

A Light in a Dark World

Psalm 107:23–32, Acts 28:11–16

In our New Testament text today God fulfills his promise to bring Paul to Rome. As the shipwreck chapter shows, this was no easy undertaking. Several years before, as Paul was confined in a Roman prison in Jerusalem, the Lord had stood by him and said, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome” (Acts 23:11). The words “Be of good cheer” can be translated “Take courage,” “Don’t be afraid.” The days that followed would be very trying. Immediately, a mob of about forty Jews came together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat or drink till they had killed Paul. Their hatred of the apostle Paul was visceral. Their plot was foiled when the Roman commander sent a posse of 470 soldiers, horsemen and spearmen to squirrel Paul out of Jerusalem at 3 AM to take him safely to Caesarea to Governor Felix. There, the high priest and his party accused him of sedition, but before the governor could rule, Paul appealed to Caesar.

Now the Lord fulfills his promise, bringing his evangelist Paul to what was then the largest and most influential city in the world, to preach the light of the gospel. Let us consider this text under three heads: (1) Protected in travel; (2) Refreshed by the saints; and (3) Trusted by his Roman guard. First,

1. Protected in travel

Our text begins, “After three months we sailed in an Alexandrian ship whose figurehead was the Twin Brothers.” Notice Luke’s use of the first person plural: “we sailed.” Luke and Aristarchus continued to accompany the apostle Paul. The part about the Alexandrian ship accords perfectly with the fact that in ancient times Rome imported a lot of grain from Egypt. But let’s take a closer look at the phrase “whose figurehead was the Twin Brothers.” The KJV is quite different: “whose sign was Castor and Pollux.” The NIV combines both ideas: “the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux.” The word in the original is Διόσκουροι. The first part of the word is an alternate spelling of Zeus, the national god of the Greeks. Διόσκουροι is defined in the Bauer lexicon as “Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, twin sons of Zeus and Leda, insignia and also patron deities of an Alexandrian ship.”¹ Here was a ship that was recognizable and quite distinct from other vessels sailing the Mediterranean at that time. As a careful historian Luke preserves this detail. Clearly, he is describing events that actually happened; his history bears the marks of authenticity. Surely some of his readers would have seen this particular ship and would associate it with the biblical narrative.

But let’s delve a little further. Strong notes that Castor and Pollux “were regarded as the tutelary divinities of sailors.” “Tutelary” means *servicing as a*

¹ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, Διόσκουροι (Logos Bible Software)

protector, guardian or patron. Being a mariner, as we have seen in the shipwreck chapter, was a dangerous occupation in ancient times, and sailors who did not know the true God would derive some comfort from having the image of a guardian god on the bow of their ship. The waters of the Mediterranean can be relatively calm and tranquil, but they can turn suddenly into raging seas with the power to send ships to the bottom. Sailors are not unaware of this risk, and those without knowledge of the true God would figure that having the image of a patron deity in a prominent place on their vessel might give them some edge in time of danger. It's kind of like the motorist who has an "I support my local police" decal on the window of his car: that might be a little extra protection if one is ever pulled over.

The shipowner would have paid dearly for the images of Castor and Pollux, but he would figure that the extra cost was worth it, if it provided protection and kept his ship safe on the high seas. So this is not an incidental detail. It is not benign, like the figure of a flamingo on a Florida lawn. The figurehead of Castor and Pollux, twin sons of Zeus and Leda—that's Zeus, the highest god in the Greek pantheon—would be worth something in an ancient pagan's mind.

So here was a ship that sailed under the figurehead of a pagan god. It was dedicated to the furtherance of idolatry.

The second commandment says, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." The second commandment forbids "the worshiping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word."² Should the apostle Paul get on this boat? It is not an idle question. Isn't the very act of choosing to sail on a boat dedicated to a pagan deity a tacit endorsement of idolatry? Of course it must be remembered that the apostle Paul did not choose to get on this particular boat. He was a prisoner being taken to Rome under the custody of a Roman centurion. He was not a traveler working out the details of his vacation itinerary.

But the very idea of idolatry is not ancient history. Many professing Christians attend churches that venerate images. They should leave these churches and seek out true worship in spirit and truth. As Jesus taught, "the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23–24). Those who are devoted to Christ must reject the worshiping of God by images and worship the true God in accordance with holy Scripture. As the second commandment teaches, the LORD God is "a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments." As summarized in

² SC 51, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

the Larger Catechism, the second commandment reveals God's "fervent zeal for his own worship, and his revengeful indignation against all false worship, as being a spiritual whoredom; accounting the breakers of this commandment such as hate him, and threatening to punish them unto divers generations; and esteeming the observers of it such as love him and keep his commandments, and promising mercy to them unto many generations." God is dead serious about this. He created us for the purpose of loving and glorifying him. That is the chief end of man; that is our reason for existence. God will not wink at idolatry, he will not turn the other way and overlook it. The heavens declare the glory of the true God. He will not give his glory to another.

