

Acts 27:1-28:10

A Commentary on The Apostle Paul's Voyage, Shipwreck and Rescue

In preaching the series "*The Unfinished Work of Christ*" on the book of Acts it was readily apparent that it would not be able to cover all twenty-eight chapters in great detail. Many finer details and comments had to be set aside for later observation in another venue. However, probably no section of the book of Acts personally strikes me with greater intrigue than Paul's "*ship of state*" voyage and shipwreck with which Luke winds down his letter. The precision and detail with which Luke records the voyage is remarkable. Having personally spent several nights on the Mediterranean Sea, in the same vicinity as the Apostle Paul, adds to the intrigue. I sailed through a couple nights in rough seas to the point at which our ship was unable to dock at one of our ports of call at the island of Santorini, 102 miles north of the island of Crete. This makes Paul's voyage take on personal meaning. In a small way, I sense a slight affinity with the Apostle Paul. I still recall the violent winds of the Aegean and Mediterranean. In my mind's eye I can still see the white-capped waves of the rough sea. I feel the burn of the salt water in the air. I vividly remember the seasickness on board. Thankfully, my Mediterranean voyage providentially turned out less traumatic than Paul's shipwreck, but nevertheless it was a memorable experience. It is in an attempt to set forth some textual observations and insights that could not be adequately delivered from the pulpit that I record and submit the following commentary on Paul's voyage and shipwreck.

Luke's account of Paul's maritime voyage to Rome is a classic in miniature, and one of the most vivid pieces of descriptive writing in the biblical record.¹ "It has long been acknowledged as one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship."² "Its details regarding first-century seamanship are so precise and its portrayal of conditions on the eastern Mediterranean so accurate . . . that even the most skeptical have concluded that it probably rests on a journal of some such voyage as Luke describes."³ Luke, while not himself a seaman versed in the technical vocabulary of sailing, describes his experiences in his own vigorous and vivid language as an eyewitness. His description causes the reader to enter into the experience with a sense that "you are there."

Luke's primary reason for devoting so much time in his narrative to the details of those few weeks at sea is best understood by **his desire to emphasize the divine determination of the purpose of Paul's seeing Rome.**⁴ In spite of the extreme circumstances that rendered his odds unlikely to get there, it is the will of God that Paul

¹ Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), vol. 9, *John and Acts*, Acts by Richard N. Longenecker, 556.

² Gordon D. Fee, gen. ed. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), *The Book of Acts*, F.F. Bruce, 474.

³ Longenecker, 556.

⁴ A grouping of statements scattered over ten chapters of Acts helps one see the story and its progression: "*I must also see Rome*" (19:21); "*so you must witness at Rome also*" (23:11); "*to Caesar you shall go*" (25:12); "*it was decided that we should sail for Italy*" (27:1); "*you must stand before Caesar*" (27:24); "*and thus we came to Rome*" (28:14).

preach the gospel at the heart of the Roman Empire.⁵ The means were neither what Paul could have foreseen nor what he might have chosen, but God was in control, and the apostle was fully willing to leave the details in His hands.⁶ Paul would reach Rome as the strategic center of the world, whose highways ran throughout the entire known world, and would there proclaim the hope in Christ.⁷

Along with Luke's intent to communicate the "divine intention," **there also seems intent to communicate the importance and significance of the interaction with various people** (Julius, Publius and his father, people of Malta, etc) **and events** (breaking of bread on the ship, campfire and viper incident, healing of people on Malta, etc.) **in which and to whom Paul was used by God.** The journey was much more protracted than Paul had originally anticipated, but God had ministry along the journey. **Such is life, that while the destination is extremely important, the journey with its details is significant as well.**

27:1 – The account of Paul's trip to Rome is the longest of Luke's four "we" sections (27:1-28:16; compared to 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18). The use of the plural pronoun "we" along with the clear and precise description and detailed account makes it certain that Luke was a companion of Paul during this trip and that chapter twenty-seven and twenty-eight is an eyewitness account of the events.

Luke says that for their trip to Rome Paul was delivered, along with some other prisoners, into the custody of a man named "Julius" who was a centurion⁸ "of the Augustan cohort."⁹ Julius was a middle ranking officer of probably at least 100 men (and perhaps up to several hundred men) from a prominent legion that had the royal designation bearing reverence and honor to the Emperor Nero.¹⁰ Probably Julius was already bound for Rome with his soldiers and prisoners and Paul was added to his company.

27:2 – The ship set sail no doubt from the artificially engineered port of Caesarea. If they would have embarked from any other location, such as Ptolemais, it seems that

⁵ Bruce, 475.

⁶ Homer A. Kent, Jr., Jerusalem to Rome: Studies in the Book of Acts (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House and BMH Books, 1972), 184.

⁷ As well, Paul strongly desired to make Rome a center of his base of operations for Christian service into Spain and the western reaches of the Empire.

⁸ A centurion was a middle-ranking officer and his title means 'leader of the hundred'. The centurionate covered all the lower and middle ranking officers in the legion. "A centurion could be a veteran quartermaster nearing the end of his active service, a middle-aged staff officer, or a young company commander with a successful career in front of him." Michael Grant, The Army of the Caesars, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 74.

