

Acts 28 - Paul snake-bitten but not done yet

THEME: Paul arrives in Rome.

This, our final study in the Book of Acts, follows Paul from Melita to Rome. When Paul arrives in Rome, he ministers first to Jews and then to Gentiles. The narrative is not concluded but breaks off with Paul preaching in Rome. The acts of the Holy Spirit have not been finished even in our day. - McGee

Paul on Malta

Act 28:1 Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta.

This is the island which we know today as Malta. The bay where this took place is known today as Saint Paul's Bay. This is a very interesting place to those of us who lived during World War II when this island made the headlines at the very beginning of the conflict. It was the most bombed spot of the war because it was in a strategic position. At that time General Darby was the general and the governor of the island. He was a Christian and a worthy successor to the apostle Paul. He said that he had no notion of surrendering. I think it is interesting to be reading about Paul landing at this bay and to realize that General Darby had command on that same island.

Certainly, in the incident of this shipwreck and the landing of Paul on the island of Melita we see the providence of God in the life of the apostle Paul. All of this is recorded for our learning. - McGee

Act 28:2 And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold.

It may cause us to smile a little that Dr. Luke labels the natives of the island "barbarous people." The word barbarian was used to describe one who did not speak Greek. It does not imply savagery. Here we have another instance of the kindness and the courtesy of pagans. Remember that there are 276 people who have landed on this little island. Out of this crowd, many are criminals who are being sent to Rome for punishment. Yet we find this wonderful compassion and helpfulness on the part of people who are pagans. We find in the Book of Jonah another instance of this same thing when the pagan sailors tried to spare Jonah. They didn't want to throw him overboard even though he had told them they should do it. They tried to bring the ship to land but found out they couldn't do it. Sometimes pagan folk are more gracious than the folk who are religious. – McGee

Notice: Even the pagans provided hospitality to the motley crew including criminals. How much more should we provide hospitality to those in need.

Act 28:3 But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand.

You remember that at the end of the Gospel of Mark there is this promise: "And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover" (Mar_16:17-18). I believe that these signs were confined to that time before the New Testament was completed when the believers needed the sign gifts to substantiate the message of the gospel.

My advice to you today is not to deliberately pick up a rattlesnake. I lived in Tennessee for many years, and I have never known an authentic case where someone picked up a rattlesnake during a meeting, was bitten, and was unaffected by the venom of the snake. Most of them die. Those who live through it almost die. The venom has a tremendous effect upon them.

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May I point out something else? Paul did not deliberately pick up this viper. Paul was not tempting God. I consider this another evidence that Paul's "... thorn in the flesh ..." (2Co_12:7) was eye trouble. (I'll develop that when we get to the Epistle to the Galatians.) Paul couldn't see very well. When he picked up some sticks, there was a viper on the sticks and Paul just didn't see it.

There is another interesting sidelight to the apostle Paul that I want you to notice here: the great apostle Paul gathered sticks. These people on the island had been very gracious to them. They had accepted 276 strangers who landed there. It was cold and rainy, and they had started a big fire to help warm these people who had come in from the sea. When the fire began to go down, Paul went out to gather a bundle of sticks. This should dispel any notion that Paul was a lazy preacher. He himself tells us that he practiced his trade as a tentmaker so that he would not be a burden to the church. Obviously, he was not afraid of work.

When Paul threw the sticks onto the fire, the viper would naturally crawl away from the fire. The viper not only bit Paul but actually fastened onto his hand. – McGee

While being bitten by a viper can't be pleasant, God uses it miraculously to spread the Gospel. How about you? Have you used your hardships and failures to proclaim the Lord to many?

Act 28:4 So, when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live."

The Greek word here for "vengeance" is dike which actually would be better translated "justice." "Yet justice suffereth not to live." In other words, they felt that Paul was guilty of a great crime, and justice was catching up with him. He had escaped from the sea but now he would surely die of the venom. Very frankly, I think they sat down to watch what would happen to him. They expected that any moment he would begin to show swelling in his hand and arm, then would fall down dead. They knew by sad experience, as that is what had happened to their own people. They expected it to happen to Paul.

