



# PART 1

# PAUL IN CHAINS:

# LEADERSHIP

# IN ACTION

## Chapter Four

## TAKING CHARGE

So Paul had some good news, and he had some bad news. The good news was that not one life would be lost. The bad news was that the ship would run aground on an island. As everyone on board already sensed ([Acts 27:20](#)), they were headed for certain shipwreck.

They were in precisely the kind of crisis situation that calls for a **strong, clearheaded, courageous leader**. And the one man best qualified to fill that position and most prepared to step into it was the guy who had the prisoner's cabin at the bottom of the ship's hold. The irony of that must have occurred to the ship's captain, to Julius the Roman centurion, and to all others who were in positions of authority on board. Paul had no official position, but he certainly wielded a greater authority than any of them. He took his orders from God, and he spoke for God. By now that was becoming clear to all.

**True leadership is tested and proved in crises.** The real leader is the one who can handle the stress. He is the one who can **solve the problems, bear the burdens, find the solutions, and win the victories** when everyone else is merely **flustered, confounded, and perplexed.**

That's what Paul had done. By now he had in effect taken charge. He didn't usurp anyone else's authority; all of them more or less capitulated to Paul because he was the only one with a clue what to do. And that is why although Paul began this journey as the prisoner (low man on the ship's organizational chart), all on board were now looking to Paul for leadership. The captain wasn't leading. The pilot was no longer even steering the ship. The centurion didn't take over in the chaos; he was evidently as perplexed and as frightened as everyone else. The only guy left with any sense of composure was Paul, and he was a rock.

This underscores the truth that leadership is not something automatically conferred by title or by rank. **Again, leadership is influence. It is a matter of ability, not position.** And as we read Luke's account of this shipwreck, it is quite an amazing picture to see all these powerful men,



accustomed to giving orders and outranking others, suddenly looking to Paul, the prisoner, who had earned the right to lead.

## NEARING MALTA AT MIDNIGHT

The ship continued to be driven by hurricane-force winds for days. The crew and passengers' panic was stretched out with intensity for days. The struggle to stay afloat was so intense that nobody ate for two full weeks. They were petrified with fear.

They had not the faintest idea where they were. They didn't even know what direction they were going. The apostle Paul's assurance that they would all survive was the one last hope they had to cling to.

We pick up Luke's account of the struggle in [Acts 27:27–29](#):

**Acts 27:27-29 (NASB)**

**<sup>27</sup> “But when the fourteenth night came, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors *began* to surmise that they were approaching some land.**

**<sup>28</sup> 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.**

**<sup>29</sup> Fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak.”**

The Adriatic Sea, of course, is the narrow arm of the Mediterranean that lies between Italy and the Balkan Peninsula. In Paul's day, however, the Ionian Sea (the large, open expanse between the bottom of the Italian boot and Sicily on the west side and western Greece on the east) was also considered part of the Adriatic. Paul's ship was blown and tossed about in that vast region of the Mediterranean for two full weeks. That is a long time to be caught in such a desperate situation.

Then, around midnight on the fourteenth night, they sensed land. In the dark of a cloudy night, it would be next to impossible to see the outline of land on the horizon. That's why Luke didn't say they *saw* land; rather, they “**surmised or sensed**” it. This most likely means that they heard the faint sound of waves crashing on a nearby shore.

So they took soundings. That process involved lowering a rope with weights until it hit bottom. Then they would measure the rope and that would tell them the depth of the ocean. The first sounding measured the depth at 20 fathoms. A fathom is the length of two outstretched arms (standardized to exactly 6 feet). Twenty fathoms were about 120 feet deep. Deep enough for safety, but shallow enough to indicate that they were no longer out in the open sea.

They waited awhile and sounded again. This time they found bottom at 15 fathoms—90 feet. They were moving toward shore quickly. That was cause for panic; not an occasion for rejoicing. This was a highly dangerous situation to be in at midnight. They were literally washing ashore and unable to see what lay ahead of them. In water that shallow, there are frequently submerged rocks offshore, jutting outcrops that sink ships without warning. It was a sailor's worst

nightmare. They were sailing blind, in the middle of the night, knowing only that every wave took them closer to danger. So they put out four anchors and prayed for morning to come.

They didn't know it yet, of course, but the island they were nearing was Malta ([Acts 28:1](#)).

[Acts 28:1 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>1</sup>“When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta.”

Malta is a small island directly south of Sicily. The geographical features of the region are in exact accord with the ocean depths Luke recorded. Experts who have studied maritime Rome also corroborate all the other details of Luke's account. For example, the distance from Clauda (where the ship last sighted land [[27:16](#)]), to Malta is 476.6 nautical miles.

[Acts 27:16 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>16</sup>“Running under the shelter of a small island called Clauda, we were scarcely able to get the *ship's* boat under control.”

Let's assume this ship was drifting at the rate of 36 miles every 24 hours. (Nautical experts say that is about what we would expect with a Roman-style cargo ship in those currents at that time of year in a gale-force wind.) Drifting at that rate, it would take them exactly 13 days, 1 hour, and 21 minutes to be driven from Clauda to Malta. Add a day from Fair Havens to Clauda, and that's precisely two weeks. So it is, in fact, a 14-day journey from Fair Havens to Malta, if you happen to make it in a drifting ship being blown by a hurricane.

Judging from the data Luke gives about the depth of the water, they were less than three miles from the island. They could have been near the mouth of a large bay on the northwest side of the island. In modern times, that bay is known as St. Paul's Bay, though it may not have been the actual place where Paul came ashore. There is another bay at the eastern extremity of Malta, known as St. Thomas Bay, that some say fits the description more accurately.

About the time they sounded for depth, they would have been drifting about a half mile offshore from the eastern end of the island. That is how they could hear the pounding surf.

Notice Luke said they dropped four anchors from the *stern*, which, of course, is the back end of the boat. That would automatically make the prow of the ship point inland. The plan, evidently, was that when daybreak came and they could see the shore, if it looked safe, they would raise the four anchors, drift straight in, and beach the ship. The winds were apparently still too powerful to risk sailing until they could find a safe harbor.

## A THWARTED ESCAPE ATTEMPT IN THE DARK

In fact, the weather conditions were still so bad that some of the sailors tried secretly to abandon ship. Pretending to work on more anchors at the prow end of the ship, some of them had dropped the dinghy and were planning to use it to slip away from the damaged ship.

It isn't unusual for *passengers* to get nervous in adverse weather, but if you're ever on a ship and the *crew* panics, you're in real trouble. That's exactly what happened here.



Here is Luke's description:

**Acts 27:30-31 (NASB)**

<sup>30</sup> **"But 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,**

<sup>31</sup> **Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved."**