

The Island Was Called Malta

As we continue this morning in our study of the book of Acts, we come to the final chapter in the book, chapter 28. Turn there now, as we will spend our entire time there this morning. As a means of fully understanding the narrative of the chapter, let me provide you with a brief overview of what we discussed last week.

If you recall, we devoted our entire time examining the details and more importantly extracting valuable principles from the story of Paul’s experience while caught in a storm at sea. As you know, Paul had appealed his case to the highest authority in the known world, Rome. Two governors of Palestine, as well as King Herod Agrippa, found nothing in Paul deserving of punishment under Roman law. However, since Paul had appealed his case to Caesar, as was his right as a Roman citizen, his case was transferred to Rome. In Acts 26:32, King Agrippa, after hearing Paul defend himself, said to the governor, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.” So as a result, the king assigned Paul to a Roman centurion named Julius. It was Julius’ responsibility to get Paul from Caesarea to Rome.

Their journey was primarily by ship, and as the initial part of chapter 27 revealed, they had relatively easy sailing during the early part of the trip. However, from verse 13 on, we noted that the ship encountered a violent storm, during which time they saw neither sun nor stars. And although as seasoned sailors they did everything they could to weather the storm, there was nothing they could do to save themselves. Verse 20 tells us that they had abandoned all hope of being saved. Finally, in an act of desperation, they threw everything overboard.

Their storm experience culminated in verse 41 where we read, “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.” The concluding part of the chapter tells us that some who were on board swam ashore while others clung to pieces of the ship to reach safety. The final outcome was that all were brought safely to land. If you recall, we noted seven very practical principles from Paul’s storm experience. I encourage you to get a CD or transcript or go online if you missed last week’s message.

Now this morning as we transition into chapter 28, it’s fairly easy to see that the chapter divides nicely into two sections. Section one is contained in verses 1-16; section two in verses 17-31. We will discuss the first section this week and conclude our study of the book next week as we examine the final section. So with that in mind, I want you to follow along now as I read the first 16 verses of the chapter. Once we’ve read the passage, we’ll observe several things from the text that I believe are instructive for us.

(Acts 28:1-16 ESV)

[28:1] After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. [2] The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. [3] 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 his hand. [4] 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.” [5] He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. [6] 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.

[7] 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. [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. [9] And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. [10] They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

[11] After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. [12] Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. [13] And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. [14] There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. [15] And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. [16] And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

Now one of the first things that strikes me about the aftermath of their storm experience -- this is something I believe that applies for us as well -- is contained in verse one. Take a look. It reads, “After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta.” You see, after weeks at sea tossed and hurled about by the typhoon that engulfed them, they had absolutely no idea where they were. I find that particularly interesting, and for this reason. It’s obvious that the length and severity of the storm had obliterated any sense of geography. They had no idea where they were. It wasn’t until they reached shore, following the shipwreck that they discovered their location.

As you know, the only means of monitoring one’s location at sea in that day was by gauging the sun and the stars; and as we are aware, they didn’t see the sun or the stars for 14 days. In other words, the storm erased any sense of where they were. Can you see how that observation might apply to the storms we experience? No doubt we endure difficult and devastating situations when, upon our release from them, we have much to learn. There are times when we discover that every landmark of our life is gone, no longer providing us with a sense of where we are, who we are, or what lies ahead for us.

I recall a situation when I saw this principle at work firsthand. In November of 1976, Ruth’s father died unexpectedly. This was the second time Ruth’s mother had been widowed, the first being when Ruth was a baby. As a result of Tom’s death, her mother Isabelle had to go through a painful process of learning. At that point she faced an enormous storm, one familiar to any of us who have experienced the death of someone close to us.

You see, from her perspective, her life had been shipwrecked by the loss of her husband. Over the years she had become very dependent on Tom. Following his death and over the course of time, Isabelle had to learn how to be alone. She had to learn how to deal with finances, how to adapt to new living circumstances as she spent part of the year with us in Missouri and part of the year alone in the Upper Peninsula. She had to learn how to make friends as a single person. She had to learn independence as opposed to the safety she had in her dependency on Tom. She had to learn a number of practical life skills that Tom had previously cared for.

Isabelle’s learning process took time and it was not always pleasant for her. But as a woman of faith, she relied on the promises of God as she learned to adapt to life without Tom. For Paul, it wasn’t until after the shipwreck had delivered them to shore that they learned where they were. And as part of their learning, they may have had to learn the language, customs and other facets of life on Malta. As we know, they spent three months there.

