

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #56

Acts 28:1-10

Back in World War II there was a place that became one of the most bombed places in the world, and a Christian general, whose name was General Dobie, was put in charge of this place by the British until it became independent in 1964. General Dobie actually taught the people the Bible and the place where he taught it was the island of Malta.

Malta is an island that is 18 miles long and 8 miles wide and has a circumference of about 60 miles. This island sits 58 miles south of Sicily and 180 miles northeast of the African coast. In 218 B.C. the Romans put a Roman governor on the island to monitor things; but somewhere around the year A.D. 60, Malta received its most famous visitor—the Apostle Paul.

In fact, today Malta has a population of about 354,000 people and everyone on the island says they are a Christian; and every year on February 10, the island celebrates the shipwreck of the Apostle Paul.

There can be no doubt that it was God who sovereignly took Paul to Malta.

**THE SOVEREIGN WILL FOR PAUL'S LIFE WAS THAT HE GO TO ROME;
BUT BEFORE HE GOT TO ROME, GOD SOVEREIGNLY LED HIM TO MALTA
WHERE HE PROTECTED HIM, PROVIDED FOR HIM, AND USED HIM.**

It is a strange thing what happens on Malta. On the one hand, Paul arrives via a shipwreck and has to swim to shore about a mile. On the other hand, once he gets to the island he does some amazing things that demonstrate his apostolic authority.

This must have been encouraging to Paul because he certainly learns that in spite of the negative things that hit him, God's hand was still on him. Paul was an amazing man of faith.

MALTA FACT #1 – When they got safely to shore they found out the island was Malta.
28:1

Just imagine, at this point none of these people even know where they are. All they know is that they are safely off the ship and safely on the shore. For the first time in days they are standing on land. But of course God knows where they are and in all reality, in spite of drifting out at sea in a hurricane for 14 days, they are actually still on course to getting to Rome.

MALTA FACT #2 – When they got to shore, the natives were kind and built them a fire.
28:2

Now these shipwrecked people have just made it to shore from about a mile out at sea. The water temperature is hovering at about 70 and the air temperature is in the 50s and it is raining. These are prime conditions for hypothermia.

When we lived out West, they said in some mountain survival classes I took, that most people who die of hypothermia die in 50 degree weather.

So when this group got out of the water and stepped on the shore, a good hot fire would be a welcome sight and a key to survival.

The word “natives” is the word “barbarian.” This term does not indicate that these people were rude heathens who were uncivilized, but that they were not pure Greek born or Roman born citizens. But they showed “extraordinary kindness” to all of the survivors. What they did impressed Paul and Luke as being way out of the ordinary, way beyond the norm.

These natives saw all of the people trying to make it to shore; and they took it upon themselves to help them, and one of the things they obviously did to help them was to build a fire so the people could get warm.

These were good people and they wanted to help those who had been in a shipwreck. By the way, who do you think it is behind the scenes that is causing this to happen? God is sovereignly watching over this entire situation and He directed these Maltese to build a fire.

MALTA FACT #3 – Paul put a bundle of sticks on the fire and was bitten by a viper. **28:3**

Now Paul was no prima donna apostle. He saw the fire needed more wood and he did not just sit around expecting others to do the work; he, himself, went and got some wood. For one thing, this would help him warm up. If you get up and get moving it gets the blood circulating and will warm you up.

Some ministers need to look at this text because, when there is a work day at their church or when someone needs some help, their whole philosophy is let someone else do it, not me. Many take the position I am too high and mighty to gather sticks for a fire. Paul did not think like that.

Years ago I received a phone call from a leading Christian businessman who is known all over the world. Mary took the phone call and I was out mowing the yard. She came out to get me and handed me the phone. The man said, “So I hear you are mowing your yard.” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Good for you, because we have a pastor who would never think of mowing his own yard.” Paul was the kind of guy who would mow a yard or pick up sticks for a fire.