⁹ BAGD, 761. Literally, "*speires Sebastes*"; *speires* is the Greek word used to translate the Latin 'cohors.' In biblical literature it probably always refers to "the tenth part of a legion." The number varied but normally had around 600 men; cf. Matt. 8:5-13. *Sebastes*, has the root meaning of being "revered, worthy of reverence, august," and is a translation of the Latin "Augustus" and was used as a designation for the Roman emperor, cf. Acts 25:21, 25 (of Nero). Perhaps at times it could have been given as an honorary title to auxiliary troops, but second century astrologer and educator Ptolemy wrote that it was used specifically in connection to three legions that bore that name.

¹⁰ Some commentators believe that there may have been a special unit of "*speculators*" that formed an elite unit and in a unique manner bore the title "Augustan cohort" or "Imperial Regiment" and were assigned to various police and judicial function. Longenecker, 558.

Luke would have noted it in his usual manner to detail. They departed on a ship belonging to or from Adramyttium (modern Edremit), a seaport of ancient Mysia in northwest Asia Minor, (modern Turkey), opposite the present day Greek island of Lesbos.¹¹ No doubt this "Adramyttian ship" would hug the coastal shore of Palestine as it sailed northward, then westward, holding to the southern shore of Asia Minor, calling on various ports in the province. Probably from the beginning of their departure from Caesarea it was at one of these ports Julius had always intended to find a ship bound for Italy.¹² Luke records that they were accompanied by a devoted Christian brother named "Aristarchus," who first appeared in Acts 19:29 as one of Paul's traveling companions, and was seized by the angry mob in Ephesus. He later accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the offering from the Gentile churches (Acts 20:4).¹³ Aristarchus is mentioned in Colossians 4:10 and Philemon 24 as sending greetings from Rome (assuming a Roman origin for these letters), suggesting that he accompanied Paul all the way to Rome and did not return to his home of Thessalonica even as they journeyed near by.

27:3 – After sailing approximately seventy miles northward, the next day they put into the ancient double ported Phoenician seaport of Sidon. Luke notes the Roman centurion Julius treated Paul with an extraordinary kindness and allowed him to leave the ship and venture onto land where he was allowed to go and visit Christian friends in the area. These friends provided refreshment and ministry to Paul. No doubt one can see the grace of God moving the heart of Julius in this remarkable act of freedom. Perhaps Julius had been advised by Festus to be lenient with Paul. However, one might also observe Paul's genius and winsomeness in friendship that at such an early stage he had already secured respect and trust from Julius to allow him so much freedom.¹⁴ Even if a soldier was dispatched to accompany Paul, in light of the riots and controversy that often accompanied Paul, this was an extreme act of generosity. How fast Paul developed trust is a lesson in leadership and Christian living. People trust one they believe has others' best interests at heart and not merely their own. "Paul cared about people like Julius, and Julius knew it."¹⁵ Luke seems to indicate that this time, though brief, was one of personal refreshment and care to Paul.

27:4-5 – Continuing from Sidon, the boat sailed northwest toward Cyprus, to gain some shelter¹⁶ from the prevailing westerly winds that blow from spring through fall on the

¹¹ Modern day Edremit is a popular coastal retreat area in western Turkey.

¹² In the event that they did not find a ship bound for Italy by the time they reached Adramyttia they had the option of taking the land route via the Roman road of the Egnatian Way.

¹³ Some theorize that Luke and Aristarchus accompanied Paul, a Roman citizen, as Paul's personal physician (Luke) and personal servant (Aristarchus) or both as his slaves, thus raising Paul's status and respect in the eyes of the Roman commander, cf. Longenecker, 558; Bruce, 477; Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller*, 316. An ancient tradition says that Aristarchus suffered martyrdom with Paul, in Rome, under Nero. John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Acts 13-28*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 346. Without a doubt, Aristarchus was a loving, devoted companion and friend.

¹⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977; reprint 1995), 370.

¹⁵ MacArthur, 346. See also, Acts 16:28.

¹⁶ Greek ὑποπλεῖν (*hupopleo*) "sail under the lee of an island, i.e., in such a way that the island protects the ship fr. the wind Ac 27:4, 7", BAGD, 846.

eastern Mediterranean. During this time of the year, as they headed westward toward Italy, they were running against the winds. Thus, any shelter they could gather from land masses would be helpful. Local breezes coming off the land as well as westward currents that run along that coast helped them in their progress.¹⁷ Little by little they crept from point to point up the coastal area of Cilicia, of which Paul was very familiar since his birth city of Tarsus was in Cilicia. They took advantage of every opportunity to make a few miles. Probably Luke remembered their journey from Patara to Tyre two years before (Acts 21:1-3) when they had taken a slightly different course and had the wind to their backs and were able to progress more swiftly.¹⁸ Having to cut across a small, open section of sea, between the island of Cyprus to the south and the land region of Cilicia to the north, they sailed westward to the port of Andriake, the port for the city of Myra, which actually was a few miles west / southwest of the city.¹⁹ The ancient port of Andriake, of the region of Lycia,²⁰ was one of the chief ports for transporting imperial grain.²¹ Andriake, having secured relative safety from ancient piracy that plagued the area, during the first century she became the port of call, (overshadowing its ancient port rival Patara), for grain ships to Rome from Egypt. In Paul's day, the city of Myra was a very busy, industrious and exciting city boasting distinguished public buildings, the largest theater in Lycia, and much wealth.

