

March 5, 2023 by Steve Brandon



Miracles in Malta

Acts 28:1-10

1. Saved from the Snake (verses 1-6)

2. Delivered from their Diseases (verses 7-10)

In our text today, we find ourselves on the island of Malta. Paul was there for three months. It wasn't his plan to be in Malta, but that's where he found himself. His plan was different.

In Acts 19:21, we see Paul in Ephesus laying out his plans for the future. "Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome.'" In Acts 20, we saw Paul travel through Macedonia and Achaia. In Acts 21, we saw Paul travel to Jerusalem.

When Paul was in Jerusalem, he was falsely accused by the Jews, and his life was at stake. But the Lord appeared to Paul and said, Acts 23:11 The following night the Lord stood by [Paul] and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." In these two verses, we see the mind of a man planning his way. and the Lord directing his steps (Proverbs 16:9). Paul had planned to be in Rome. and the Lord was assuring him that indeed, he would arrive in Rome and be a witness for Jesus.

Last week, (in Acts 27), we saw Paul begin his travel on his way to Rome on that difficult sea voyage. If you remember, Paul began his journey from Caesarea. He boarded a cargo ship, which was planning Acts 27:2 "to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia," picking up cargo along the way. The next day, they landed at Sidon (Acts 27:3). The ship remained there a few days, and then embarked again along the coast. Eventually, they landed eventually at Myra (Acts 27:5).

While they were in Myra, they transferred to another ship that was headed to Italy (Acts 27:6). They went out to sea. However, because of difficult winds, they were forced to land at Cnidus (Acts 27:7). Then, they embarked again. And again, because of the winds, they were forced to sail under the lee of Crete (Acts 27:7), landing at a place called Fair Havens (Acts 27:8). While they were at Fair Havens, the weather was turned bad, but the harbor in Fair Havens wasn't suitable to spend the winter. So they embarked, hoping to arrive in Phoenix, on the western side of the island.

It wasn't far from Myra to Phoenix. It was just across the island. However, the winds turned bad and they never made it to Phoenix. Instead, they were pushed out into the open sea, where they were violently tossed by the storm (Acts 27:18). The storm was so bad that they threw their cargo overboard to lighten the ship. But the storm worsened. We read in Acts 27:20 that "all hope of [their] being saved was at last abandoned."

Yet, Paul had reason to hope. He had the promise from the Lord that he would arrive in Rome. But further, one night on the ship, he had an angel appear before him and say, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you" (Acts 27:24). In other words, "God has promised that you will testify before the Roman emperor in Rome. That promise still stands. You must stand before Caesar. And everyone on the ship will survive."

Now, to make a long story short, in the providence of God, this lost-at-sea ship was approaching an island. It was determined that the best way for those on the ship to survive, was to run the ship aground on the shore. The narrative continues this way:

Acts 27:39-44

Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. 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 soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

All 276 passengers on the ship were saved, exactly as the angel had told Paul (Acts 27:24). We find in Acts 28:1 that only after the shipwreck did Paul and his traveling companions learn of the name of the Island. It was called, "Malta." It was a small island on the Mediterranean sea. The island of Malta is part of the Maltese archipelago (a series of islands). Malta is the biggest island of the archipelago that measures 17 miles across and 9 miles wide. The entire island isn't much different in size that the Rockford area in which we live. Today, there are over 400,000 people living on this island, which is more dense than our own city, making it own of the most densely populated countries in the world.

Our text today (Acts 28:1-10), will tell us what happened during the three months that Paul and his companions were on the island. Let's consider our text:

Acts 28:1-10

After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. 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. 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. 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." 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.

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

The title of my message this morning is, "Miracles in Malta," because that's what we see in the text. We see Paul, bitten by a venomous snake, not dying. We see Publius, being healed from fever and dysentery when Paul prayed. Furthermore, we see numerous other healings in our text as well. So, let's dig into our first point this morning. I'm calling it,

1. Saved from the Snake (verses 1-6)

In these six verses, we see Paul bitten by a deadly snake, but not dying. Paul is "Saved from the Snake." Again, I take you back to the first verse:

Acts 28:1-2

After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. 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.

Remember, Paul and all of the passengers on the ship had just come through a storm, and had happened upon this island. But as it had been cloudy for days, those who navigated by the stars had no idea where they were. They had no idea what island this was. All they knew is that by running their ship onto the beach, they may be saved from the storm. Their ship broke up in the rocks, and many of those on the ship swam to shore.