Apparently what happened is that Paul grabbed a bundle of sticks to put on the fire, and in the sticks was a viper that he could not see. As he put the sticks on the fire, the serpent was probably in a torpid state because of the season and cold; and when it got near the heat of the fire it somewhat revived and bit Paul. Just because Paul was an apostle did not mean he was free from dangers of the world. Snakes will bite Christians or heathens.

James Montgomery Boice tells the story of T. E. Lawrence in his book *Revolt in the Desert* about a military desert campaign in World War I, that one cold night the Arabs had gathered sticks for a fire and one of the sticks turned out to be a snake that was revived by the fire’s warmth and slithered away without biting anyone (*Acts*, p. 418).

Not only did this snake bite Paul, it apparently was hanging onto his hand (v. 4); and instead of panicking, Paul just shook it off into the fire (v. 5). God's will for Paul's life was that he go to Rome and preach. His will was not that he gets bit by a snake and die. God didn't let a storm kill him on the sea and he was not about to let a snake kill him on the land.

When we were in Idaho, there was a man at the university from Malta who spoke Greek, and I asked him if they had deadly snakes on the island today and he said, "No." He certainly did know that Paul had visited his island and he felt he knew the beach where Paul landed. But today there are no vipers.

But we must remember, back in Paul's day the island was much more primitive and as people began to inhabit the island, they killed off the poisonous snakes. One of the arguments that has been used against the reliability of the N.T. is the fact that there are no poisonous snakes on the island of Malta today. But anyone knows that the more populated a place becomes and the more cultivated the land becomes, things like snakes are killed off and disappear.

There was a missionary to Brazil who spoke of various dangers they faced in getting back into jungle areas. They mentioned jaguars, poisonous snakes, crocodiles, scorpions, centipedes and spiders. He went on to say that as they cut down timber, drained marshes and made roads, and planted crops, most of these deadly things were either killed or left the area.

This similar kind of thing happened with wolves and grizzly bears out west until they were reintroduced to the area by special interest groups. If you read the journals of Lewis and Clark, they had several dangerous encounters with grizzlies; but when humans inhabited the areas, they killed them off and many of the grizzlies moved north up into Canada.

MALTA FACT #4 – People from Malta react to the snake bite. **28:4-6**

There were two wrong reactions of the people to seeing this viper hang on the hand of Paul.

Wrong Reaction #1 - They assumed Paul was a murderer who had been tracked down and killed by justice. **28:4**

Now these natives had just seen all 276 people saved from a shipwreck. They had all made a mile swim to shore which was impressive. But now having made it to shore they see this snakebite Paul and they draw the conclusion that Paul is a murderer and justice has tracked him down. The fact that this happened seemed to prove to these people that Paul had committed a terrible crime.

In Greek, there is an article "the" before the noun justice. The people of Malta believed there was a goddess whose name was "justice" who had tracked Paul down. So the people were not only talking about Paul getting what he had coming to him, but also that some god had tracked him down.

They expected that Paul would swell up, fall over, and die, which they assumed to be some form of punishment.

Wrong Reaction #2 - They assumed Paul was a god . **28:5-6**

Now this must have been a very deadly snake because they expected Paul to drop dead. But what they see is the viper dangling from Paul's hand, and he just shook it off and went about his business as if nothing had happened. According to **verse 5**, Paul shook the viper off into the fire.

When Paul shook off the viper as if it were nothing, they all changed their minds and declared that Paul was a god. It is interesting that Paul does not rebuke these people like he did with those at Lystra (Acts 14:15-18). One reason may be because these people did not start worshipping Paul. Some people are so quick to make assumptions and draw conclusions that are wrong.

One question worth asking is why would God let this happen to Paul? The answer is to show this is My man. This is My apostle. My hand is on him and My hand is protecting him. God's will was that Paul go to Rome and Satan was trying to stop him; but he couldn't do it because no matter what Satan did, God's sovereignty overruled. **This snake bite showed all that the Apostle Paul was connected to the God of the Bible.**

Notice carefully from **verse 6** that the normal thing that happens when a person is bitten by a poisonous snake is that they swell up and then fall down dead. Luke is a medical doctor and he had seen this and knew about these symptoms. We may recall that Jesus said there were certain signs that would follow His apostles, and one of those signs was "they will pick up serpents ... it shall not hurt them" (Mark 16:14, 18). This was a promise given to apostles, not to a bunch of religious crazies in Kentucky, Alabama, or Georgia.

