

August Sermon Series

Leader Guide ESV, Session 2

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Clinging to the Promises of God

Summary and Goal

Trusting someone else is hard work, especially if they have let you down by not coming through in the past. As human beings who are not perfect, letting people down is a natural part of life. When trust has been violated, it's hard to regain it. God, on the other hand, is perfect, and we should automatically and completely trust Him. Still, most of us struggle to trust God when life gets hard. In this session, we will look at how Paul kept on trusting God in the midst of a situation where his life could have ended. We will also consider how God has shown Himself to be trustworthy in our lives as well.

Session Outline

1. Trust in God and boldly proclaim His truth (Acts 27:21-24).
2. Encourage others to trust in God (Acts 27:30-38).
3. Recognize the fulfillment of what God has promised (Acts 27:39-44).

Background Passage: Acts 27–28

Session in a Sentence

God calls on His people to trust His promises without wavering and to call on others to trust in them as well.

Christ Connection

Paul made it clear that the only way to be rescued would be to stay on the ship as it endured the storm. This story echoes other events in which salvation came through judgment, such as Noah on the ark, the children of Israel walking through the Red Sea, and the bronze serpent lifted on a pole. Because Jesus endured judgment in our place, we cling to Him and His promises, trusting that He is able to carry us through the storm.

Missional Application

Because God has fulfilled His greatest promise in providing salvation through Jesus, we live on mission without wavering, even when our work seems futile and the future unsure.

Group Time

Introduction

INSTRUCT: Ask group members to use the scales in their DDG (p. 57) to evaluate their own sense of trusting people and trusting God.

How likely are you to trust people in general?

I Don't Trust People

I Trust People Completely

How likely are you to trust God in the varying circumstances of your life?

SUMMARIZE: Trusting someone else is hard work, especially if they have let you down by not coming through in the past. As human beings who are not perfect, letting people down is a natural part of life. When trust has been violated, it's hard to regain it. God, on the other hand, is perfect, and we should automatically trust Him. Still, most of us struggle to trust God when life gets hard. In this session, we will look at how Paul kept on trusting God in the midst of a situation where his life could have ended. We will also consider how God has shown Himself to be trustworthy in our lives as well.

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Point 1: Trust in God and boldly proclaim His truth (Acts 27:21-24).

READ Acts 27:21-24 (DDG p. 58).

21 Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. 22 Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. 23 For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, 24 and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.'

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 58) to explain Paul's situation of being on a ship in the middle of a storm threatening the lives of everyone on-board.

Paul finally was on his way to Rome after two years in Roman custody. He was put on a ship along with other prisoners and ferried from Caesarea to Crete and then into a storm (27:1-20). Earlier, Paul had shared his spiritual insight and warned the centurion in charge not to sail from Crete, but he was ignored. Now the storm was beating on the ship and the travelers' hopes for survival. So Paul reminded everyone of his advice, not as an "I told you so" moment but so the people on-board would now listen to him.

- Paul had warned of danger on the seas, and now the sailors, soldiers, and prisoners were surrounded by the pounding waves. He spoke of what he foresaw, but his cautions were dismissed. Yet now that the danger surrounded the ship, Paul's words took on added weight. If Paul hadn't spoken up earlier, what cause would they have to hear him now?
 - The hopes of the sailors and passengers waned as the storm raged on for days, but Paul's hopes were renewed by a visit from an angel with a message. Again God promised that Paul would share the gospel in Rome. But now coupled with that promise was the preservation of every life aboard the ship. For Paul, who was deeply devoted to people's eternal destinies, having this promise surely rejuvenated his spirits because all the passengers on-board would remain alive and have the opportunity to continue hearing the gospel and hopefully believing.
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INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

Why should we consistently speak the truth, even though people won't always listen? ([we never know when God will open a person's heart to hear and believe the gospel; so we have a consistent](#)

record of speaking truth that will support our future opportunities to speak truth; people will be challenged to reckon with the truth, even if they reject it; God is a God of truth and so should His people be)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 58) to comment on the connection between true beliefs and proper actions.

