

Acts 27:42

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the soldiers' counsel was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim out, and escape.

Analysis

This verse captures a pivotal moment in Paul's shipwreck narrative, revealing the brutal pragmatism of Roman military culture. The Greek word **βουλή** (boulē, 'counsel' or 'plan') indicates a deliberate, strategic decision rather than a spontaneous reaction. The soldiers' proposal to kill the prisoners reflects their accountability under Roman law—guards who allowed prisoners to escape faced execution themselves (Acts 12:19). The phrase **μή τις ἐκκολυμβήσας διαφύγη** (mē tis ekkolymbēsas diaphygē, 'lest anyone swimming out should escape') shows their fear of capital punishment for dereliction of duty.

This cruel calculus stands in stark contrast to the centurion Julius's protective intervention in the next verse. The term **δεσμώτας** (desmōtas, 'prisoners') emphasizes their bound, helpless state, making the soldiers' plan even more ruthless. Paul's earlier prophecy that all would survive (Acts 27:22-25) now hangs in the balance, demonstrating God's sovereignty even over military decisions in crisis situations. The tension between human self-preservation instincts and divine purposes creates a powerful narrative moment where God's word must overcome human fear and institutional violence. This verse illustrates how God's promises often face opposition from worldly systems and human reasoning.

Historical Context

Roman military law was exceptionally strict regarding prisoner custody. The Justinian Code codified what was already standard practice: guards who allowed

prisoners to escape would receive the punishment that prisoner was destined to receive. This explains the soldiers' extreme response—they preferred to kill prisoners rather than risk their own execution for negligence. The shipwreck occurred around 60 AD during Paul's voyage to Rome for trial before Caesar. The 276 people aboard (Acts 27:37) included Roman soldiers, sailors, prisoners, and passengers. Swimming to shore was feasible—they were near Malta—but the violent storm and nighttime conditions made it dangerous. The centurion's authority to overrule the soldiers' counsel demonstrates the command hierarchy even in crisis situations.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does the soldiers' counsel reveal the harsh realities of Roman military justice?
2. What does this verse teach about human self-preservation instincts versus God's protective purposes?
3. How did the centurion's intervention fulfill Paul's prophecy that all would be saved?
4. What parallels exist between the prisoners' helpless situation and humanity's spiritual condition?
5. How does this crisis moment demonstrate God's sovereignty over both natural disasters and human decisions?

Interlinear Text

τῶν	δὲ	στρατιωτῶν	βουλὴ	ἐγένετο	ἵνα	τοὺς	δεσμώτας
G3588	And	the soldiers	counsel	was	to	G3588	the prisoners
	G1161	G4757	G1012	G1096	G2443		G1202
ἀποκτείνωσιν	μή	τις	ἐκκολυμβήσας	διαφύγοι			
kill	lest	any of them	should swim out	and escape			
G615	G3361	G5100	G1579	G1309			

From KJV Study • kjevstudy.org