

Ministry on Malta

Acts 28:1-10

As we get into the last chapter of this great book, we are with all the 276 souls on the shore of Malta – all saved from the sea – all exhausted. As they are glad for land beneath their feet, they see their need to warm themselves against the cold. So they head inland in search of a clean, three-star hotel just off the beach; get a warm shower, some new clothes and some room service! How is this not a good plan?

Our thoughts of God and His ways must be much higher than his; as far as the heavens are above the earth. Wouldn't our plan would be for Paul to take one of those nice cruise ships straight from Caesarea to the closest port of Rome for a few days of rest and relaxation, before heading off to this little court-thing. And if I were one of the money-stealing TV evangelists, here is where I would say that YOU TOO can have this easy life for a small fee! All you need is a little faith and big donation.

Now please understand; isn't it wonderful to live in the modern period; to have our many comforts and conveniences? Anyone want to live back in the 1600's and go to a dentist? Or a doctor?

But don't let a love for modern blessings stop the ancient peoples from teaching you. After all, which would you choose? To be kept by the sovereign grace of a loving God but lose your comforts, your ship, your own expectations – or losing an eternal wealth for a bowl of momentary pleasure and ease? That is the temptation of our age; the seduction of modernity; and the funny thing is, Satan has used it in every age, as though that time was THE time to be alive, to not be concerned for eternity.

Let us follow Paul now as he is warmed by the fire of strangers, bitten by a snake, believed to be a god, and by Christ's power, heals the whole island. Let us learn something about man here – and about ourselves.

And the first thing we learn is something about the **Nature of man**.

Learning they are on Malta – an island some 60 miles south of Sicily, 18 miles long and 8 miles wide. They enjoy the kindness of what the old versions call “Barbarians” – in verse 2. The word barbarian arose in Greek times to describe those who could not speak Greek. Listening to their words, it sounded like ‘bar bar, bar bar, bar bar’. And it stuck.

After the Persian wars, it took on the meaning of barbarity or cruelty. But by NT times, it was a people group and had lost the sense of meanness or ignorance. This is not unlike the name “Puritan” which changed from those who tried to purify the Anglican Church, to those who were very strict in their lives, to being stuck-up, self-righteous.

But the bigger question is how these pagans, unbelievers, these fallen, sinful, Godless people, can show such kindness, such goodness, even extraordinary charity, in providing for such a large group of people? Don't we read in the Bible that men are totally depraved? They are selfish, self-seeking sinners? Their every thought and intention of heart is only evil continually? Are their hearts not desperately wicked? Why, wouldn't we expect them to act like the viper about to come out of the wood? How is it, men in the flesh, void of the Spirit, can bring forth this fruit of the Spirit?

We'll see here the nature of man. He is fallen; he is totally, or entirely depraved, but that does not mean that he does as much evil as he desires. There are at least restraints all around us by the hand of a strong God. And be clear – there have been many instances in which a stranger arriving on a foreign shore have met spear and sword and death, right?

When the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock, a certain ferocious tribe of Indians had left the area just a few years before. But they had either died off by disease or had moved elsewhere by the time the Puritans landed.

But how do we account for sinful man's kindnesses? Here is what we call common grace at work – sinful man is still a man with a conscience – he still knows good from evil, right from wrong, truth from falsehood. And while he suppresses the truth, and learns to call good evil and evil good, he is inwardly restrained and even led to accept what is morally right. Man knows he should be kind, should be, as the word is here, a *philanthropist*, a lover of humanity.

These are the remnants of a soul destroyed by sin but not erased, not annihilated. Men see this – like looking on the ruins of ancient Greece, and able to piece together what temples and buildings once stood in their golden age. So all man knows deeply – in his sinful, darkened, hard heart – what is good, right and true.

But can he do such loving works from a pure heart? Can he render direct obedience to the true God? To the glory of his Maker? That is impossible.

But think of what a hell this world would be if the milk of human kindness dries up, when God lifts his good hand of restraint and conviction, and spiritual barbarity rules the day. Common grace is like the outer walls of Jerusalem to the temple. This common care over all protects the Church, the flock of God's own people.

And we don't have time to go into it, but as that wall serves the larger purpose of the life within, the life within the church, will do much to strengthen common grace in culture, being the salt and light of the world. Nehemiah's wall protects Ezra's temple; Ezra's temple gives Nehemiah's wall strength.