Although Paul had shared the message from God, the people on-board still had to make the decision to believe Paul and to act accordingly. Likewise, we all must make the decision to believe God and to act on our faith. Paul was certain of what God had promised through the angel, and he encouraged everyone to take courage with him in the midst of the storm around them. Because he believed in God, he boldly declared God's truth. Proper actions are dependent upon true beliefs.

- True beliefs come from God, the Creator of everything. He alone declares and sees all things as they are, so we must go to Him for the truth and measure all things in light of the God of truth. Scripture is God's message of truth to humanity that He breathed out for our benefit (2 Tim. 3:16). Scripture provides us with the truth about God's love for us, His desires for our lives, and how we can live on His mission to bring Him glory.
 - We respond rightly to God's truth not just by reading it but by doing what His Word says. In James 1:22-25, James used the illustration of someone looking carefully at himself or herself in a mirror, spending time examining the reflection, only to walk away and forget his or her eye color, hair color, and ethnicity. As silly as that sounds, and it is, James said this describes the person who hears God's Word—whether through Bible studies, listening to audio readings while driving, attending live preaching, or plugged into podcasts—and does not do what the Word says.
 - If we do not believe rightly, then our actions will be wrong. We see this readily through sinful actions, but we can also be wrong in our motivations for doing "good" things, which still reflects our sinful nature at work. Conversely, if we fail to act on what we know to be true from God's Word, then can we say we truly believe it?
 - Looking deeply and meaningfully into the Scriptures, we discover that our freedom in Christ allows us to live consistently with the new life we've been given in Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17). We are no longer slaves to sin and do not have to obey its desires (Rom. 6:1-14). As we believe this and pursue holiness while trusting what God has said, He will provide us with opportunities to share with others what trusting God looks like in real-time.
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INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

How do our beliefs impact our evangelism? (we must believe the gospel to justify sharing the gospel with others; if we do not believe in sin, judgment, and hell, we will lack motivation for sharing the good news of salvation with others; the less certain we are of Jesus' death and resurrection for sinners, the less likely we are to proclaim what He has done for us; if we believe that we have been freed from our sin, then we will pursue holiness, reinforcing the truth and impact of the gospel in our lives)

Point 2: Encourage others to trust in God (Acts 27:30-38).

READ Acts 27:30-38 (DDG p. 59).

30 And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, **31** Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." **32** Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go.

33 As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing.

34 Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.” 35 And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. 36 Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. 37 (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) 38 And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 59) to highlight the lack of faith of the sailors trying to flee the ship and our own propensity to lack faith in our always faithful God.

Some of the crew were about to abandon ship. They had lost all hope. Most likely these men weren't worshipers of the one true God and instead prayed to other gods for rescue (27:29). But in this moment of crisis, their gods and their faith failed them. No rescue came, and they chose to flee. Yet God remained faithful to His promise.

- It's tempting to look at these sailors and feel a little self-righteous or judgmental. Even if we never say the words, there's a part of us that looks at them and says, "Well, if I had been there, I would have..." But the truth is we're not much different. We are all prone to think our faith isn't working when we experience times of trial and difficulty. But we cannot forget how the true God has shown Himself to be faithful over and over again to His people:
 - When the people of Israel called for rescue from their bondage in Egypt, God sent Moses to free them and lead them to the land they would call home (Ex. 1–15).
 - When David sinned against Bathsheba and had her husband, Uriah, murdered to try to cover it up, God still forgave and restored him, though he reaped consequences for his sins (2 Sam. 11–12; Ps. 51).
 - When Peter denied Christ three times, just as Jesus said he would, Jesus was gracious and faithful to restore him (John 21:15-19).
 - God's faithfulness isn't limited to the pages of Scripture, although the acts recorded there are more than enough to prove His faithful character. Over and over again in our own lives, in seemingly insignificant moments as well as in life-changing turning points, all of us can point to times when we've seen God prove Himself trustworthy.
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EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 59) to show how Paul's consistent faith in his consistent God propelled him to a position of leadership aboard the boat.

Paul, a prisoner and passenger on his way to Rome, transcended his position on the ship and became a fearless leader and beacon of hope for everyone on-board. He intervened as the sailors looked for a way to escape, and the centurion listened to his warning this time. He also encouraged everyone to keep their strength up by taking some food. Why should the 275 other men on-board the ship listen to Paul, a political prisoner? Because of his confidence in God. Paul's faith was evident to all who encountered Him, and when all the other people had lost their faith, Paul was able to point them to his God.

