Acts: “Oh Fortunate Shipwreck!”
Acts 27:27-28:10

Well… I did it. I prayed, I mustered up the courage, and I took my dog for a walk in our neighborhood… armed with some invitation cards for our neighborhood BELIEVE group that Christy and I will be hosting in our home this fall! I have to admit, I was very nervous. But over the course of a 30 minute walk on Wednesday morning, I had four conversations and managed to invite four families to our home group. I’m trusting God for whatever their response might be, but it felt good to be obedient and to actually break the ice in terms of Being the Light in our neighborhood. I will continue to walk the dog this next week, and hopefully by Sept. 10th we’ll have the makings of our first neighborhood group at the West house.

So… how about you? Did you take the first step? Did you step outside of your comfort zone to invite someone to join us for the BELIEVE series? Colonial, we’ll never know what God has in store for us if we don’t take the first step in faith and get out there on the street. As you know, our BELIEVE series is set to kick off here on Sept. 9, and it is the perfect opportunity to invite your neighbors to join you in a home group study of the ten core beliefs, the ten core practices, and the ten core virtues of the Christian faith. This fall, we’ll be focusing on the 10 core beliefs, and once again I am asking you to pray about hosting a 10 week group in your home, your workplace, or your school so that others who may be far from God can consider the life-changing, soul-saving TRUTH found in Jesus Christ as revealed in God’s Word. You’ve heard me say this before but it bears repeating: what we believe to be true about God shapes every aspect of our worldview and thus largely determines our behavior and our attitudes. So nothing has the potential to change, heal, and transform individuals and families… even entire cities… like the truth about who God is and how much God loves us! People need to know, and the BELIEVE series is specifically designed to walk people through what we BELIEVE as Christians. In addition to our weekly reading through the BELIEVE book and our time together in groups, I will be preaching on the weekly question of what we BELIEVE each week, and our kids will be tracking with using the same content in their group settings as well.

Now, once again, let me carefully acknowledge that not EVERYBODY is ready or called to host a home group, but I hope you will all consider being in a BELIEVE group if at all possible. The GroupFinder is available once again this morning for your consideration, so please get connected in a BELIEVE group if you cannot lead one this fall. At the minimum, I hope each person who calls Colonial their church home will pick up a copy of the BELIEVE book and allow each chapter to serve as your devotional material over the course of this series so that we can all be on the same page each Sunday. Imagine the energy and the synergy that will be generated by a couple of thousand people all reading the same scripture, asking the same questions, and discussing the same core belief each week for 10 weeks! This is going to be fun!

I want to also acknowledge that there are other important opportunities and ministries happening at Colonial this fall as well. There are dozens of other groups, ways to serve, and opportunities to connect that can be accessed on our website: www.colonialkc.org. Once on our website, click on the “CONNECT” tab and then “GROUPS” to see all of the available groups and opportunities for you and your family.
Alright...let’s return now to the second to last message of our three-year series on the book of Acts. We are in the middle of chapter 27, and we’ll pick up where we left off beginning with vs. 14. Before we jump back into the text, let me remind you of where we are.

If you recall, while on trial in Caesarea, Paul appealed to Caesar, so he (along with Luke and Aristarchus) have been assigned to a Roman Centurion named Julius, and at the beginning of ch. 27 they embark on their sea voyage to Rome. We’ll throw the map up here on the screens, (show map) and I’ll recap their journey so far.