Well we move on to a second point – from the nature of man to the **Fickleness of man**, in 3-6.

How many of you have ever been bit by a snake? Or let me put it the other way, how many of you have never been bit by a snake? Aren't you glad we don't see snakes much less encounter them in a hostile way like this!?

Pastor Gorrell grew up catching snakes, and holds the record of a 117 garter snakes in one day. Snakes, when cornered or threatened, will recoil and strike. BJ has been bit more times than he can remember. But never by a poisonous snake.

The various poisons which God has put into these creatures at the fall, is amazing. There are two types - hemotoxicity and neurotoxicity; one attacks the blood and flesh, the other the nerves. Cobras are the latter; rattlesnake venom is the former. The pictures of those ravaged by poison is frightening – where the flesh is actually bursting.

So it is with these natives – with their confused mixture of justice and false worship – see the snake taking its victim.

We understand this, don't we? A storm at sea is a prime time for God to claim the wicked. That is in the book of Jonah. But now having escaped a watery grave, they see this viper as a messenger of righteousness and wrath.

There is an element of truth in this view. When Job's friends came to him, they assumed the worst. He must be harboring sin – why? Because there is truth in that view. Augustine put it this way: God does judge some sins in this life, so we know that He is ruler in this world; but He does not judge all sins now, that we may know there is a judgement to come.

Imagine if every time we were guilty a snake jumped out of the wood to latch upon our bodies! What a snake pit this world would be.

But God does sometimes pursue the guilty in this way. In Amos 9 we read: "Though they dig into Sheol, from there will My hand take them; and though they ascend to heaven, from there will I bring them down. Though they hide on the summit of Carmel, I will search them out and take them from there; and though they conceal themselves from My sight on the floor of the sea, from there I will command the serpent and it will bite them. (Amo 9:2-3)

But the fickleness of man is seen when Jesus preserves his servant from certain misery, if not certain death. What do they say? Well, he must be a god!

We have seen this before in Lystra, when Paul and Barnabas were mistaken for Zeus and Mercury come down to earth and they proceed to offer a cow to them in sacrifice. Then in the next hour, they seek to stone their god!

These Islanders have a fair assessment of Paul's serpent but not of Paul's God; they understand justice but when he is miraculously preserved, they assume the most ridiculous superstition.

See the power of a worldview! Their outlook on life, made way for this assessment. We look down upon them as silly men; we would never think such a foolish thing, would we? A man being a god!

So today's scientist insists God could never come down to us at all; could never be united with our human nature, be conceived in the womb of a virgin, or die for sinners and rise again bodily the third day. Their worldview says a loud "NO" to anything divine, anything regarding God, anything supernatural.

So what do they believe regarding this world and how it got here? How do we get something from nothing? Who made all the creatures and the life of this world? Why is there a difference between poison and water?

Do you know most evolutionists believed that snake venom was originally stomach acids which migrated upward into their teeth!?! There's your worldview coming out; has nothing to do with science or observation.

But this is not just about 'THEM'. What does your worldview allow or disallow that is off? What does your worldview allow that is unbiblical, untrue, unreal? What does your outlook disallow that is in Bible? See how desperately dependent we are on Scripture, of living not by bread alone but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God!

We too must be fickle without the anchor of the Holy Scriptures! And what do those blessed Scriptures tell us? But that a Savior has risen victorious over this world and all of its elements; who says: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly *poison*, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover. So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed. (Mar 16:15-20)

Only in His light, the light of Christ, can we see light; can we understand ourselves, our world, our sin, and as we turn now to our third point, **man's great need**.

The kindness of the barbarians continues in Publius, a leader, and the generosity shown for three full days. Here is where the ministry of the

gospel comes forth with Paul healing the very sick father of this man – did so by prayer and the laying on of hands.

This gift of healing comes from the Lord Jesus, who promised to do great wonders. These are New Covenant signs, that the Final Word has come. Joel prophesied of these last days, when the Spirit would move by supernatural ways.

On the one hand, these signs are foundational – they mark the beginning of these NT times. Like in England, when the king or queen is crowned, special gifts are given to the people at that time, not for all time. So Jesus has sent forth His ascension gifts, which have expired with the mission of the Apostles.