Now let me take that principle and apply it to you and to me. You see, you may feel you are in the middle of a storm right now, or you may have just survived a shipwreck of some sort. Just as Paul and his companions had to cling to the wreckage of the ship to reach shore where they learned where they were, there are several things we should cling to when our shipwreck comes and we must learn new things.

First, we can cling to God’s word; they did. Paul related to them the promise the angel made in the midst of the storm. The angel promised that none would be lost as long as they all stayed on board the ship. Further, Paul could cling to previous promises God had given him that he would one day preach in Rome. We can cling to God’s faithfulness. We know that he’s always at work for his glory and our good, no matter how violent the storm or how frightening the shipwreck. We can cling to the certainty that God will use our shipwreck as a means of equipping us to better serve him. We can cling to the reality that others are watching how we weather our circumstances, thereby providing a platform for effective ministry. Paul clearly did that, as we are about to see.

So I believe the first observation to make is that just as they had to learn where they were and adapt to their newfound circumstances and location, there is much for us to learn when shipwrecks come. Our world may be turned inside out following our shipwreck. We may not know left from right, up from down, or good from bad. But as followers of Jesus Christ, in God’s timing we will learn again who we are, where we are and how God wishes to use us for his glory.

Let me show you now, how that worked for Paul. First, note how verse two describes the response of the islanders once they reached shore. It says, “The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all.” The word *natives* in verse two should not create an image of wild, primitive or uncivilized residents. Rather, it’s a term used to describe people who lived on the island whose native language was not Greek or Latin. Frankly, their reaction to these unexpected and very needy visitors proves that they were anything but uncivilized.

If you've been following the recent shipwreck in Italy, you've surely noticed the response of the islanders nearby. The cruise ship that was overturned is barely 200 yards from shore. As soon as it capsized, the entire village rushed to the shore to pull people out of the water and assist them in any way possible. That's exactly what took place for Paul and those on the ship with him.

Now take a look at the word *kindness* in verse two. In Greek it's the word *philanthropea*. It's the same root word from which Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love derives its name. It literally means "brotherly love." Thus the people of the island showed an outpouring of love and concern for those who had survived the shipwreck.

If you read the text carefully, you will find three examples of their kindness. In verse two they kindled a fire and welcomed them all. I want you to pay attention to the phrase *welcomed them all*. That's significant. Remember the ship had a sizeable contingent of prisoners on board. Thus the people of the island were equally kind to everyone, making no distinction or showing no discrimination against prisoners. Note verse 7. The chief man of the Island received them and entertained them for three days. Then finally in verse 10: "They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail they put on board whatever we needed."

From those three instances of kindness, there are two observations worth making. First, God uses a variety of people to assist us following shipwrecks of one sort or another. Remember now, those on board the ship had no connection to the islanders whatsoever. To the islanders, those who came ashore were perfect strangers, unlikely to be seen by them ever again. I wonder, have you ever been shown unusual kindness by a complete stranger, someone who came on the scene one minute and was gone the next?

If you read missionary biographies you will learn of countless instances where God used unusual circumstances to bring forth unusual people in order to show unusual kindness to his servants. Perhaps you have been on the receiving end of such unusual kindness and all you can do is look back and thank the Lord for the manner in which he provided for you. But equally important are those instances when God might use you to show such kindness and comfort to others.

I wonder if Paul had his Malta experience in mind when he wrote in II Corinthians 1: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort which we ourselves are comforted by God."

There's a second observation to make from the manner in which the islanders assisted Paul. We would be hard pressed to identify another person in the New Testament who worked harder on behalf of others than Paul. He continually poured himself out serving others. Yet now he finds himself on the receiving end of others' service to him. The only point I would make is that not only is there a grace in serving others, there is as well a grace in receiving from others. For some of us that's hard. When others seek to serve us, no matter how used to serving we may be, we deprive them of blessing if we don't receive their service with grace. That's what Paul did.

Now as we move ahead in the text, there is a sequence of events about to unfold that's quite important, I believe. Think with me now. At this point in time, Paul is a shipwrecked stranger. He has no platform from which to preach. Recall, he had demonstrated a significant level of leadership during the storm. But this is different. And further, no one would question his passion to preach Christ everywhere he went. Why would he do anything different on Malta?

So in his mind he is likely thinking, "How can I show myself to be a person these people can trust as a prelude to preaching Christ?" In other words, how do I gain their ears? Well, I want you to note what he did in verse 3. They had built a fire. Paul, ever the servant, gathered wood to put on the fire. In other words, he was serving them as an initial step to gaining their trust. But God had another path, a faster path whereby Paul would gain their ears. Verse 3 states, "A viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand."