As I stated a moment ago, many professing Christians attend churches that venerate images. Such worship is superstitious. It is not in accord with the truth of Scripture. Worshiping God by images spills over into everyday life. At a music recital recently I was startled to see a man in front of me cross himself after the opening prayer. Crossing oneself is not benign; it is false worship. The Bible nowhere teaches that we ought to cross ourselves. We are not to make up worship elements on our own. Churches are to faithfully teach the Bible, and not teach anything that is not in the Bible. Since the Bible does not teach us to cross ourselves, the act of crossing oneself is false worship. God has shown us in his word how we are to worship him. Any supposed element of worship that originates elsewhere than in the Bible is false worship; it is superstition.

When I was a little boy Roman Catholics frequently affixed medals of St. Christopher to the dashboards of their cars. According to tradition, St. Christopher "carried a child, who was unknown to him, across a river before the child revealed himself as Christ. Therefore, he is the patron saint of travelers, and small images of him are often worn around the neck, on a bracelet, carried in a pocket, or placed in vehicles by Christians."³

Saint Christopher—if he even existed (there are two very different accounts of his life from different centuries)—is dead. He is dead. The idea that dead Christians have power to protect us is superstition and foreign to Scripture. In our Old Testament text, travelers ("those who go down to the sea in ships") cry out to the *LORD* in their trouble, and he brings them out of their distresses" (Ps. 107:28). Scripture thus specifically teaches us to cry out to the Lord Jehovah when we encounter perils in travel. Nothing is said about praying to dead Christians. Nothing is said about dead Christians having any power or ability to help us. Clearly, the unambiguous teaching of the Bible is that "our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 124:8).

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Christopher, accessed 6-3-23

Make no mistake: we are not to pray to dead Christians, whether the Virgin Mary or other supposed saints. They cannot help us. “There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). Christian, your help is in the name of the Lord! Call out to God—through the mediation of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit—in the day of trouble. True worship is spiritual. The Christian has no need of any physical aids to worship, such as images, medals, rosary beads or crossing oneself. True worship is spiritual.

When Paul sailed on the vessel bearing the images of Castor and Pollux he did not do it as an expression of worship; his presence was strictly utilitarian: he needed to get from the island of Malta to the mainland of Italy, and the only way to do that was by boat. Paul was protected in travel not by Castor and Pollux but by the living God who made heaven and earth. Second, Paul was

2. Refreshed by the saints

Our text records that the ship landed in Puteoli.⁴ Puteoli was a port in the Gulf of Naples. It is now part of greater Naples, Italy. Our historian writes that “we came to Puteoli, where we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them seven days” (vv. 13–14). The word “brethren” can be used in the literal, physical sense of descendants of the same parents. Jesus calls everyone who is devoted to him *brother* (after his resurrection he said, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me”⁵). It can also be used in the wider sense of *countrymen*, as it will be used in v. 17 of this very chapter.

But when Luke says, “we found brethren,” he means fellow Christians—saints, members of the body of Christ. This is very interesting. Calvin says that “we gather out of this place, that the seed of the gospel was then sown abroad, seeing there was some body of the Church even at Puteoli.”⁶ Even before Paul landed on the Italian peninsula, the gospel had gone there. Remember Acts 1:8, “ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” The Holy Spirit had empowered witnesses—individual Christians—to spread the good news of Christ all over Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. Faithful Christians had taken the gospel to the Italian peninsula in advance of Paul. No matter how you heard of Christ, the most important thing is to believe in him now. Sometimes we might hear a well-meaning Christian say something like “I was converted under the ministry of so-and-so,” as if that makes his conversion of greater importance. But the gospel doesn’t make much of the preacher, it makes

⁴ “In ancient times Puteoli became the great emporium for the Alexandrian grain ships and other ships from all over the Roman world,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pozzuoli>, accessed 6-2-23

⁵ Matt. 28:10

⁶ Calvin commentary on Acts 28:12 (Logos Bible Software)

much of *Christ*. *He* must increase; *we* must decrease. There is no place for pride in the Christian religion. In all things *Christ* must have the preeminence.⁷

We know that the gospel had reached Rome even before the arrival of Paul. His epistle to the Romans had been sent “to all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7). In that letter Paul had written, “I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established” (v. 11).