If you recall, they left from Caesarea and after a short stop at Sidon, they head north due to the prevailing west winds that make a more direct route impossible. After slowly making their way along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, they arrive in Lycia where they board a large, Alexandrian grain ship (show pic of ship). They then take a short jog (return to map) west to Cnidus, but finding no break in the westerly winds, they decide to head south towards the island of Crete where they rest in a small port called Fair Havens. The ship’s crew and the Roman centurion then decide to winter in the port of Phoenix, on the southwestern edge of Crete, though Paul warns them that it would be exceptionally dangerous to cross the open sea so late in the fall of the year. The crew waits until they have a favorable south wind to make their short trip to Phoenix, but sure enough, on the way to Phoenix they are overtaken by a massive squall that the ancients called the Northeaster. Luke records that they could not fight the gale winds from the NE so they “gave way” to the winds and began to quickly sail southwest. They were able to find some momentary reprieve under the lee of a small island named Cauda (show map of Claudia), but soon they were once again speeding towards the dangerous shallow sandbars of the Syrtis (the northern tip of Africa) (show map of Syrtis). Fearing shipwreck and certain death should they run aground on the Syrtis, the crew lowered the gear and did all they could to heave the ship on a course that would be approximately west by 8 degrees north (I’ll explain that in just a moment). After several days of seeing neither the sun or the stars, the crew jettisoned the cargo and even the ship’s tackle in hopes of buying some time, but Luke records that for the Egyptian sailors, “all hope of being saved was at last abandoned.” Paul then takes the stage, and here is what he said at the end of our passage last Sunday, beginning with vs. 21: Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, 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.” So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.

So...that’s where we are. There are MOUNTAINS of water...likely 60-80 ft waves all around them. Their ship is taking on water; everyone on board has lived in a state of constant anxiety and increasing hopelessness for several days now, but PAUL claims to have heard from His God that they would all survive the shipwreck that was destined to come. Let’s look what comes next in vs. 27, When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven along the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come.
I know what you’re thinking...you’re asking yourself: “What’s a fathom?” Right? I’ll tell you in just a minute!

First, let me ask you a question: given that the ancient Egyptian sailor had no electronics on the Alexandrian grain ship...no sonar, no depth finder, how is it that they discerned they were approaching land in the middle of the night? Remember, they could not see the stars...so it’s not as though they have the light of the moon to work with. They obviously did not see any land approaching during the daylight hours. They are being driven along by hurricane conditions...it’s midnight...and yet, according to Luke, the crew suspects they are nearing land...but how? Again, I’m going to tell you in just a minute; but first, let’s examine the clues and see what we can learn.

Remember last week I referenced a book entitled, “The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul” published by a man named James Smith in 1848. James Smith provides a masterful examination of every dot and tittle of this story, engaging active sea captains and other methods of research in order to help us understand the clues that we find here in the text.

Smith first tries to ascertain how far an ancient grain ship, having “heaved to” in hurricane force winds. Now, when I say “heave to,” I’m speaking of a tactic sailors use to slow down and ride out a massive storm. In this case with a NE wind, the sailors would have lashed the steering oars to point the bow of the ship to the north, while using the sails to hold the ship at an angle that would slightly quarter the huge waves coming from the NE. Make sense? That slows the ship down, puts it in a strategic position to negotiate monster waves, keeps the waves from crashing directly over the bow or the stern, and also keeps the ship from traveling south toward the dangerous sand bars of the Syrtis. So, to begin his research, James Smith (back in the 19th century) found two experienced sea captains and asked the question, “What would you say would be the probable amount of drift of a ship hove to in a gale of wind?” After estimating the size of the ship and the ferocity of the wind, the two captains estimated forty miles per day and 24 miles a day respectively. Smith took the average and made his estimate using 36.5 miles per day. Then (show main map) he measured the distance from Clauda to the point of Koura, the eastern most side of Malta (show map of Malta) https://jeffersonwhite.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Bay-e1506963603643.jpg, which is a distance of 476.6 mile. When you divide 476.6 miles by 36.5 miles per day, you come up with 13 days, one hour and twenty-one minutes...which suggests that Luke is spot on in his report: on the 14th day of the trip, after 13 days and some change being blown by a Nor’easter, their boat has travelled 476.6 miles, and they are precariously close to Malta.