¹⁷ Longenecker, 558.

¹⁸ Bruce, Acts 478.

¹⁹ Myra was one of the six leading cities of the Lycian Union of cities (Myra, Xanthos, Tlos, Pinara, Patara and Olympos). The city is well known for its amphitheatre (the largest in Lycia) and the plethora of rock-cut tombs carved in the cliff above the theatre; http://www.lycianturkey.com/lycian_sites/myra.htm.



²⁰ The Lycian coast justly gained the reputation as the "Pirate Coast". This coast is dotted with many strategically placed coves and islands where the sea-raiders would hide themselves and pounce upon the many heavily-laden merchant ships sailing by. It was not until 67 BC that Admiral Pompey, given huge powers and almost unlimited resources, was able to check the piracy problem with great success. http://www.lycianturkey.com/lycian_history.htm.

²¹ Bruce, Acts, 479.

27:6 – At Myra, the centurion Julius found an “Alexandrian ship” sailing for Italy. This ship from Alexandria, Egypt, was probably a part of the Roman grain fleet.²² Egypt was the chief granary of Rome and the regular trade in grain between Alexandria and Rome was of extreme importance. In many aspects the political stability of Rome depended on this grain trade.²³ The service of ships devoted to this trade was organized as a department of state in the Roman government.²⁴ The corporation of owners of these ships received special recognition from the Roman state.²⁵ Julius arranged with the owner of a large Alexandrian grain ship to take the soldiers and prisoners on board for the long voyage to Italy.

27:7-8 – Having set sail on this new vessel, Luke records that they found their movement very slow with little progress over many days. As they journeyed westerly along the southern coast of Asia Minor they began to approach the western shores of Asia Minor where the coast heads northward. At this point they began to lose the cover and protection of land and became more exposed and opened themselves up to the southerly and westerly winds of the Aegean Sea. After several days with great difficulty they arrived off the coast of the port city of Cnidus.²⁶



²² Probably both of the last two “Alexandrian” ships that Paul caught, 27:6; 28:11, were wheat transport ships carrying grain from Egypt to Italy. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, gen. ed. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, vol. 4, *Ships*, by Earle Hilgert, 485.

²³ Bruce, Acts, 479.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Cnidus was one of the six Dorian colonies in Asia. It seems to have kept a purer Greek character, no doubt because it set its sights seaward and had little contact with the interior. Around 360 BC, the city was rebuilt at the windblown tip of the peninsula, banking on the fact that a good harbor at the outer corner of Asia Minor would become a popular calling-port for ships on the Aegean-East Mediterranean transit routes. The rocky island facing the shore at the new site was joined to the mainland with a causeway, creating two deep harbors on either side of the isthmus, one on the Aegean and the other on the Mediterranean. <http://www.bodrumpages.com/English/cnidus.html#lukian>.

Here they had a choice of two alternatives: (1) put into port at Cnidus and wait for fair wind (there were ample accommodations at Cnidus as it had two harbors, the eastern one being particularly large);²⁷(2) set a course for Crete and try to sail under the protection of its land. The second option is what they chose. It was probably the ship owners preference to continue the voyage. However, the wording of the biblical text could possibly be interpreted that the ship was unable to get into port at Cnidus due to the heavy, driving north-west winds. Due to the direction of the winds, they set sail for the most easterly cape of the island of Crete called Salmone.²⁸ With difficulty they sailed around the eastern cape of Crete and came to the small bay called Fair Havens. Fair Havens was the first convenient port after they rounded Cape Salmone. It was an exposed harbor and not conducive to wintering a ship (27:12), but they chose to pull in there and wait for the wind to change. Very close to Fair Havens was the city of Lasea.



27:9-10 – Navigation in this part of the Mediterranean was always dangerous after mid-September, and was considered impossible after mid-November.²⁹ The ship had lost valuable time since leaving Myra, and apparently waited some time in the harbor of Fair Havens hoping for the wind to change. It was now obvious that there was no hope of reaching Italy before winter. “The fast” (referring to Yom Kippur, “the Day of Atonement”) celebrated between the latter part of September and first part of October was already past. While Paul was not a sailor by vocation, he was an experienced traveler and had won the respect of the men. Therefore, he was permitted to speak and he warned them that he perceived that disaster was awaiting them if they attempted to go further. Paul wisely counseled them not to gamble; he had already experienced three shipwrecks (2 Cor. 11:25) and was not excited about a fourth!

27:11-12 – Much discussion and input from many people ensued (v. 12) The centurion who was now probably in official command of the ship since it was a grain ship on official business for the Roman government and he appears to be the ranking officer on board, was more persuaded by the input of the pilot and owner of the ship than by Paul.

²⁷ Bruce, *Acts*, 480.

²⁸ James Smith, *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul: With Dissertations on the Life and Writings of St. Luke, and the Ships and Navigation of the Ancients*, (Minneapolis: The James Family, 1880; rev. and corrected ed. 4th ed., Walter E. Smith), 76-77.

²⁹ Longenecker, 559.

Finally the majority decided to put out to sea and try to make it to a better port on Crete. Approximately thirty-four miles west of Fair Havens was the larger and safer port of Phoenix whose opening was in a slightly different direction making it more conducive for wintering.