Paul had no affects at all. I saw one of the demonic snake handlers who had been bitten swell up and then eventually live and claim God had done it. God did let him live, but his stupidity caused him to be snake bit and this was nothing like what happened to Paul. If they were apostles they wouldn't even swell up when bitten.

MALTA FACT #5 – Paul is welcomed by Publius, the leading man of the island. **28:7-10**

Now Publius was like the President of the island. He had "official political eminence." There are several points of observation we want to see:

Observation #1 - Near the beach was several properties owned by Publius. **28:7a**

Publius was the leading man of the island of Malta and he was a rich man. God does use wealthy people to minister to his true servants. When Lewis Sperry Chafer was contemplating becoming president of Dallas Theological Seminary, one of the things God did for him was raise up a man of means who said he would cover his salary every year, which he did for years.

Observation #2 - Publius welcomed and entertained Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus for three days.
28:7b

Publius did three specific things for Paul:

- 1) He welcomed (αναδεξαμενος) them—he undertook on their behalf to receive them.
- 2) He entertained (ξενιζω) them—to receive as a guest and treat them in an unusual way.
- 3) He was courteous (φιλοφρονως) to them—very kind to them.

There were 276 people who had made it to shore alive, including Roman soldiers and a Roman commander, and yet, Publius was led to zero in on doing good things for Paul and his team. Everywhere Paul went God had raised up key people to care for him. Even when on a ship as a prisoner, God raised up a Roman commander to care for Paul. Now Paul has been shipwrecked on an island, and God raises up the wealthiest man on the island to personally take care of Paul and his associates.

God promises to take care of and provide for His people, and horrible circumstances do not ever change the promises of God.

Observation #3 - Paul heals Publius' father. **28:8**

As Paul talked with Publius, he learned that his father was very sick. Now remember Luke is a medical doctor so he knows medical terminology and is very specific as to the problem. The text says that he had “fevers” and “dysentery.” The word “fevers” (πυρετος) is one that means he had a very high fever to the point of burning up and the plural indicates he had multiple fevers. The word “dysentery” (δυσεντερια) is a very rare Greek word and it means that he had some form of intestinal issue. So some form of intestinal problem was causing the multiple fevers and, as a result, Publius' father was a very sick man.

Paul went to see him and he prayed and laid his apostolic hands on him and he was healed. These are apostolic sign miracles (II Cor. 12:12). Luke could not do this and neither could Aristarchus. Paul was the apostle and he was the only one who could perform this kind of miracle. These are not miracles for faith healers today; these were specific apostolic sign miracles.

By virtue of the fact that Paul prayed, you may be certain he had spent time sharing truth about Jesus Christ and his apostleship. Otherwise, Publius would have had no sense of Paul's ability to heal.

Observation #4 - Paul healed the rest of the people who had diseases on the island. **28:9**

Notice Luke is careful to point out that the people were going to “him,” not “them.” In other words, only the Apostle Paul could do these healing miracles.

Observation #5 - The people did many nice things for Paul and his friends. **29:10**

This truly is an amazing provision of God. They have been shipwrecked on an island and God has raised up people, most of whom are heathens, to take care of their needs.

The people honored them, the people respected them; and when they were getting ready to sail for Rome, they supplied them with everything to meet their needs.

David Livingstone said that in dark regions of South Africa that had never been visited by any European until he arrived, he found natives that were sympathetic to him and would help him. Here he was deep in jungles and God was still looking out for him.

We are all on a voyage through life and sometimes that voyage is stormy. There are times when we get snake bit. It is in these moments when we need to believe God and trust God and watch God work in some amazing ways. He will never fail His people even if shipwrecked or snake bit.