Now, if you remember, all took place, just as winter was just setting on. The ship had originally sought to endure the winter months in Phoenix, on the island of Crete. Yet, with contrary winds, they had been pushed hundreds of miles off course in the open sea. My point is this: it was cold! (verse 2). All on the ship had come from the cold water. Further, it was raining.

Those on the island demonstrated their kindness to those from the ship, by caring for their needs. In fact, Luke tells us that they demonstrated, "unusual kindness" (verse 2) by caring for all of these people. The Greek word here translated, "unusual kindness" comes from two Greek words, which mean "love" and man. Literally, they showed their "love for men." We get the word, "philanthropy" from this word. We usually use this word to describe the generous donations that the ultra-rich give to a cause, such as an endowment for a college, a financial contribution for a hospital, or a grant for research in healthcare. We normally think of philanthropy on the large scale, with millions and billions of dollars in donations. But these islanders showed great philanthropy by getting their hands dirty and helping a group of people in need. If you remember, there were 276 aboard the ship (Acts 27:37). That's a large group of people. That just showed up on the shore of the beach. These natives had compassion upon them, and helped them in their need. They were cold and wet, not only from their swim to the shore, but also from the rain which was coming down.

The best that I can compare this to is what's happening in our country, as immigrants are coming across the border in Mexico and being bused to cities in the north to take care of them. It has become a burden to some of the cities, even in our day. Now, I'm not trying to make any sort of political statement here, only to say that that's a bit of what has happened here. All of these 276 people simply appeared on this island, unannounced. The natives responded in love by kindling a fire for them to warm up.

Such is the common grace of God to men. As we shall see, these men are not Christians. They are not god-fearers at all. In fact, they are called (literally in the Greek text), "Barbarians." Not, it's not quite as bad as it might seem in our ears. For this term simply means that they didn't speak Greek. But, they were uncultured men. Typical of what you might think of as island people. But they were kind to Paul and to those who landed upon the island. Simple lesson here: With all we know that the Bible speaks about sin, and our lost state without Christ, and how we are dead in our sins, and unable to respond to the things of God without the Spirit of God working, let us never think that non-Christians are so steeped in sin, that they are incapable of kindness.

At this point in the narrative, we find these uncultured people, caring deeply for those who just arrived on shore. Just like many of your non-Christian friends, who are genuinely kind to many people. Embrace this: there are many kind and gracious non-Christians in this world. But this doesn't mean that they don't need Jesus. They do. They won't be saved by their kindness. Nobody will. We all are saved by God's grace to us through faith in Jesus.

Anyway, they build a fire for those who were just shipwrecked. It looked like many pitched in to help, including those from the ship. In verse 3, we see Paul, lending a hand to pick up sticks to throw on the fire. Unfortunately, in gathering sticks, Paul didn't only pick up some stick, but he picked up a snake with the sticks.

Acts 28:3

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.

Apparently as Paul neared the fire with these sticks in hand, this snake felt the heat of the fire. Just as Paul was about to toss the sticks onto the fire, this snake bit Paul on the hand, and fastened itself to Paul. Picture the situation. There is Paul before the bonfire, with a snake dangling from his hand. It wasn't good. This snake dangled long enough for the natives to see what happened. We read of their reaction in verse 4.

Acts 28:4

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."

This gives us an idea of what sort of snake this was. It was a dangerous, deadly viper! And this poisonous snake had injected its venom into Paul's hand.

Now, today, there are no such snakes on the island of Malta, as the dense population has removed them all from the island. So, we can't go to Malta today and do any research on what type of snake this was. However these natives knew what kind of snake it was, and how dangerous such a bite would be. Further, they concluded that a bite from this viper would prove to be fatal. Furthermore, they concluded that this was no accidental viper. 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."

Those on the island, no doubt, had seen others die from similar snake bites. They had seen children playing off by the bushes, bitten by a viper, only to die a short time later. They had seen the full-grown man, walking by the beach in his sandals, be bitten by such a viper on his foot, only to pass away, soon thereafter. And they gave Paul the same death sentence. They said, "Justice has not allowed him to live."

Did you notice in verse 4, that the word, "Justice" is capitalized? Now in the Greek text there is no capitalization, in fact, the earliest manuscripts that we have of this passage, there are only capital letters. So, the capitalization here is an interpretation. If you have an ESV Bible, you can see in the footnote that another translation might have a lower-case, "justice." If you have a New American Standard translation of the Bible in your lap, it's reversed. The translation has it as a lower-case "justice," but in the footnote, gives it a capitalization. That's all to say that we aren't exactly sure how to translate this. The capitalization is an identifying the islanders and referring to their goddess, "Justice," who has actively sought out Paul for punishment.