But how did the sailors know they were approaching land in the middle of the night? We find clues from various reports provided by other sailors and shipwreck survivors who bear witness to the fact that the land on the point of Koura is so low that it cannot be seen until you are quite close to it. In hurricane-like conditions in the middle of the night, there is no way the Egyptian sailors would have seen the point at Koura...but they would have heard the horrifying sound of the surf crashing onto the point. That’s how they knew they were close to land: they heard the breakers on the point, and I imagine that was fairly terrifying. By the way, guess what the depth of the water is adjacent to the point of Koura even to this day? 120 ft, which in ancient and nautical terms translates to 20 fathoms (a fathom is 6 feet). And,(show map of Malta) as the ship passed the point of Koura and approached Salmonetta Island, they would
have entered into 15 fathoms of water, and now they would have been able to discern the surf breaking upon the massive rock formations that guard Salmonetta Island. At that moment the sailors immediately understand that they will all die if they do not find a way to stop the ship.

Luke reports that to avoid running up on the rocks, they immediately attempt to stop the ship by dropping four anchors from the stern (the back) of the boat. Let me tell you something: any experienced seaman would tell you that the chances of stopping a huge vessel being driven along by hurricane force winds with four anchors dropped from the stern is like 1% chance of success. As Smith writes, “Their only chance of safety was to anchor, but to do so successfully in a gale of wind, on a lee shore, requires not only time for preparation, but holding ground of extraordinary tenacity.”

Astoundingly we find in the nautical reports of St. Paul’s Bay this record: “The harbor of St. Paul is open to the easterly and north-east winds. It is, notwithstanding, safe for small ships, the ground, generally, being very good; and while the cables hold there is no danger, as the anchors will never start.” Smith p 92.

Why is the bottom so good for anchoring there off the east cost of Malta? It is because there are two streams that flow into that bay, depositing copious amounts of clay, and it is the clay bottom that made anchoring a possibility for the Egyptian grain-ship...any other bottom (sand or rocks), and Paul’s ship would have crashed into Salmonetta Island that very night, and all would have been lost.

Now, as they wait out the night, praying that the anchors would hold, some of the crew decide they would rather take their chances on the ship’s boat. Let’s pick up the story beginning with vs. 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, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.” Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship’s boat and let it go.

We can hardly blame the Egyptian sailors for wanting to abandon ship now that land was in sight. They expected those anchors to give way any moment and all would be lost. But Paul’s message from the Lord was clear: their salvation from the sea depended on them all sticking this out together. Luke then reports that the Roman soldiers cut the ropes and set the boat’s ship adrift. Whether they did so because of Paul’s warning or their own hatred for deserters we’ll never know.

Continuing on we read: As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them to take some food, saying “Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. 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.” 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. Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. (We were in all 276 persons in the ship). And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Once again we see Paul taking leadership on the ship. His confidence is in the Lord, and he demonstrates a level of faith and certainty that brings hope to the sailors. No doubt the crew had eaten little if anything as they worked day and night to keep the ship afloat in this horrific storm for two weeks. Not
only were they working feverishly and highly anxious, but we should also assume that their “kitchen” below deck was likely under water! Now that the ship was anchored, they were in a holding pattern until daylight, and Paul sees an opportunity to minister to people that Jesus died for. So he encourages them all to share a meal together. As we’ve seen over and over again in Acts, Paul’s behavior looks very much like that of Jesus. In fact, the way Luke records Paul “breaking the bread and giving thanks” sounds a lot like Jesus at the Last Supper, right? Notice also that everyone gets that this is the “last supper” they will ever have on this ship. When daybreak comes, they will identify where they want to run the ship aground, they will cut the anchors, and they will intentionally ground the ship and hope to God they can somehow make it to shore with their lives. Consequently, they dump the remaining wheat into the sea, hopeful that by lightening the ship they might make it ever closer to land before the ship runs aground on the shallow bottom.

Let’s pick up the story in vs. 39: 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. 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. 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.