27:13-15 – Shortly after they made the decision to try to winter at the harbor of Phoenix a moderate southern breeze began to blow and it appeared they would have no problem crossing the wide Gulf of Messara that began west of Cape Matala on the southern coast of Crete. Consequently they pulled up the anchor(s) and began to sail around the Cape of Matala, all the while holding as close to the shore of Crete as possible. No sooner had they rounded the Cape and were less than half the way, than they were caught in a hurricane type storm.³⁰ "The sudden change from a south wind to a violent northerly wind is a common occurrence in these seas."³¹ Coming down off of Mount Ida to the north came a rushing and violent wind sailors referred to as "the Euroquilo"³² or "the Northeaster" (NIV). Present day sailors in the area still recognize such conditions and refer to them as "*the grigal*" or "*gregale*."³³ The term used indicates that the storm was accompanied by phenomena typical of "typhonic" hurricanes – whirling of winds caused by the meeting of opposite currents of airs from different directions and temperatures, the clashing of opposite currents of water, and the rising and heaving of waves. The ancient writer Pliny described these types of blasts in this area and wrote that it creates a vortex type atmosphere.³⁴ Attempts were made to "look the storm in the face" and ride it, but they were unable. This swirling, vortex soon became a driving force and they gave into the winds, allowing them to be driven to the southwest.³⁵

³⁰ Greek *typhonikos* – ancient word "typhoon" but more equivalent to our modern usage of "hurricane."

³¹ Smith, 102.

³² Longenecker, 560; *Euraquilo* is the transliteration of a compound hybrid Greek word from the Greek *euros* meaning "east wind" and the Latin *aquilo* meaning "north wind" thus "a Northeaster"

³³ Fee, 484-485.

³⁴ Smith, 102.

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<http://www.rbc.org/ds/sb215/maps.html>

27-16-17 – They were driven southwest approximately twenty-three miles to the small island of Clauda.³⁶ This was no place to harbor, nor were they even able to pull into port, but at this point were struggling for their lives. For a moment the ship received a brief and temporary relief from the shelter of the island. Sensing the brief respite they took what steps they could to further weather the storm. Their ship's dingy boat (which served as a lifeboat) had been, as was common, towed behind the ship and was normally taken on board during bad weather. Perhaps it had been left in tow due to the sudden nature with which the storm blew up. By now, apparently the dingy was filling with water and in danger of being lost ("we were scarcely able to get the ships boat under control"). With difficulty they were able to get the dingy on board (Luke's use of the plural pronoun "we" may indicate that even the passengers helped secure the boat. Social distinction began to disappear in the fight for survival).³⁷ After hoisting the dingy on board, the crew members passed supporting cables under the hall of the ship. This procedure, sometimes known as "frapping," involved securing ropes under the hall and then winching them tight to prevent the heaving vessel from breaking apart.³⁸ This was a common problem with ancient ships of this time.³⁹ It would be a reasonable deduction at this point that the ship had already suffered severe strain upon her hull and that quite possibly leaks were beginning to show and she was taking on some water.⁴⁰ As the winds continued to drive them southward they began to fear that they would be driven onto the shallow sandbars off the coast of North Africa known as "The Syrtis." Luke records that they "let down the sea anchor" or literally, "let down the gear" or "lowered the instrument." Luke is not very specific at this point as to what he is referring, therefore it is hard to speak definitively. Perhaps he was referring to a final small sail that was occasionally kept aloft to provide some direction or guidance or perhaps (as the NASB and NIV interpret) he was referring to a "drift anchor" dragged astern to provide resistance.⁴¹

27:18-20 – The following day the crew began to lighten the ship by jettisoning all non-essentials. At this point all hope of delivering their primary cargo was surrendered and a spirit of survival set in. In spite of great financial loss, the cargo was pitched. The situation was now desperate. Survival was all that mattered. On the third day of this intense phase, literally they were "throwing out" with "their own hands" everything not essential to life itself. The ships rigging and tackle were thrown over. Any hope of steering or sailing the ship was gone, they were now in total survival mode, "if only we

³⁶ Also spelled Cauda (modern day Gavdos or Gozzo).

³⁷ MacArthur, 350.

³⁸ Kent, 187; MacArthur, 350.

³⁹ Ancient writers both Pliny and Josephus note that ships often sank not directly in the storms but as a result of the damage to ships hulls from the storm (Smith, 104). Pliny wrote about these kinds of storms, [they are] "The chief pest of seamen, destructive not only to the spars but to the hull itself." The fact that the ships of the ancient Mediterranean were fitted with cables as a part of their normal tackle for this process is another indication how common and serious this problem was. Improvements in modern naval architecture and rigging have seriously reduced this problem. Smith, 104-105.

⁴⁰ Smith, 103-104.