Whether "justice" is capitalized or not, it demonstrates the pagan religion of these natives. It was either the karma of justice that has gotten Paul, or it was their goddess, Justice who "is meting out divine punishment on an evildoer." Either way, they were expecting Paul to die. They saw it as "justice," because they concluded that Paul was a murderer! Though he had escaped the sea, he couldn't run from justice!

How ironic, that Paul actually was a murderer (of sorts)! Though there is no evidence that he actually killed anyone, he still consented to the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1). He confessed to the Jewish mob in the temple, "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women" (Acts 22:4).

So, all eyes were on Paul, as they awaited him to die.

Dying from a snake bite is not a pleasant experience. Depending upon the type of viper and amount of venom injected and the health and immune response of the one bitten. The exact symptoms can vary. But there is usually swelling at the site of the bite. Often there is nausea, vomiting, dizziness, difficulty breathing. There are times when the venom can bring damage to internal organs, leading to bleeding, kidney failure, respiratory failure, or heart stoppage. Such was the expectation of the natives as they watched Paul. In fact, in this case, the natives were expecting him to "swell up or suddenly fall down dead" (verse 6).

But that's not what happened.

Acts 28:5

[Paul], however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.

Of course, this is exactly what we would expect to have happened. Paul had this promise of the Lord, that he would arrive in Rome, and be a witness of the resurrection to those in Rome (Acts 23:11). It was confirmed to him on the ship by the angel who appeared to him (Acts 27:24). No mere snake bite would prevent Paul from arriving safely in Rome! This is exactly what Paul would have expected as well! He knew that he was immortal until he arrived in Rome!

By way of application, please know that you are just like Paul, immortal until God finishes his work in you. Now, unfortunately, we don't have a word from the Lord as to how long that is. But we can rest confident, that God has his hand upon our lives. We need not fear the future. Isaiah 41:10 is one of those go-to promises that we can turn to when fearful ourselves:

Isaiah 41:10

fear not, for I am with you;
be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

I doubt that Paul feared his snakebite one bit. But that wasn't the expectation of the natives on the island.

Acts 28:6

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.

Does this sound familiar? Do you remember what happened in Lystra, when Paul arrived there on his first missionary journey? He had come with the intent of preaching the gospel to those in the town. As Paul and Barnabas arrived in Lystra, they encountered a man who was seated in the square, who could not use his feet.

Acts 14:8-12

... He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking. And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.

One miracle was enough to sway the crowds in Lystra. In the same way, one miracle here, of being "Saved from the Snake" was enough to sway these natives in Malta as well.

Now, in Lystra, things turned badly pretty quickly. Those in Lystra began worshiping Paul and Barnabas! To which Paul responded by preaching the gospel:

Acts 14:15-17

"Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."

But even this didn't deter the crowds. "Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them" (Acts 14:18). Soon after that, the Jews came from Iconium and persuaded the crowds away from Paul and Barnabas. "They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city" (Acts 14:19).

We get a sense that things went differently here on Malta. We see this with our next point. We have seen Paul, "Saved from the Snake" in verses 1-6. Now, we see those on the island,

2. Delivered from their Diseases (verses 7-10)

First, we see the miracle that Paul performed with Publius, the chief of the island.

Acts 28:7

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.

Again, in verse 7 we see the kindness of pagan people. In this case, "the chief man of the island." He took Paul and his traveling companions into his home. If you remember, this was at least three people: Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus the Macedonian from Thessalonica (Acts 27:2).

I would suspect that Publius took them into his home because of Paul's surviving the snake bite. I mean, there were 276 people on the ship. The chief man of the island could have taken in the captain of the ship or the Roman Centurion, who was responsible to bring Paul to Rome. These were the obvious choices for the chief of the island to help. But no, he chose to take in Paul and his friends. He hosted them for three days. I can only assume that this is how long it took for Paul to find some other shelter.

It was a good choice on the part of the chief of the island, because Paul healed his father, something that the captain of the ship or the Centurion would have been powerless to do. We read this in verse 8,

Acts 28:8

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. Somehow, in the course of the conversation with Paul, the chief told Paul of his father, who was sick. He was sick with "fever and dysentery."

Many commentators mention that this may have been "Malta fever" also known as "Mediterranean fever" or technically "Brucellosis," which comes through unpasteurized milk of goats. With the illness so long ago, we don't know. But we do know that fever and dysentery are never pleasant. You are hot in bed. Fluids are coming out of both ends of you. And you are miserable. In those days, people could easily die from such ailments. But Paul went to visit the father of Publius. He laid his hands on him, prayed for him, and he was healed.