Now the islanders instantly recognized that the viper was venomous because in verse six we read that they waited for him to swell up or fall down dead. They immediately recognized the snake as deadly. Pay close attention to the text. Paul never panicked; he simply shook it into the fire. For Paul, this was no big deal; however, to the natives this was a very big deal. They knew Paul was a prisoner. They undoubtedly saw the soldiers guarding him. They assumed he was likely a murderer; and although he had not been killed by the storm, in their estimation, justice had been administered by the viper striking Paul.

Note their response in verse 6 after he showed no ill effect from the viper: "They changed their minds and said that he was a god." Now in previous instances in the book of Acts when any of the apostles were viewed as gods, they responded immediately. It's hard to imagine that Paul did not do the same thing in this instance. But I want us to look below the surface of what took place. Can you see that God used a most unusual means to transform the natives' view of Paul from that of a victim and prisoner to a person of respect, someone worth listening to? And further, Paul never saw that coming, did he?

There is something instructive in that for us. I wonder; when is the last time God brought unexpected circumstances to bear in your life, thereby giving you an opportunity to share Christ with others? If you recall, I've asked you several times during this series of messages to tell me your stories of how God has put you in a place of sharing your faith and speaking about Christ with others. As a congregation, you have been very good in doing that. I have been incredibly blessed by the e-mails, calls and messages I've received from you.

But what I've noticed is that for some of you, the opportunity to talk about the Lord arose unexpectedly; you did not see it coming. You weren't bitten by a viper, but maybe a co-worker unexpectedly brought up the topic of religion. You weren't bitten by a viper, but perhaps you locked your keys in your running car and were assisted by a perfect stranger, thereby enabling you to begin a conversation about Christ. No viper for you, but maybe you sat on an airplane and started a conversation with the person sitting next to you about what Jesus means to you. Again, no viper, but maybe after you visited someone in the hospital and the nurse in the room heard you pray, she followed you into the hall and you were able to tell her why you prayed as you did.

Here is my point. Paul did not waste his viper. It was orchestrated and used by God to give him access to the people, and as we will see now, access to the most important person on the island. Take a look at verse 7: “Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island named Publius.” Now the title Luke used to describe him, the chief man of the island, indicates that he was the Roman governor of Malta. Note his reaction to these unexpected visitors; and by the way, it’s very unlikely he did not know about Paul’s snake experience as word would spread quickly. The text tells us that he received them and entertained them hospitably for three days.

This now is where Paul’s broader ministry on the island begins. Paul learned that Publius’ father was sick with fever and dysentery. In the ancient world, dysentery was no small disorder. It could lead to death, as there was no effective treatment available.

Note the latter part of verse 8: “And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him.” It’s likely that Paul took the initiative in visiting this man after he learned of his illness. Once he was healed, word spread quickly. Verse 9: “And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases came and were cured.”

Now what this reinforces is a pattern we have seen throughout the book of Acts. Simply stated, miracles always served as prelude to preaching the gospel. That’s the pattern throughout the book, and although Luke does not mention it, Paul undoubtedly preached Christ since the purpose of miracles was to authenticate Paul as God’s messenger. Since the text tells us that “the rest of the people on the island also came and were cured,” we can assume that Paul had multiple opportunities to preach. And further, according to church tradition, the result of his preaching was the establishment of the first church on Malta.

Take a look at verse ten in support of that. It tells us, “They also honored us greatly.” The word *honor* means to place a high value upon or to revere someone. So in the space of three months Paul went from being a shipwrecked prisoner to a highly honored individual. Only the gospel does that. The manner in which they said goodbye to Paul suggests very strongly that the gospel had reached their hearts and manifested itself in their love for Paul. Verses 11 through 16 describe the concluding portion of their trip. Verse 16 states, “And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself with the soldier that guarded him.”

What a journey! Drama every step along the way. I know the exhaustion of travel, but this is in a class all by itself. From being rescued from the mob in Jerusalem, enduring two years of protective custody in Caesarea, speaking before two governors and the king, surviving a typhoon and shipwreck as well as the bite of a venomous snake, Paul is finally where God promised him he would be, in Rome.

No doubt few of us will have similar experiences. Yet I trust you can see that what God did for Paul, he will do for us. He will carry us through our storms and shipwrecks. He will be kind to us as we learn to navigate life once we are safely brought to land. He will surprise us with unexpected opportunities to tell others about him. And finally, at the end of our journey, we will come to see that just as God’s promise to Paul was fulfilled, his promises to us have

proven equally trustworthy and unshakeable. In all honesty, can you think of anything more exciting than to live as Paul lived, on the receiving end of God’s surprises and his goodness every step along the way?