Voices from Church History

"Little know we what sorrow may be upon the sea at this moment ... God help you, poor, drenched and wearied ones! My prayer goes up to the great Lord of sea and land, that he will make the storm a calm, and bring you to your desired haven! ... This is not our rest, and the restless billows tell us so. There is a land where there is no more sea—our faces are steadfastly set towards it; we are going to the place of which the Lord hath spoken. Till then, we cast our sorrows on the Lord, who trod the sea of old, and who maketh a way for his people through the depths thereof."¹

–Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

- Paul believed the sailors trying to escape would not be safe on their own and knew for certain they would be safe on-

board with him. Either they all would survive together, as God had promised, or they all would perish.

- The confidence Paul had in God was a powerful example for the men on the boat, and for us as well. He had faith in its truest sense, not a blind and unfounded hope but an absolute certainty that God was going to fulfill His promise. Paul and the crew's present danger was no hindrance to his faith. In fact, their circumstances gave him the opportunity to point everyone on-board the ship to his Lord and Savior.
- Even though we know God is faithful, Christians can struggle to act in faith in the moment—especially in extremely difficult situations. How much more could this be said for unbelievers in the midst of trying times. But God, in His faithfulness, doesn't leave any of us alone in those moments. He brings others around us who can encourage us to trust God. And believers have opportunities to encourage unbelievers to look outside of themselves for hope to the only One who can give it and back it up.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What are some ways believers can encourage unbelievers to trust in God? (we can encourage by our own example of trusting in God in difficult situations; we can pray for people in their circumstances; we can speak or share the words of Scripture; we can share the gospel, in which the Son of God endured the unimaginable for our sake to rescue us from sin and its effects)

Point 3: Recognize the fulfillment of what God has promised (Acts 27:39-44).

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Acts 27:39-44 (DDG p. 60).

39 Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. 40 So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. 41 But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. 42 The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. 43 But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, 44 and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 60) to set the tension of the moment for the people aboard the boat as it ran aground, and emphasize that God remained in control.

The ship struck land, but Paul and the people were not out of the waves yet. Should they survive to the shore, the soldiers did not want to lose their lives on account of losing prisoners, so they planned to kill them. Still some distance from the beach, some of the passengers could not swim and would never make it there on their own. God's promise seemed to be coming apart at the seams, but God remained in control of the circumstances and He fulfilled His promise—everyone reached the shore alive.

- God worked in the heart of the Roman centurion to preserve the lives of the prisoners, including Paul. In fact, the centurion's motivation was expressly to keep Paul alive, so all the prisoners were kept alive on account of Paul.
 - The waves battered the boat, breaking it up. This situation put everyone in danger, but it also provided those who could not swim with the means to make it to shore alive. The centurion saw to it that everyone would make it to the shore alive, just as God had promised and planned.
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FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 60).

God's Plan and Human Action: God's [sovereignty](#) over all of life encompasses the free actions of human beings. In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord's plan goes forward through the [choices](#) of human beings as moral agents. Knowing that God is working [all](#) things for the good of those who love Him, we trust in His promise to fulfill His plan, even when we do not understand our present circumstances.

Essential Doctrine "God's Plan and Human Action": God's [sovereignty](#) over all of life encompasses the free actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand." In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord's plan goes forward through the [choices](#) of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God's overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working [all](#) things for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28), we trust in His promise to fulfill His plan, even when we do not understand our present circumstances.

PACK ITEM 7: HE WILL GO WITH YOU: Use the **R. C. Sproul quote** on this poster and the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 60) to elaborate on God's ability to work all things together for the good of those who love Him.

God's promise to Paul and subsequent encouragement to all the people on the boat involved the promise of survival. But this declaration from God did not include all the frightening details everyone would have to endure: the storm, being lost, and a shipwreck. We are not promised ease in this life, but we are promised that God will be with us and will work all these things together for good (Matt. 28:20; Rom. 8:28).