Once again, Luke’s reportage is so beautifully accurate in terms of his use of nautical terms and descriptions. One of the reasons they had anchored from the stern the night before was to set up what we read about here at first light. You see, pretty much every boater in the world anchors from the bow, which puts the highest part of your boat into wind, protecting your boat from getting swamped by waves that might come over the stern. However, by anchoring at the stern, the bow of the Egyptian grain-ship is now pointing towards land because of the NE wind that blew at their backs. Now, as day breaks, they can see the bay, they can choose the safest place to run aground, and they don’t have to worry about turning the ship around. Once they determine their course, they raise the foresail up at the very front of the ship, they cut the anchors loose, and once the anchor lines have fallen, they untie the rudders that would have been pulled up and out of the way of the anchors. Once the ship is sailing, they will use the wind and the rudders to navigate the bay and hopefully beach the boat on shore. In this Paul’s case, there’s only one problem… the large grain-ship hits a shallow reef before they make it to shore, and the boat literally stops. Once again, this description is consistent with the clay bottom still found in St. Paul’s bay in Malta. The large grain ship drafts too much water, so the keel of the boat digs into the clay and it holds fast. Meanwhile, the surf is smashing the stern of the boat into pieces.

Let’s pick up the story again with vs. 42: The soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. 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, and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

Simply put, as shipwrecks go, the morning could not have gone better! Instead of crashing into a coral reef or a rocky shoal, the ship gets stuck in clay…which keeps the ship from immediately being destroyed. In fact, because the stern is getting busted apart by the surf in a slow and steady fashion, the loose planks and boards serve as “life preservers” that assist the men who can’t swim! Most importantly, the standard military practice of killing the prisoners to ensure that no one escapes is
suspended by the Roman centurion Julius who has developed a meaningful relationship with Paul. By the way, that’s what can happen when we “love our enemies” as Jesus commanded, right? So...by the grace of God, against all the odds, every single man survives an ancient shipwreck! Needless to say that was very unusual. What should we make of miracle? I think it’s fair to say that God allowed the shipwreck, but He ensured it would be just the right kind of shipwreck, right? Hold that thought...

Let’s see what happens next, beginning with ch. 28:1: After we were brought safely through we the learned that the island was called Malta. The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it has begun to rain and was cold. When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on to his hand. When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, “No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.” He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

Luke confirms that the island is called Malta, and he is taken by the hospitality of the native people there. Apparently 276 men comprised of Roman soldiers, Egyptian sailors, and a host of prisoners would have likely drawn a different response on some other island, but here on Malta the natives light some fires and provide shelter for the men “because it had begun to rain.” Having been lost at sea for two weeks in hurricane conditions, I suspect the sailors were perfectly alright with a bit of rain on Malta, but don’t you know that fire felt good! That is until a snake slithered out and bit Paul right on the hand! The irony is thick, right? You get that, right? The Maltese people do! The irony is that Paul just survived two weeks in a gale, he survived a shipwreck, and now that he is safely ashore and warming his toesies by the fire, he is going to die from a snakebite! The Maltese people immediately conclude that Paul, who is admittedly dressed and shackled as a prisoner, must have been a murderer since Justice was still pursuing him via the snake!

Now...you know I can’t pass that up. Pause for a minute and consider what Luke just recorded. Here we are on the island of Malta...2000 years ago. The island is occupied by uncivilized, albeit very hospitable, natives. And what do they KNOW in their core? They know that JUSTICE is a thing. They know that JUSTICE catches up with those who break the moral law that is also a thing. They assume that anyone who murders will get their just reward, because JUSTICE will find the one who does evil, and JUSTICE will wreak vengeance upon that person. This story provides an excellent example of the universal moral law and the inevitable, inherent notion found in all human communities that JUSTICE is coming for us all.

Now, the natives are so certain that the snake has come to serve JUSTICE that when Paul does not swell up and die, they conclude that Paul must be a god. In other words, Paul must be something other than human because humans cannot escape justice. Now...we don’t even know if that snake was poisonous, though I suspect it was because the term used here for “viper” is the same term John the Baptist used when he referred to sinful people as a “brood of vipers” in Luke 3. Today Malta is very developed. There are very few trees and no poisonous vipers on the island, but Malta was likely a very different kind of island 2000 years ago. Whatever the case, Paul survives the snake bite with no problem...which sets the
stage for what comes next. In vs. 7 we read: Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days.

