1:1-4.
- Peter’s claim that they did not follow cleverly devised tales but were eyewitnesses to Christ’s majesty (II Pet.1:16).
- Paul’s bold declaration to Festus and King Agrippa about the resurrected Christ in Acts 26.
- Paul’s restatement of an early creed that identified more than 500 eyewitnesses of the risen Christ in I Cor.15.

7. The NT writers describe miracles like other historical events: with simple, unembellished accounts. The apocryphal forgery known as the Gospel of Peter contains a description of the resurrection that is full of

outlandish descriptions that are quite different from the canonical Gospel's accounts.

8. The NT writers abandoned their long-held sacred beliefs and practices, adopted new ones, and did not deny their testimony under persecution or threat of death.

Pre-Resurrection Belief	Post-Resurrection Belief
Animal sacrifice	Unnecessary because of Christ's sacrifice
Binding Law of Moses	Nonbinding because it was fulfilled by Christ's life
Strict monotheism	Trinity (three persons in one divine essence)
The Sabbath	Replaced by Sunday worship
Conquering Messiah	Sacrificial Messiah
Circumcision	Replaced by baptism and Communion

Luke presents both the sovereign will of God and the effective actions of man.

9 And when considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul {began} to admonish them, 10 and said to them, "**Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be {attended} with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.**" 11 But the centurion was more persuaded by the pilot and the captain of the ship, than by what was being said by Paul. 12 And because the harbor was not suitable for wintering, the majority reached a decision to put out to sea from there, if somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing southwest and northwest, and spend the winter {there.} 13 And when a moderate south wind came up, supposing that they had gained their purpose, they weighed anchor and {began} sailing along Crete, close {inshore.} 14 But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo; 15 and when the ship was caught {in it,} and could not face the wind, we gave way {to it,} and let ourselves be driven along. 16 And running under the shelter of a small island called Clauda, we were scarcely able to get the {ship's} boat under control. 17 And after they had hoisted it up, they used supporting cables in undergirding the ship; and fearing that they might run aground on {the shallows} of Syrtis, they let down the sea anchor, and so let themselves be driven along. 18 The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo; 19 and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. 20 And since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing {us,} from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned. 21 And when they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, "**Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete, and incurred this damage and loss.** 22 **And {yet} now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there shall be no loss of life among you, but {only} of the ship.** 23 **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."**

27 But when the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors {began} to surmise that they were approaching some land. 28 And they took soundings, and found {it to be} twenty fathoms; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found {it to be} fifteen fathoms. 29 And fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak. 30 And as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship, and had let down the {ship's} boat into the sea, on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors from the bow, 31 Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "**Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved.**" 32 Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the {ship's} boat, and let it fall away. 33 And until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing. 34 **Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation; for not a hair from the head of any of you shall perish.**" 35 And having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all; and he broke it and began to eat. 36 And all of them were encouraged, and they themselves also took food. 37 And all of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons. 38 And when they had eaten enough, they {began} to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea. 39 And when day came, they could not recognize the land; but they did observe a certain bay with a beach, and they resolved to drive the ship onto it if they could. 40 And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea while at the same time they were loosening the ropes of the rudders, and hoisting the foresail to the wind, they were heading for the beach. 41 But striking a reef where two seas met, they ran the vessel aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern {began} to be broken up by the force {of the waves.} 42 And the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, that none {of them} should swim away and escape; 43 but the centurion, wanting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, 44 and the rest {should follow}, some on planks, and others on various things from the ship. And thus it happened that they all were brought safely to land."

1. In this chapter we have examples of three types of knowledge.

- **Paul's natural wisdom** – "10 . . . Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be {attended} with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives."
- **God's revealed plan** – "23 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.'"
- **Man's free decisions** – "26 But we must run aground on a certain island."
 "31 . . . Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved."
 "34 Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation; for not a hair from the head of any of you shall perish."

2. This chapter provides an opportunity to explore different ways in which we can look at God's will and human responsibility.

Four evangelical approaches:

(The two positions in the middle seem to make the most sense to me.)

Open or Free will –	Simple Fore -knowledge	Middle -	Augustinian -
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theism view	view	Knowledge view	Calvinist view
God knows the past and the present but has limited knowledge of the future.	God knows the future in detail but we do not know how He knows it nor do we sense that such knowledge is the origin of a decreed action.	God knows all options and consequences but does not decree all actions.	All is determined by decree and foreknown from eternity.
People are relatively free	People act with enough freedom to be responsible.	People are fully free to act as they choose.	People (are free to) act according to their nature.

1. Biblical examples of both predestination and responsible choice.
 - **The crucifixion of Jesus. Acts 2:23** “this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to the cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.”
 - **The betrayal of Jesus by Judas. Mk.14:21** “For the Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!” It is said that Judas’ actions were Satanically motivated (Lk.22:3; Jn.13:2,27)
2. There are many texts that seem to clearly teach predestination. (see **Apttoteach.org** theology notes on Predestination #704)
3. Human freedom suffers under conscious and subconscious constraints – temperament, culture, personal history, physical ability, etc. This is acknowledged by everyone. The issue is to what degree are these constraints absolutely deterministic of choices made?
4. **Deut.29:29** “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.”
 - a. **There are some things we are not expected to understand.** Rom.9:19-20 “19 You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’ 20 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this.’ Will it?”
 - b. It is significant that **Job** cries out in the end, not “I understand!” but “I repent.”
 - c. **We are limited to human experience framed in time.** The notion of timeless or eternal perspective is beyond us and always will be in this life. God’s knowledge might best be understood as without tense even though He has chosen to work out His plan in time. We might say that God knows the future without foreknowing it. This would be the case if God (and his knowledge) exists outside of time. On this conception of God he could still know everything that is yet future relative to us; but since he is not himself in time, these things would not be future relative to him, and so he would not know them as future. This was in fact Augustine’s view of God.
 - d. What is clear and set before us to obey?
 1. God knows and has determined in His plan much of what happens in history.

2. We are left to struggle with decisions from a posture of being influenced by some conscious forces and many subconscious forces.
5. **I may know that you will do something but this does not encroach upon your free choice unless I decree it to happen in advance.** The addition or deletion of the factor of God's simple knowledge of some act in advance does not affect the freedom of that act.
6. Thomas Oden, has encouraged free discussion of openness ideas while showing no sympathy for them, has said that those given to the fantasy of divine ignorance of the future should be **resisted with charity**. Charitable resistance is all too rare among evangelicals.
7. **An illustration:**

*I could play a one-on-one basketball game with Michael Jordan where he would give me complete freedom to do anything I wanted yet he would never be threatened by my choices with respect to the outcome of the game. **How could this be?***

- I have limited ability and thus limited freedom. My circumstances, nature, character, and environment each place limits on my freedom.
- He has much greater ability and thus freedom to do many things I cannot do. Realize that God has infinite ability and full knowledge of all possible scenarios of what I might do.
- God does not decree as certain every move I make but He knows me perfectly and the many constraints on my decision making process enable Him to know what I will do in almost every situation.
- We assume that love requires some real freedom to not love and freedom involves risk with respect to our choices.
- This freedom does not in any way prevent God from having His way in history even though our actions can frustrate, disappoint, or please Him.