Now, he had landed on the Italian peninsula, and he’s already found fellow Christians. How that must have warmed his heart! He stayed with them seven days, no doubt encouraging them in the things of the Lord. Amazingly, the Roman centurion guarding him lets him do this. This brings us to our last point,

3. Trusted by his Roman guard

As Paul and his company made their way toward Rome Luke writes that “when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum and Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.” The Greek spells out these Latin names in Greek characters: Appii is related to the name of the famed Appian Way (Latin and Italian: *Via Appia*), a Roman road used as a main route for military supplies for its conquest of southern Italy in 312 BC.⁸ A *forum* was a public square or marketplace used for judicial and other business. The Three Inns (KJV: “The three taverns”) is the translation of the Latin word *taberna*, meaning *inn*; the word comes into English through the French. The use of these Latin words gives a sense of immediacy to Luke’s account. The Appii Forum (also called Forum Appii) was located 43 Roman miles southeast of Rome. Horace mentioned it as the usual stop at the end of the first day’s journey from Rome, and described it as full of boatmen and cheating innkeepers.⁹

How encouraging it is to read how word of the apostle Paul’s arrival fanned out among the Christians, and they came from miles away to hear the man of God. How our hearts, too, ought to long for the pure teaching a preaching of God’s word. “My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God” (Ps. 84:2). As disciples, our deepest longing ought to be to know Christ truly, as he has revealed himself in his word.

Finally we reach verse 16, “Now when we came to Rome . . .”! The Lord fulfills his promise. Paul arrives at the capital of the world, not to view its earthly glory, but to proclaim Christ. As he had earlier said in his letter to the Romans, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). Throughout his ministry Paul avoided distractions and focused on Christ.

⁷ Col. 1:18

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appian_Way, accessed 6-3-23

⁹ *Ibid.*

Luke writes, “Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him.” Paul was trusted by his Roman guard. He trusted him so much that he didn’t deliver him with the other prisoners to the captain of the guard but let him live by himself in his own hired house. This doesn’t happen often. Think of a man arrested for inflicting serious bodily harm, as he is being frisked and thrown into the back of a police cruiser, convincing his arresting officer, “Hey, officer, let me go right now, and I’ll take my own transportation down to police headquarters; I’ll go right away.” Think that would work? No way! But here was Paul, distinguished from the other prisoners and permitted to live in his own hired house while he awaited trial. Every day a different guard would come as Paul wrote his prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon) and met with people who came to see him, pointing them to Christ. Think of how many guards were won to Christ through the gospel. As Paul would write in Philippians, “All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar’s household.”¹⁰ How blessed it would have been to be assigned as Paul’s bodyguard—to be in close contact with a man of God, asking him questions, hearing the word of God! Truly Paul was a light in a dark world—a light that shone on Christ. All this shows that Paul won the confidence of the Roman centurion tasked with taking him to Rome, making sure that he was present to stand before Caesar. Paul was trusted by his Roman guard; we, too, ought to be trusted by people around us. This is why Christ told us, “Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’”¹¹ You and I must be people of our word, trustworthy, representing him who is “the truth” (John 14:6).

As Christians we are strangers and pilgrims within a larger culture that is hostile to our faith. We live and work among people who do not understand our faith, are antagonistic to our faith, and respond with opposition when we try to express our faith. We are in the world, but not of the world (John 17:12, 16). We are sojourners and aliens within the larger culture which is anti-Christian.

Paul boarded a ship dedicated to false gods that don’t exist. He did it for a good reason. But we should ask, should Christians shop at stores that promote anti-Christian philosophies such as gay pride and transgenderism and gender mutilation? “Diversity” “inclusion” and “equity” are codenames for anti-Christian philosophy. Jesus clearly said that God “made them at the beginning made them male and female.”¹² For the Christian, that is the end of the discussion. Pushers of

¹⁰ Phil. 4:22

¹¹ Matt. 5:37

¹² Matt. 19:4

the LGBTQ agenda characterize Bible-believing Christians as “extremists.”¹³ Such is name-calling, not rational argument. Moreover, to say such is to make Christ an extremist.

Should Christians work for corporations that promote anti-Christian philosophies? I spoke recently with an employee of the US government. He has been an employee for many years. During the Covid panic great pressure was put on government employees to get the experimental Covid shot. Though he was conscientiously opposed to the shot, he was denied a religious exemption. For some unexplained reason the government never got around to terminating him. Thankfully for him, my friend still has his job. The Lord can open doors which no man can shut.¹⁴

From the time of the Puritans and Pilgrims our country was built on biblical morality. It was populated by men and women who believed that “righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov. 14:34). The righteousness referred to is the righteousness of God expressed in his holy law and revealed in the person of the Savior, Jesus Christ. God’s law is not extreme but is in all points eminently moderate. For the born-again person, God’s “commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3); his heart cries out, “O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day”; “I hate vain thoughts: but thy law do I love.”¹⁵

Let us, like Paul, be lights in a dark world. Amen.

¹³ https://www.theepochtimes.com/elon-musk-says-target-will-face-shareholder-lawsuits-amid-pro-lgbt-controversy_5310676.html?utm_source=Goodevening&src_src=Goodevening&utm_campaign=gv-2023-06-03&src_cmp=gv-2023-06-03&utm_medium=email&est=1fvpQIFQ%2FgELMoDTf%2FQZo3EzsNxF3a7jqqqJ%2FslidIQIVxyeJCCvuiROhICag%3D%3D accessed 6-3-23

¹⁴ Rev. 3:8

¹⁵ Ps. 119:97, 113