Notice that these pagans did have a sense of justice. They assumed that Paul was a murderer and that he deserved punishment. In such a circumstance today, folk would be helping the criminal to get back out to sea to escape being punished. This incident shows that throughout the Roman Empire there was a sense of justice. Pagan Rome made that contribution to the world. Rome was noted for justice, not mercy. Sins were not forgiven. If you broke the law, you paid the penalty. Under the iron heel of Rome, the world was crying for mercy. This was a preparation for the coming of Christ who came as the Savior from sin—that mankind might know the mercy and forgiveness of God. - McGee

Act 28:5-6 But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

The promise of God in Mar_16:18 was fulfilled in Paul's experience. He suffered no ill effects from the venom. When folk today deliberately pick up snakes and claim that promise as their protection, they are far afield from what God had in mind.

When they saw that no harm came to Paul, they decided that he certainly could not be a criminal but was instead a god. Although they were equally wrong in this judgment, it did give Paul a very important contact on the island of Melita here. – McGee

Note: Nothing can prevent you from fulfilling what God has called you to do! Therefore, be on the lookout for fear, which the enemy uses to keep you from doing the Lord's Will.

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Act 28:7-8 *In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days. And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him.*

The leading citizen of the island of Malta at that time was Publius. He owned considerable land in the vicinity of the beach where the shipwrecked party landed. This wealthy Roman official received Paul and his friends courteously, and provided accommodation for them for three days, that is, until permanent quarters could be arranged in which they would spend the winter. – Believers' Bible Commentary

Paul was now exercising his gift as an apostle. He entered and he prayed. Apparently, he did not pray for the man; he prayed for himself. That is, he prayed to determine the will of God. Was this man to be healed through Paul? That is what he prayed to know. – McGee

Paul uses the gifts of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the gospel in a new land with new people. Modeling what Jesus did so many times in his short ministry. What is keeping us from doing the father's will today?

Act 28:9-10 *So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed. They also honored us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary.*

The question has been raised whether or not Paul preached the gospel in Melita. There are those who believe that this is one place where Paul did not preach. This is an instance where I think the Holy Spirit expects us to use ordinary common sense. Of course, he preached the gospel. We are coming to the end of the book, and the incident is related in a very brief and blunt manner. By now Dr. Luke expects us to know what Paul would do. Remember that Paul is the man who wrote, "For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1Co_2:2). With the apostles, healing was God's witness that the gospel they preached was from Him. It is very important for us to realize that Paul preached the gospel and that the healing was the result of it. It was the evidence of the truth he was preaching. I think it can be only a normal inference that Paul did exactly the same here as he did everywhere he went. – McGee

Paul had such great fellowship and relationship with the Lord that he was able to use the authorities and gifts given him by Jesus everywhere he went consistent with the Lord's Will.

Paul Arrives at Rome

Act 28:11 *After three months, we sailed in an Alexandrian ship whose figurehead was the Twin Brothers, which had wintered at the island.*

After the three months of winter had passed, and navigation was safe again, the centurion, with his prisoners, embarked on an Alexandrian ship ... which had wintered at the island. The figurehead of this ship was the Twin Brothers, that is, Castor and Pollux. These were supposed, by heathen sailors, to be the patron gods of mariners. – Believers' Bible Commentary

Act 28:12-14 *And landing at Syracuse, we stayed three days. From there we circled round and reached Rhegium. And after one day the south wind blew; and the next day we came to Puteoli, where we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them seven days. And so, we went toward Rome.*

From Malta they sailed about eighty miles to Syracuse, the capital of Sicily, located on its east coast. The ship stopped there for three days, then proceeded to Rhegium, on the southwest corner of Italy, at the toe. After one day a favorable south wind blew, enabling the crew to sail 180 miles northward along the west coast of Italy to Puteoli, on the northern

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shore of the Bay of Naples. Puteoli was about 150 miles southeast of Rome. There the apostle found Christian brethren, with whom he was permitted to enjoy fellowship for seven days. – Believers' Bible Commentary

Act 28:15-16 *And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum and Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him.*

We are not told how news reached Rome of the arrival of Paul in Puteoli. However, two different groups of brethren set out to meet him. One group traveled forty-three miles southeast of Rome to The Market of Appius. The other group traveled thirty-three miles southeast to the Three Inns. Paul was greatly cheered and encouraged by this touching demonstration of the love of the saints in Rome.

Upon arrival in Rome, he was permitted to dwell in a private home, with the soldier who guarded him. – Believers' Bible Commentary

Notice: When you are in God's favor, you can be blessed even as a prisoner in chains, so how much more should we pursue the favor of the Lord.