- God gave Paul a specific promise: he would preach the gospel in Rome and that everyone on the ship would survive the storm. We don't have these specific promises, but we do have others. One promise of God made to every believer comes from Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." God will take all the nuances of our stories, good and bad, and work them together for our good. The phrase "all things" means just that—every experience in life that we have encountered.

Application: If you find yourself in a storm, a difficult time in life, recognize that it won't last forever. If you're enduring a season of deep pain and woundedness, realize God's promise to work all things for good remains true. God comforts us during our seasons of affliction so that He can heal us and we can, in turn, pass that comfort on to others who are suffering, knowing that God always keeps His promises (2 Cor. 1:3-7).

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

How have you seen God work things together for good in your life? ([be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation](#))

My Mission

EXPLAIN: God requires His followers to place their trust in Him, not only for the salvation of their souls but also for the care of each of their steps. We must be unwavering in our commitment to call upon the Lord when we're struggling with trusting Him. He's worthy of our trust, and we must fight to remind ourselves of this truth. Because God has fulfilled His greatest promise in providing salvation through Jesus, we are now free to live on mission without wavering, even when our work seems

futile and the future unsure. We can remain faithful even when we do not have all the details God has prepared for us in the future. We can be confident in God's protection and preservation over His people to complete His mission.

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 61), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God's Word.

Because God has fulfilled His greatest promise in providing salvation through Jesus, we live on mission without wavering, even when our work seems futile and the future unsure.

- **How would you respond to someone who asked you whether or not we can know if God is trustworthy?**
- **What are some experiences you have had of God fulfilling His promises that could encourage your group members in the faith?**
- **How will you use the sure promises of God to communicate the gospel to unbelievers this week?**

Voices from Church History

"If God be our God, he will do more for us than all the world besides can ... He will give us peace in trouble: when a storm without, he will make music within. The world can create trouble in peace, but God can create peace in trouble."²

—Thomas Watson (c. 1620-1686)

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Father, You are sovereign over all things, including shipwrecks. For this reason, we can confidently rest in Your promises, knowing that You work everything for the good of Your people, just as You did in the crucifixion of Your Son, Jesus. Thank You for the salvation You provided in Christ and for the Holy Spirit who enables us to live on mission without wavering as we call on others to trust in Your gospel promises. Amen.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the **Daily Study** devotions in their DDG (pp. 62-64), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use **Encourage One Another** (p. 65) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God's Word.

Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The **Daily Study** devotions in the DDG (pp. 62-64) will help group members get into God's Word and study it for themselves. **Encourage One Another** (p. 65) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 62-64) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for **Day 2** as a part of point 2 in the session: **Sometimes we need to remind people to take time to eat and enjoy life. At the same time, we need to challenge them to give thanks to God, who, out of His benevolent care for His creation, has provided them with what they need to live.**

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief

messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God's Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- **Day 1: "Sometimes it takes a storm in life for us to divert our attention off of the things that distract us from God so we can focus on Him and hear Him.**
- **Day 5: "One practice we can learn from Paul: No matter where he found himself, he was going to make Jesus known. May we too follow this example.**

Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God's Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member's DDG (p. 65) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using *The Gospel Project* in their groups.

- **Encourage group members to recall and share occasions when God has provided in tangible ways in response to something they've prayed about.**
- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.

Additional Commentary

Point 1: Trust in God and boldly proclaim His truth (Acts 27:21-24).

"By the second day of the storm, the crew decided to lighten the ship by throwing some cargo overboard (27:18), thus beginning to suffer the losses that Paul had warned them would come (27:10) ... Depression set in as they realized that Paul's prophecy was going to be fulfilled—we finally gave up all hope of being saved (27:20b) and many gave up eating (27:21a). But believers hope against hope, and Paul had not forgotten that God had assured him that he would reach Rome (23:11). At this dark time, Paul stood up before them (27:21b). He reminded them that he had warned them of coming disaster before they left Crete, but his speech is more one of encouragement than blame. He assured them that although the ship would be destroyed, God would save their lives (27:22). He could say this confidently because he had a divine revelation the previous night (27:23). Paul was careful to specify that the God he served, for the others on board had presumably been praying to their gods, and in particular the god of the sea."³