⁴¹ Bruce, Acts, 486.

can make it through alive." Luke records that for many days they had seen neither sun nor stars, or any signs of a clear or clearing sky. The situation was desperate. The towering white-capped waves, the roaring wind, the constant violent rocking, the lifting, plunging, tossing, constant motion, made walking and standing near impossible. The wind-driven salt spray no doubt caused blinding of those exposed and was taking its toll. The constant thought of drowning in the depths of a water-filled grave seemed ever on their minds. Now even the most veteran and seasoned sailors were abandoning hope of survival. Interestingly, it was a violent storm at sea that God used to bring fear into the heart of John Newton a debauched seamen working on a slave ship from England to Africa and eventual author of the famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*.⁴²

27:21-26 – It was at this dark moment, after nearly fourteen days of this intense storm, Paul comes forward with much needed words of encouragement. Having gone days without food (probably due to sea-sickness and the difficulty with preparing food in the storm),⁴³ Paul stood in their midst and speaks. Perhaps in an attempt to firmly establish his credibility Paul humbly reminds them that they had not listened to him when they were safely anchored at Fair Havens in Crete. This was not a time of trying to prove one's self or playing games of "I told you so," rather together they were all desperate men fighting for their lives. Having firmly established his credibility, Paul is not into mocking or chiding them but imparting encouragement. Therefore he urges them to "keep up their courage for their will be no loss of life . . . only the ship." Perhaps to everyone discouraged and without hope on board this seemed like wishful thinking. But Paul explained that he had received divine revelation from God. A messenger from the God "whose I am" (the One who owns me) and the One whom I serve, was sent to Paul. The messenger stood before Paul and told him to absolutely not fear; he must appear before Caesar, the Emperor Nero in Rome. Likewise, he arrested Paul's attention with the good news that God had determined to spare and give into Paul's care the lives of everyone on board that ship. While Paul had been repeatedly told that he would appear before Caesar in Rome (19:21; 23:11; 25:12; 27:24) it must have come as great comfort that all 276 persons on board would be spared. Paul consistently ministered with deep compassion and care for people. This had to encourage his heart. Therefore, Paul admonished them to keep up their courage because he was confident God would do as He had said. However, Paul made it clear that this salvation would not come about without them running the ship aground.

27:27-29 – After fourteen days in this storm after leaving Crete, and having been driven approximately 476 miles⁴⁴ in the open sea,⁴⁵ probably from the sound of the surf⁴⁶ the

⁴² Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), 170.

⁴³ John Newton records of his experience in a storm at sea which was a crucial part in God bringing him to Himself, "We found that the water having floated all our movables in the hold, all the casks of provisions had been beaten in pieces by the violent motion of the ship. On the other hand, our live stock, such as pigs, sheep, and poultry, had been washed overboard in the storm; in effect all the provisions we saved . . . would have subsisted us but a week, at a scanty allowance." Smith, 118.

⁴⁴ Smith, 127.

veteran sailors surmised that they were approaching some unknown land. To confirm their suspicions, using a known length of rope with a weight attached to the end, they dropped the weight overboard and found the depth of water to be 120'. A little farther in they took another "sounding" and found the water depth to be 90'. The decreasing depth was a good indicator verifying their suspicions that they were in fact approaching land.

Since hitting a strange shore in the dark in a violent storm was not the wisest approach, the sailors cast out four anchors from the stern of the ship in an attempt to keep the ship in place and the bow pointed toward the shore. They hoped to ride it out a little longer and began to pray for daybreak.

27:30-32 – At this point an attitude of panic and "every man for himself" began to spread across the ship. The crew decided to shirk their responsibilities and began to make plans to desert the ship. They came up with a ruse of letting down an anchor from the bow of the ship, while in fact they were letting down the dingy boat to escape. Paul saw what they were doing and brought it to the attention of the centurion Julius and some of the soldiers. Paul said that unless these men remained in the ship the lives of those on board would not be spared. Their desertion would threaten the unity and safety of everyone. Paul said they must stay together, and the centurion was not about to ignore Paul's warning a second time. The soldiers cut the rope attached to the lifeboat, which was in the water by this time, and let it drift away. Paul had probably not intended for the soldiers to cut the lifeboat away, as the dingy could have been used the next day to help bring people to shore, but the soldiers were going to make sure no one left the ship.

27:33-38 – It is in the midst of this great crisis that we see Paul's leadership shine forth as his faith and confidence in God remains strong. Paul, quoting a common Jewish proverbial saying, "for not a hair from the head of any of you shall perish" (cf. 1 Sam. 14:45; 2 Sam. 14:11; 1 Kings 1:52; Luke 21:18), reminds them of God's provision and care up to this point and his care and provision in the hours ahead. Paul urged everyone on board to take some nourishment, since they had not taken a meal or prepared any food for the past fourteen days. No doubt hard work of making it to shore was ahead of them. With thanksgiving, Paul in the presence of all led in a word of prayer, taking bread, breaking it and eating.⁴⁷ In a real expression of unity, all 276 persons on board ate together, under the leadership, direction, and influence of the Apostle Paul. Everyone was encouraged and everyone responded by following Paul's leadership. Paul probably did not originally imagine that he would be having a unified prayer service, giving thanks and honoring God, with a group of roughneck seamen, violent Roman soldiers, convicted prisoners, and who knows what other castaways

⁴⁵ MacArthur, 353; Bruce, *Acts*, 489-490. Adriatic Sea here should not be confused with the modern day Adriatic Sea located between Italy and Croatia. In Paul's day, our Adriatic Sea was often referred to as "Gulf of Adria" and the central Mediterranean was occasionally referred to as "the Adriatic Sea."

⁴⁶ An obscure variant reading of the text says, "some land was resounding in their ears." While this text is probably not original it gives some indication as to early interpretations as to what the text might have been intending to communicate. Bruce, *Acts*, 490.