Clearly, this was a miracle. God responded to Paul's prayer of faith. It appears that there was a direct correlation between Paul's prayer and the healing of this man. Soon the word got out, of the healing power of the one who came to visit them!

Acts 28:9

And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.

It would have been easy, on such a small island, to find this man who could heal others with a prayer. It would have been easy to walk a few miles to see Paul. Again, there is much we don't know about how these healings took place. whether it was Paul, praying for each one who came to him, and God, by his sovereign grace, healing those prayed for. Perhaps Luke was able to lend his medical expertise with some of the illnesses, so that they were cured through medical means, not merely through the supernatural. However it took place, the people were "Delivered from their Diseases."

Reading verse 9, we get the sense that disease was banished from the island during the time that Paul was on the island, which was three months. We know this by reading ahead to verse 11, "after three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island."

These healings, no doubt, gave Paul the opportunity to preach the gospel to those on the island. The text says nothing about Paul's preaching. But wherever he went, he was always "eager to preach the gospel" (Romans 1:15). Being on an island for three months, and interacting with so many natives, and healing so many on the island, Paul would certainly have used the healings as an opportunity to preach Jesus.

Yes, Paul was praying, and people were being healed. But Paul certainly wasn't taking glory to himself. He wasn't saying (like Nebuchadnezzar), "Look at my great power to heal you!" No, he certainly pressed those he healed, to the one who can heal them from their sins.

Any relief that Paul (or Luke) might give to these natives, would only prove to be temporary, as sickness may come upon them again. as they would eventually die. But Jesus gives permanent relief from our sin! He rose from the dead to give us life! that though we die, we will live again.

We have reason to believe that some on the island believed in Christ. I say this because of the honor that they gave to Paul and his friends. Look at verse 10,

Acts 28:10

They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

I love how Simon Kistemaker puts it:

When Paul and his friend arrived in Malta, they had nothing more than their sea-drenched clothes on their backs. We expect that the Maltese brought them numerous gifts of clothing and provisions, so that they could continue their travels in comfort. In brief, when the time came for Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus to depart, the Maltese had supplied them with everything they needed for the remainder of the journey. Thus, the islanders expressed their appreciation for all that Paul and his friends had done and said while they were guests on Malta.^[1]

Isn't this how things work in life? Paul and Luke loved those on the island, by giving themselves to them, and by serving them with their gift. In this case, their healing abilities. They were loved in return.

This love wasn't a tit-for-tat. Luke and Paul weren't expecting anything in return for their labors. But those on the island came to appreciate what they did. They returned in kind with honor and supplying them for their journey to Rome.

By way of application, I would simply encourage you on the same path. Love the people of the world. Love your neighbor. Love your co-worker. Love your unsaved family member. The Lord will return the blessing to you. "When a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7).

Now it's not that the natives on the island were enemies with Paul. (They were certainly enemies of the gospel, at least when Paul arrived on the island.) But Paul made peace with them, through loving them and serving them. May we do the same. May our reputation be one of love and service to others. May the Lord bless us in his time and in his way.

At this point in my message, I want for us to step back a bit and think about this passage as a whole. We saw Paul "Saved from the Snake" (verses 1-6). We saw the people on the island of Malta "Delivered from their Diseases" (verses 7-10).

One thing that really struck me about this passage is how "Jesusesque" this passage was. Jesus was saved from the snake. Jesus delivered people from their diseases.

Paul healing the fever of the father of Publius, was so like when Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law.

Matthew 8:14-17

And when Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him. That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases."

Furthermore, Jesus was immortal until the day that he died. How many times did Jesus say, "My hour has not yet come?" Consider the following verses:

John 2:4 - And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come."

John 7:30 - So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come.

John 8:20 - These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

John 12:23 - And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

John 13:1 - Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

The life of Jesus was under sovereign guidance of God. He was immortal until his hour came.

I can't help but to think of the symbolism of the snake biting Paul. The snake bit Jesus. But he overcame. In fact, this is the first expression of the gospel in the Bible. Speaking a curse to the serpent, God says, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). The serpent will bruise Jesus on the heel, but ultimately, Jesus will conquer him.

This is all that Satan has. All he has is a little viper bite that is able to be overcome by the power of God. In the case of Jesus, it was death on the cross. But this was but a heel wound, because Jesus rose from the dead. In so doing, Jesus conquered the serpent of old, Satan, himself.

This is our hope and trust, that Jesus has conquered for us. Jesus has conquered the serpent of old when his time was come to be laid out on the cross.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 5, 2023 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 952.