"Compared to other parts of Paul's journeys in Acts, Luke goes into great detail about the storm at sea. This journey shows God's sovereign purposes and underscores that God can be trusted to fulfill his promises: God not only led and called Paul but protected him and was indeed an intricate part of every step of Paul's voyage. Paul announces to the other sailors and prisoners what was revealed to him, that despite an imminent shipwreck, they will reach Rome without loss of life (vv. 21-26). Sure enough, the ship crashes against an island, but no one dies (vv. 39-44). Paul had taken God at his word, even as the storm dragged on and the professional sailors despaired. God is the true actor behind the scenes. Paul acts as a messenger of God's promise, but he displays no power to quiet the storm, as Jesus did (Luke 8:22-25). Paul was first a recipient of God's grace, and now is an agent of grace to others, but God is the ultimate deliverer."⁴

Point 2: Encourage others to trust in God (Acts 27:30-38).

"The prospect of imminent landfall after being adrift on the stormy sea for two weeks (v. 27) enticed a group of sailors to attempt, selfishly, an escape on the skiff (lifeboat). Paul's wisdom in preventing this is seen in the next episode, when all hands

were needed (vv. 37-38,40,43-44). The men had gone **without food** for fourteen days, most likely because of severe seasickness brought on by the rough sea. Following Jewish custom, Paul **gave thanks** to God for the food they ate. Paul's example of steady faith ('he gave thanks to God') and practicality ('he began to eat,' v. 35) in the midst of the storm **encouraged** the battered sailors. Luke mentions the number to show that Paul had managed to encourage all of them to eat. Verse 37 ends the fourth 'we' section in Acts. The crew threw out the **grain**, which had been acting as ballast for the ship, so they could run it aground (v. 39)."⁵

"As Luke recounts this travel episode, he depicts a growing respect for Paul on board the ship. The narrative opened with Paul as a submissive and expendable prisoner being taken, along with other prisoners, to Rome. With each intervention of Paul on the ship, his voice gathers in importance and his value increases. Now, for the fourth time he intervenes and displays wise leadership. He recognized that after two weeks adrift in the stormy sea and unable to cook or eat food, the crew and passengers were weak and exhausted. He urges them to eat because, as he sees it, this is necessary for them 'to survive' (v. 34). Again, their rescue is described as 'salvation' (cf. vv. 20,31). As if to lead the way for the others, Paul 'took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat' (v. 35) ... Paul's words and actions calm the storm within the hearts of his fellow shipmates. They 'were all encouraged and ate some food themselves' (Acts 27:36). In all this, however, Paul emphatically declares his God as the only God who rules the seas!"⁶

Point 3: Recognize the fulfillment of what God has promised (Acts 27:39-44).

"The whole narrative from v. 23 on has made it clear that *Paul's* presence on the ship and God's protection of *him* was responsible for the remarkable deliverance of all 276 on board. In a real sense, it was something of a reversal of expectations. In many ancient shipwreck stories there is a motif in which a storm or shipwreck is attributed to the presence of one on board who has incurred the wrath of a god. The presence of the guilty party endangers the lives of all the voyagers. In this instance the opposite took place. Paul's presence was in no sense responsible for the storm. Had his advice been followed, the ship would never have encountered the storm in the first place. On the contrary, Paul's presence was responsible for their *deliverance* from the storm. His God was with him, and because he was with the apostle, all were saved."⁷

"The ship breaks up in the daytime in order that they should see the prophecy in action and not be paralyzed with fear. Do you see that in this as well [the prisoners] were given by grace to Paul? For because of him the centurion did not allow them to be killed. Those men seem to me so patently bad that they would choose to kill them. But some jumped into the sea, and others were borne on planks. All were thus saved, and the prophecy was fulfilled, even though time had not yet endowed it with solemnity ... And through their own deliverance they learned who Paul was."⁸

References

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4. Justin S. Holcomb, "Acts," in *Gospel Transformation Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 1494-95, n. 27:13-44.
5. Stanley E. Porter, "Acts," in *CSB Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2017), 1769, n. 27:30-32; n. 27:33-34; n. 27:35; n. 27:36; n. 27:37; n. 27:38.
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7. John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1992) [Logos].
8. Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* 53, in *Ancient Faith Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2019), 1384, n. 27:44.