⁴⁷ C.K. Barrett, "Paul Shipwrecked," in *Scripture: Meaning and Method*, ed. B.P. Thompson (Hull, 1987), 59-63, quoted in Bruce, *Acts*, 492, n. 86.

were on board! Having taken the food they needed, they cast the rest of the remaining wheat (most of it had been jettisoned earlier in the storm, v. 18) overboard in a final attempt to lighten the ship, taking on as little water as possible, and making it as swift as possible as they prepared to run the ship aground.

27:39-41 — At this point it was now day light and the sailors could see the land. But as they strained to recognize it they could not identify the island or figure out where they were. However, as they peered at the land they were observing that there was a small bay area into which a creek emptied with a small, visible sandy area. Strong tradition has it that the bay area is what has come to be known as "St. Paul's Bay" on the coast of the island of Malta. Thanks to the careful research of James Smith in his definitive work in *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*, it is with a strong degree of certainty that this bay is the actual site of the shipwreck. St. Paul's Bay is some distance away from the main harbor of Malta, known as "the grand harbor of Valletta," with which some of the sailors were probably familiar but did not recognize this area of the island due to the fact that it was not in their normal lanes of sailing. Probably through a process of discussion and interaction they began resolving to try to drive the ship onto the sandy area. With this purpose in mind, they no longer had need of the four anchors that had been holding them relatively in place, so they cut them away,⁴⁸ allowing the anchors to fall into the sea. At the same time as they were cutting the ropes to the anchors other men were taking off ropes from the ships rudder system⁴⁹ which they had tied fast earlier. Now however they were preparing to try to steer the ship to the beach. As they were hoisting a small sail at the front of the ship which would increase their steering capabilities without a severe increase in speed,⁵⁰ they headed for the beach. But there was something which the sailors did not notice, nor could they hardly been capable of noticing given the weather conditions and their unfamiliarity with this part of the island. St. Paul's Bay, the beach area into which they were attempting to steer, is sheltered on the northwest by a small rocky island called Salmonetta, which is separated from the mainland of Malta by a narrow channel known as "the sea between two seas" (Luke writes, "where two seas meet").⁵¹ At the edge of this channel is a special formation, which Luke records that the ship literally, "struck a place." Smith describes this special feature through his research and nautical charts of the bay. Smith describes how the rocks of Malta disintegrate into extremely fine particles of sand and as they mix with soil and are washed down creeks into the sea they form deposits of inflexible clay. As this mixture is deposited in various areas around the island, in areas where the currents are broken and tend not to work on these deposits, they form "mud bars" with bottoms of impenetrable clay.⁵² Such is the formation in the area of modern St. Paul's Bay. Actually, the ship hit a tightly packed mud bar with a bottom of intense clay and became

⁴⁸ περιλοντες Aor/Act/Nom/Mas/Ptc of περιαιρω "take away; remove; cut away of anchors (cf. Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed., (Germany: United Bible Society, 1994), 139.

⁴⁹ πηδαλια, BAGD, 656, "each ship had two rudders, connected by a crossbar and operated by one man." "When anchored by the stern in a gale, it would be necessary to lift them out of the water and secure them by lashings or rudder-bands, and to loose the rudder-bands when the ship was again got under way." Smith, 141, n. 2.

⁵⁰ αρτεμων, Bruce, 494, n.94; Kent, 190.

⁵¹ Bruce, 494.

⁵² Smith, 143-144.

firmly fixed. With the bow stuck firmly fast, and no hope of it being moved, the stern was being battered by thunderous breakers and began to break. Still being some distance from land, amidst the sound of creaking and cracking wood, it became obvious that the ship was coming apart.

27:42-44 – As the ship was beginning to break up, it seemed logical to the Roman soldiers that in the midst of the confusion the prisoners, among whom was Paul, would have a prime opportunity to escape. In accordance with traditional Roman discipline of the soldiers being responsible for their prisoners and out of fear of the possible repercussions (12:19), the soldiers decided to eliminate any such attempts at escape by slaughtering the prisoners. However, the centurion Julius, who had already shown great kindness to Paul (27:3) and personally wanted to bring Paul safely through this ordeal, personally and directly intervened with the soldiers and kept the killing from taking place. Further, he issued an instructive command to his soldiers and everyone on board that those who could swim should jump overboard and head toward land. Those who could not swim were to grab hold of planks from the collapsing ship, as well as grabbing hold and getting help from other members from the ship.⁵³ In God's power and providence he safely brought through and delivered all 276 souls to land. It benefits us to take note of the wonderful grace and glory of our God, not only in saving Paul, but in fulfilling His promise that not one soul was lost.⁵⁴

28:1 – Everyone made it to shore, wet, weathered, and worn. Probably through some interaction with the inhabitants on the island, they learned that the island was named Malta (or Melite). Malta is an island approximately 18 miles long and 8 miles wide and lies 58 miles south of Sicily and 180 miles north of the African coast.⁵⁵ The island's ancient name means, "refuge."⁵⁶ It was first colonized by the Phoenicians around 1,000 B.C. and by them was given a Canaanite name "Melite" meaning, "refuge" "or a place of refuge," which providentially fit the events of Paul's shipwreck.⁵⁷

28:2 – Luke notes that the "natives"⁵⁸ showed them extraordinary hospitality, above and beyond what was expected and what was common. Often in the ancient world, victims

⁵³ ἐπι τινῶν τῶν ἀπο τοῦ πλοίου "upon some from the ship" may have the idea or understanding of "some of the persons from the ship," i.e. "on the backs of other members;" "grab hold of something from the ship or grab hold of someone else"; Bruce, 495, n. 99.