Paul in Rome

Act 28:17-19 *And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together. So when they had come together, he said to them: "Men and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans, who, when they had examined me, wanted to let me go, because there was no cause for putting me to death. But when the Jews spoke against it, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, not that I had anything of which to accuse my nation.*

In accordance with his policy of witnessing to the Jews first, Paul sent an invitation to their religious leaders. When they had come together in his rented house, he explained his case to them. He told them that although he had done nothing against the Jewish people, or their customs, yet the Jews of Jerusalem had delivered him into the hands of the Romans for trial. The Gentile authorities could find no fault in him, and wanted to free him, but when the Jews cried out against it, the apostle was compelled to appeal to Caesar. In making this appeal, it was not for the purpose of bringing any charge against the Jewish nation. Rather, it was that he might defend himself. – Believers' Bible Commentary

Act 28:20-22 *For this reason therefore I have called for you, to see you and speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain." Then they said to him, "We neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren who came reported or spoken any evil of you. But we desire to hear from you what you think; for concerning this sect, we know that it is spoken against everywhere."*

It was because he was innocent of any crime against the Jewish people that he had called the chief Roman Jews together. Actually, it was because of the hope of Israel that he was bound with a chain. The hope of Israel, as explained previously, refers to the fulfillment of the promises made to the Jewish patriarchs, especially the promise of the Messiah. Inherent in the fulfillment of these promises was the resurrection of the dead.

The Jewish leaders professed to know nothing about the Apostle Paul. They had not received any letters from Judea concerning him, and none of their fellow Jews had brought reports to them against him. However, they did want to hear more from Paul, because they knew that the Christian faith with which he was associated was spoken against everywhere. – Believers' Bible Commentary

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Act 28:23-24 *So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved.*

Sometime later a great number of these Jews came to Paul's lodging to hear more from him. He availed himself of the opportunity to testify to them concerning the kingdom of God, and to persuade them concerning Jesus. In so doing he quoted to them from the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. Some believed the message he brought, and some disbelieved. (Disbelieving is stronger than a simple failure to accept the message. It indicates a positive rejection.) – Believers' Bible Commentary

Once again, Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God. He proclaimed it was now, and He was the door. Paul grasped that Jesus not alone brought salvation but also the Kingdom of Heaven.

Act 28:25-28 *So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, saying, 'GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND SAY: "HEARING YOU WILL HEAR, AND SHALL NOT UNDERSTAND; AND SEEING YOU WILL SEE, AND NOT PERCEIVE; FOR THE HEARTS OF THIS PEOPLE HAVE GROWN DULL. THEIR EARS ARE HARD OF HEARING, AND THEIR EYES THEY HAVE CLOSED, LEST THEY SHOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, LEST THEY SHOULD UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEARTS AND TURN, SO THAT I SHOULD HEAL THEM." ' "Therefore, let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!"*

When Paul saw that once again the gospel was being, on the whole, rejected by the Jewish nation, he quoted Isa_6:9 and 10, where the prophet was commissioned to preach the word to a people whose hearts were dull, whose ears were deaf, and whose eyes were blinded. The apostle felt again the heartbreak of preaching good news to those who did not want to hear it. In view of this rejection by the Jews, Paul announced that he was taking the gospel to the Gentiles, and he expressed the assurance that they would hear it. – Believers' Bible Commentary

Paul to the very kept trying to go his people the Jews first, but repeatedly he was rejected, and went to the Gentiles. Should we be surprised when we are rejected?

Act 28:29-31 *And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves. Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.*

The Book of Acts tells of the beginning of the movement of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Remember that in the Garden of Eden man doubted God and that led to disobedience. The way back to God is by faith, "... for obedience to the faith ..." as Paul says in Rom_1:5. So we find in that day that some believed the gospel, and some did not.

The Book of Acts ends with Paul "preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence." The record is not concluded. The Holy Spirit continues to work today. The acts of the Holy Spirit have not been finished even in our day. The Book of Acts will end with the Rapture, the coming of Christ for His own. The work of the church has not yet been completed; it is a continuing story. What you and I have done in the power of the Holy Spirit will be included in that record. – McGee

Are you like Paul preaching and proclaiming Jesus with all confidence in a pagan world?