On the other hand, these miracles and signs continue to teach us both of the power and mercy of the Lord. Jesus gave tongues to reverse the Babel of our unbelief and to speak to us, personally, in our tongue. Jesus gave prophecy and words of knowledge to demonstrate that He is the First and the Last, the Alpha and Omega, the A and the Z of all truth. And Jesus raises up the sick, the disabled, the blind see, the deaf hear, the lepers are cleansed, the lame walk, even the dead are raised. Jesus is the healer of the nations.

This little island is eradicated of disease – reversing the ravages of the fall, the misery that comes with the entrance of sin. Paul's raising the father from his sickbed is a call to **every** man to rise up and walk, be healed. Jesus' healing all of the inhabitants of Malta is a call to **all** men to rise up and walk, be healed.

Listen to Scripture: For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, "I dwell *on* a high and holy place, and *also* with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would grow faint before Me, and the breath *of those whom* I have made. Because of the

iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry and struck him; I hid *My face* and was angry, And he went on turning away, in the way of his heart. I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and to his mourners, creating the praise of the lips. Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near," says the LORD, "and I will heal him." But the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up refuse and mud. There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked." (Isa 57:15-21)

He is Jehovah Rapha – the Lord who heals. He can and will save you! And heals, he saves from all your sins, your shame, your sorrows; wiping away every tear.

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: who forgives all thine iniquities; who heals all thy diseases; who redeems thy life from destruction; who crowns thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; (Psa 103:2-4)

And is he not a Savior for the whole world? Does He not call the nations to Himself – as nations? We have so individualized the kingdom of God that we don't even hear the Word of God any more on this topic:

Psalm 97:1 The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice; Let the many islands be glad. (Psa 97:1)

Sing to the LORD a new song, *sing* His praise from the end of the earth! You who go down to the sea, and all that is in it. You islands, and those who dwell on them. (Isa 42:10)

Jesus says through Isaiah: "Listen to Me, O islands, and pay attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called Me from the womb; from the body of My mother He named Me. He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; and He

has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver. He said to Me, "You are My Servant, Israel, in Whom I will show My glory." (Isa 49:1-3)

The same prophet looked forward to this day, this time of AD – Anno Domine: “Then in that day the nations will resort to the root of Jesse, who will stand as a signal for the peoples; and His resting place will be glorious. Then it will happen on that day that the Lord will again recover the second time with His hand the remnant of His people, who will remain, from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. And He will lift up a standard for the nations and assemble the banished ones of Israel, (Isa 11:10-12)

Therefore:

“Let the kings of Tarshish and of the islands bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. And let all kings bow down before him, all nations serve him. For he will deliver the needy when he cries for help, the afflicted also, and him who has no helper. He will have compassion on the poor and needy, and the lives of the needy he will save. He will rescue their life from oppression and violence, and their blood will be precious in his sight; (Psa 72:10-14)

What a great God our Savior, Jesus Christ! Changing the nature of man, addressing the fickleness of man, and more than meeting the many, many needs of man. Jesus never sent any away unhealed.

Oh who would not come to Him, then? Who would exchange such riches, such eternal riches of life and salvation, for Esau’s temporary bowl of pottage – no matter how big or warm or pleasant it might be?

See then how we end where we began – but with this addition – that Christ is the Savior of the world; the only Name given under heaven

by which we must be saved. Again, who would not come? Who would disobediently refuse to believe and hope in Him, turning from their sins, and trusting in such a Savior who could – if He pleased – save an entire world, were all to come to Him.

Oh, may the world come; may you come, if you have not done so, to this heavenly Atlas, who shoulders a sinful world. We of course know that Christ's blessedness and glory have been heralded now for 2 thousand years, and man stubbornly continues to follow his stormy and dangerous ways. And why? Because of our hard-hearted and hard-headed ways.

When I think of the glories of Jesus, I am amazed that the whole world does not come to Him; but when I think of the state of our sin, I am amazed that any come at all.

Jesus! what a Friend for sinners!
Jesus! Lover of my soul;
Friends may fail me, foes assail me,
He, my Savior, makes me whole.

Hallelujah! what a Savior!
Hallelujah, what a Friend!
Saving, helping, keeping, loving,
He is with me to the end.

Jesus! I do now receive him,
More than all in him I find,
He hath granted me forgiveness,
I am his, and he is mine.

Hallelujah! what a Savior!
Hallelujah, what a Friend!
Saving, helping, keeping, loving,
He is with me to the end.