⁵⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles* vol. 2, ed. from English trans. by Christopher Fetherstone, by Henry Beveridge, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 408.

⁵⁵ Longenecker, 563.

⁵⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 742.

⁵⁷ Bruce, 497. The island was brought under Roman control during the Second Punic War in 218 B.C. The natives spoke: Phoenician, Latin, and Greek.

⁵⁸ Luke in the Greek text refers to the native inhabitants of the island as – *hoi Barbaroi* – literally "the barbarians." Luke did not use this in a derogatory manner but used it as a designation for the "native speakers of the island," "the native inhabitants." Originally the Greek term "barbarian" was coined as an onomatopoeic term used to describe people who did not speak Greek and whose language sounded like "bar-bar-bar" or we might say "gibberish." They called them "barbarians." However, "barbarian" in its modern usage has come to have a negative connotation referring to those who are crude or uneducated. The first century usage of this term did not inherently have that connotation. Rather, Luke is trying to

of shipwrecks were murdered or enslaved or taken advantage of in some way. Luke notes that the islanders were uncommonly loving and humane⁵⁹ in their dealings with all 276 persons, without partiality. Apparently, while the violent gale force winds subsided, the rain turned into a downpour and the temperature dropped so that it was cold. The islanders immediately rushed to their aid and quickly went about building a giant fire welcoming everyone around it.

28:3-4 – Upon their arrival at shore and their assistance from the islanders, apparently the prisoners were not immediately confined by the soldiers, or at least not Paul. This “freedom” that Paul experienced was characteristic of the centurion Julius’ treatment of Paul and in turn Paul’s consistent gracious behavior. Paul continued his cooperative, humble, helpful spirit by joining in the collecting of firewood. This again speaks highly of Paul’s character, leadership, and example in the midst of adverse circumstances as he humbly stooped to perform the most menial tasks. This service is consistent in the model and footsteps of our Lord who came not to be served, but to serve and give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45; cf. John 13:3ff). Paul gathered together and carried a capacity load⁶⁰ of sticks to the already burning fire to help tend to its care. As the fire warmed up a poisonous⁶¹ snake came out of a bundle of wood that had been brought to the fire. The snake leaped out of the wood, struck and latched onto Paul’s hand. The detailed account by Luke the physician, one who by his training and experience would be familiar with venomous snakes, as well as reaction of the native islanders who would be familiar with the inhabitants of their island, confirm that this was a poisonous snake. When the islanders saw the poisonous snake dangling from Paul’s hand they concluded, based upon their mythological background, that apparently Paul as a Roman prisoner who had narrowly escaped death by shipwreck must be a murderer or one deserving of death. Now, based on the series of events: prisoner – shipwreck – poisonous snake bite -- he had been confronted by the keeper of human justice, the goddess Dike,⁶² and would not be allowed to live.⁶³

point out the detail that those who greeted them and showed kindness were the native inhabitants of the island who were probably speaking in some form of a Phoenician dialect, rather than Greek or Latin. The NIV translates this well unpejoratively as “islanders.”

⁵⁹ τυχουσαν φιλαθρωπιαν -- The islanders demonstrated an unexpected human affection for their fellow man.

⁶⁰ Cf. translation by Kenneth S. Wuest, The New Testament: An Expanded Translation, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1961), 345. This was a further demonstration of Paul’s servant heart.

⁶¹ Some textual critics have raised an objection to this part of Luke’s account because there are no native venomous snakes on the present day island of Malta. Therefore these critics say that the story must be factitious and cannot possibly be true. However, it is not at all uncommon and quite probable that with the progress of civilization and the continued habitation and development of the island, over the past nearly 2,000 years, that venomous snakes on the island were hunted and eventually disappeared and passed into extinction.

⁶² η δικη (*h dike*) “Dike was the Greek goddess of justice for humanity. Her mother, Themis, was the goddess of divine justice. Dike was born a human and put on earth to keep justice. When Zeus, her father, saw that was impossible, he brought her up to the gods and goddesses to sit on the opposite side of her mother, next to him. Among the gods and goddesses she was the best of all the virgins. She then, with all the other gods and goddesses, watched down on the humans from Mt. Olympus.”