I think it’s safe to say that Paul is now treated with tremendous respect and honor by every man on the ship and every native on the island. It was Paul who prophesied that they would all survive the shipwreck…and they did. It was Paul who survived the snakebite, so he clearly is a man of great power…possibly even divine. So at this point, Paul is hanging with the brass. Julius is keeping Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus in his company, and that is surely why Paul and friends are treated to three days of hospitality by the chief man…possibly the Roman procurator of Malta…a man named Publius. Publius is a very Roman title, but this man likely grew up on Malta since he owns lots of property and his father lives on the island as well. In fact, his father was likely the chief man before he was, but now he is elderly and apparently quite ill.

Let’s pick up the story with vs. 8: It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him healed him. And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

While Paul is enjoying the hospitality of Publius, the chief of the island happens to mention that his father is very sick. Paul doesn’t let that comment pass without seizing the opportunity to do ministry in the name of Jesus. He immediately requests to visit the sick man, and after praying, places his hands on the elderly gentleman and heals him. What a moment that must have been for Paul! For the past two years he has been bound and imprisoned. It has been years since he has been able to feel the power of the Holy Spirit flow through his hands to bring healing to a sick man. But now…because of a fortunate shipwreck, Paul is able to do the ministry of the gospel. Because of a fortunate shipwreck, this man who was trapped in a dying body, smelling of urine and burning with a fever, is now made whole again. And because of a fortunate shipwreck, many, many people are healed and they come to know the name of Jesus.

Church…have you ever stopped to consider that what you consider a shipwreck in your life may actually be the means by which God is going to bring healing to the world? Wait…is that how God works? Well…consider exhibit A: the life of Jesus Christ. Betrayed, denied, falsely accused, arrested, beaten, whipped, crucified…shipwrecked. But by his death He saved the world. Exhibit B: Paul—religious terrorist turned believer, rejected, falsely accused, stoned and left for dead, whipped, arrested, imprisoned, executed…shipwrecked. But he spread the Gospel and wrote 13 letters of the New Testament. Exhibit C: Martin Luther King—preacher, visionary, adulterer, hated, harassed, arrested, murdered, shipwrecked. But he championed the civil rights movement anchored in the Gospel. Exhibit D: Dietrich Bonhoeffer—brilliant teacher, pastor, leader, writer, arrested, executed, shipwrecked. But he wrote the Cost of Discipleship and demonstrated what true faithfulness looked like during the Holocaust. Exhibit E: Horatio Spafford—brilliant business man, wonderful Christian family, fire in Chicago destroys his house and business, loses everything, sends his wife and daughters to Europe for a vacation and to do mission work and promises to meet them there, but then the ship carrying his family sinks in

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the North Atlantic...only his wife survives. Shipwrecked. But then Horation wrote the song, “It Is Well with My Soul!”

Church, please quit thinking that Jesus saved you for calm waters and easy sailing...that’s simply not true. Jesus saved you and Jesus saved me so that WHEN we are caught up in the storms of life, we will step up and speak words of hope because we belong to God and we believe what He said, regardless of how bleak the circumstances might look. Jesus saved us so that WHEN our ship wrecks, we will be true to the Gospel and bring help, hope and healing to those we meet in the place we least expected to be! Shipwreck, in this life, is inevitable. And it’s not because you are incompetent or because God is angry with you...it’s because in this life, trouble is coming...it’s as inevitable as squalls at sea. None of us will escape shipwreck...the question is, what are we going to do with the time that we have? Will we sit around and feel sorry for ourselves, or will we allow God to work miracles through our lives in the place where we are...regardless of how we got there?

I wonder what it would take for us to finally realize that many hurting people in this world will never experience the healing power of Jesus UNTIL our ship grinds to a halt, gets bashed to pieces, and we float ashore...soaking wet, shaken but grateful, and find ourselves suddenly...available. Think about that. Let’s pray.