

# Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”  
Isaiah 40:31*



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## How to Survive a Shipwreck

The story of Paul's shipwreck on the island of Malta is an exciting adventure story.

But it also provides a lesson on how God's grace and man's action work together for our salvation.

“And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me” (Ac. 27:22-25).

To the 275 souls on the ship who heard these words, Paul's message had to be a great encouragement. After many days at the mercy of a terrible storm, they had given up all hope of being saved (v. 20). Now, in their darkest hour, Paul assured them that all would survive this ordeal. God had promised it, and God keeps His word.

But as we follow the story forward, we encounter some details that seem to diminish God's role in their rescue. First, when the sailors attempted to escape the ship in a small skiff, Paul warned the centurion that “unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved” (v. 31). The soldiers heeded

Paul's warning and cut loose the skiff before the sailors could get away. But why would Paul issue such a dire threat? Had not God promised that no one would be lost?

Then consider Paul's admonition to the passengers and crew to eat food, “for this is for your survival” (v. 34). What did nourishment have to do with survival, when God had already declared that all would be saved?

Finally, look at the last act of this drama, as the ship was breaking apart on the rocks. The soldiers wanted to execute Paul and the other prisoners lest they escape, but the centurion intervened and spared them (v. 42-43). Those who could swim jumped overboard and swam for shore; those who couldn't swim clung to pieces of the ship and floated to shore. “And so it was that they all escaped safely to land” (v. 44).

God promised to save everyone on the ship, but it appears that quite a lot of human intervention was required to make it happen. Was God even involved at all? Actually, God must get a great deal of credit in this story. Given the vio-

lence of the storm, no one on that ship had any reasonable hope of survival. The floor of the Mediterranean Sea was littered with shipwrecks that left no survivors; this should have been one more such wreck. That *no one* was lost in this disaster was truly an act of divine mercy.

But God's grace did not eliminate the need for human action. The sailors were needed in the final hours to guide the ship toward land; the centurion's authority was required to keep the soldiers from executing the prisoners; and everyone needed food for the strength to get them safely to shore.

So did God save them, or did they save themselves? Answer: *God saved all those who did the best they could to save themselves.* Without God, they would have failed; but God still expected them to contribute to their own deliverance.

The story of this shipwreck and the saving of its passengers is a perfect illustration of how God saves us from our sins. We cannot save ourselves unaided; but neither will God's grace save us if we do not *try* with all our might to achieve that same goal.

– David King