<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/d/dike.html>. “although the goddess of justice was in many respects more important in literature than religion, she still played a significant role in the lives of the ancient

28:5-6 – Paul’s calmness was conspicuous as there was no sense of panic or fright as he merely shook off the snake into the fire, suffering no harm. Paul knew and believed God’s promise that he must see Rome (Acts 23:11; 27:24), therefore Malta would not be his place of death. With great intrigue the islanders sat around glaring at Paul watching and waiting for him to swell up, keel over dead, or something! But after they had waited a long time and nothing happened they began to form a different conclusion that Paul must be a god,⁶⁴ or as one in “close contact with God.”⁶⁵

Luke’s inclusion of this incident of the snake bite is perplexing if not related to his larger purpose of chapters 27-28. He does not further develop the incident after the conclusion of the islanders that “he is a god” or “one favored by the gods.” He does not go on to expound the effect or ramifications of this incident upon the people, Luke just slides it into the narrative between the shipwreck and the miraculous healings (28:7-10). **Luke, through his vivid detailed account, seems to be affirming that Paul is not only a man divinely directed, but a man divinely protected.⁶⁶ God is divinely leading Paul on a mission, but God is also divinely protecting him on that mission. God is not only concerned about the final destination, but he is caring for His servant on that mission. This brief vignette serves to reaffirm and support what was so strongly portrayed in the powerful storm.**

28:7-10 – Though Paul spent three months on Malta (28:11), Luke chooses to record only one more major incident from his stay there – the healing of Publius’ father. Luke describes Publius as “the leading man of the island.” This is probably an official designation as it appears on at least two Maltese inscriptions as the designation for the Roman governor of Malta.⁶⁷ Publius was a common first name⁶⁸ in first century Roman culture. In all likelihood this was the common name to which the islanders referred to the governor, thus Luke simply recorded his first name. As an expression of official courtesy the governor welcomed the survivors by bringing them to his large estate and entertaining them for three days until other housing arrangements for the winter could be made throughout the island. While there, Paul and his companions learned that

Greeks. It is suggested in some sources that Dike was instrumental in punishing wrong doers and rewarding those who did good deeds.” <http://www.loggia.com/myth/dike.html>.

⁶³Had Paul died “they probably would have written an epitaph like the one Statyllius Flaccus wrote for a shipwrecked sailor who was killed by snakebite: ‘O, he escaped the storm and the raging of the murderous sea. But as he lay stranded in the Libyan sand, not far from the beach and heavy with sleep, at last, naked and destitute, weary as he was from the terrible shipwreck, the viper struck him dead. Why did he struggle against the waves? He did not escape the lot which was destined for him on land.’” *Palatine Anthology* 7.290; quoted in Longenecker, 564.

⁶⁴ Longenecker supports that a possible understanding of the phrase could be “a favorite of the gods” meaning that they did not actually think Paul to be a “god” but one upon whom the favor of the gods rested. Longenecker, 564.

⁶⁵ Bock, 744.

⁶⁶ Longenecker, 564.

⁶⁷ Kent, 191; Bruce, 499; Longenecker, 564.

⁶⁸ *praenomen* ; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Praenomen>

Publius' father is bedridden, afflicted with intermittent attacks of fever⁶⁹ and dysentery. Luke the physician was present and on top of it for an accurate and precise diagnosis. The reoccurring fever was quite possibly what has come to be known as "Malta Fever,"⁷⁰ a condition quite common for a long time in the region of Malta and Gibraltar. The disease is quite severe and long lasting, ranging from a matter of months to two or three years. In 1887 the primary cause of this disease on Malta was traced back to a microbe often found in the milk of Maltese goats.⁷¹ This fever and condition could last for months or even a few years.⁷² Paul, through prayer and the laying on of hands, healed Publius' father.

After Paul healed Publius' father, the news of the cure spread rapidly and the rest of the sick on the island flocked to Paul. Paul's ministry continued on with great impact as he journeyed to Rome (with some God ordained stops along the way) where his ministry continued "with all openness, unhindered." (28:31). Luke builds to this climax of the proclamation of the gospel and the practical effects upon its recipients.

As a result, the people showed Paul and his companions great respect and gave them many expressions of honor.⁷³ Having secured another "Alexandrian"⁷⁴ ship sailing for Italy that had previously wintered safely on the island (28:11), the islanders of Malta in a true show of hospitality and probably out of deep gratitude for their ministry put Paul and his companions on board and outfitted them with everything they needed for the journey to Italy. Shortly Luke concludes the journey with the words summarizing their divinely elected destination, "and thus we came to Rome." (28:14).

⁶⁹ Gk "puretois" cf. Luke 4:38; Robertson's New Testament Word Studies; http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:5CnK40FmT_YJ:www.godrules.net/library/robert/robertact28.htm+puretois&hl=en&client=firefox-a

⁷⁰ "*Malta Fever*" is another name for the infectious condition more commonly known as "brucellosis." Brucellosis is an infectious disease caused by the bacteria of the genus *Brucella*. These bacteria are primarily passed among animals, and they cause disease in many different vertebrates. Various *Brucella* species affect sheep, goats, cattle, deer, elk, pigs, dogs, and several other animals. Humans become infected by coming in contact with animals or animal products that are contaminated with these bacteria. In humans, brucellosis can cause a range of symptoms that are similar to the flu and may include fever, sweats, headaches, back pains, and physical weakness. Severe infections of the central nervous systems or lining of the heart may occur. Brucellosis can also cause long-lasting or chronic symptoms that include recurrent fevers, joint pain, and fatigue." http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:6KGyptYAcPgJ:www.wrongdiagnosis.com/medical/malta_fever.htm+%22Malta+fever%22&hl=en&client=firefox-a.

⁷¹ Longenecker, 565; Bock, 744.

⁷² Bock, 744.

⁷³ τιμαιοσ could refer to financial gifts or honorariums (cf. BAGD, 818).

⁷⁴ This ship also was probably transporting grain.