

Acts

Part 62 – Shipwrecks and Snakebites

Acts 28:1-10

Acts chapters 27 and 28 tell the harrowing story of the shipwreck involving the apostle Paul. Luke was on board the ship along with Paul and over 200 other souls. They were caught in a violent nor'easter and finally crashed against a reef just off the coast of Malta. The inhabitants of Malta were both praise-worthy for their hospitality and pitiable in their spiritual darkness. When Paul is bitten by a snake they move rather freely from assuming he is a murderer (for what else could explain his misfortune?) to recognizing him as a god (for what else could explain his good fortune?). One scholar has called this "the Maltese Fallacy" which could just as easily in our day be termed the "Evangelical Fallacy." The fact is, in God's providence believers and unbelievers alike will, in this life, experience shipwrecks and snakebites.



Main Idea: Even as they go about doing his will by advancing the gospel, God does not shield his people from hardship.

Vs. 2 – Luke's word, which the NIV renders as "islanders" is better rendered "barbarian" which, in that time and context, primarily meant someone who didn't speak Greek, though it may have also carried more pejorative meanings.

Vs. 3 – It is interesting to see the great Apostle joining everyone else in picking up sticks. It is sometimes claimed that this must be a later legend as there are no poisonous snakes on Malta. But what was the case 2,000 years ago is another matter. That these folk thought the snake poisonous is good evidence that there were poisonous snakes at that time.

Vs. 4 – "Justice" is rightly capitalized. The Maltese were thinking of the goddess "Justice" who had not been outwitted by Paul's escape from the storm. There is a Greek poem that tells exactly this tale, of a murderer who escaped from a storm at sea, was shipwrecked on the coast of Libya, but was killed by a viper. [Bruce, 522n]

Vs. 6 – You are aware of "snake-handlers," especially in Appalachia, who prove their faith and the power of the Spirit by handling poisonous snakes without harm to themselves (although it often does not work out that way). In the "long ending" of Mark there is a promise that the disciples would be able to do this ("they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all" Mk 16:18). However, this incident should not be taken as normative experience for Christians.

Vs. 7 – The following account of miracle working is very like similar accounts of Jesus' ministry, the healing of one leading to many clamoring for healing.

Vs. 8 – A typical Maltese affliction; it came to be known as "Maltese fever."

Vs. 10 – It is striking that nothing is said about Paul preaching to them or about any of them becoming Christians as a result. It is doubtful that Paul would have ignored the opportunity, but it is perhaps quite possible that no one was converted. Miracles did not always have that effect, as we know from the gospels. Nevertheless, that makes even more striking the account of the miraculous. It is not offered here as preparation for conversions and these folk are not represented as becoming friends of the gospel. But they did not doubt that a supernatural event had occurred and they wanted a piece of that blessing. Nevertheless it is inconceivable that Paul did not preach the gospel while on Malta. He most certainly did so. To conclude otherwise would be to completely miss the character of the Apostle.

1. A surprising debt

In the thought world of the Greco-Romans, the world could be divided broadly into two categories: The Greco-Romans and everyone else (barbarians). It was a cultural chauvinism which is not at all unheard of today. And while some cultures are more advanced and shaped by better ideas than others the Christian must not disdain whole peoples as lesser humans. Paul, a Roman citizen with an elite education considered himself equally obligated to share the gospel with barbarians as with Greeks; from synagogues in Asia Minor to the shores of Malta to the halls of power in Rome.

- **Romans 1:14-15** – “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.”
- Vs. 1 – *barbaroi* – “barbarian” – The word translated barbarian is curious. It is a word which mocks (“bar-bar-bar”) what the Greeks believed sounded like vulgar gibberish.
- **Colossians 3:11** – “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

2. A superior power

In a culture given over to idolatry one of the tasks of Christian evangelism is to answer the question, “Which God?” When the Maltese notice that Paul suffered no ill effects from the snakebite they surmised that he must be a god for the goddess justice did not punish him. But at the very least, the miraculous protection Paul experienced served the purpose of demonstrating the presence of a superior spiritual power. We have witnessed this same principle elsewhere in Acts where the preaching of the gospel is accompanied by a demonstration of God’s power in order to establish the credibility of the apostles and their message.

- **Luke 10:19** – “Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.”

3. A comforting providence

The inhabitants of Malta, having seen Paul struck by a serpent sprang to the conclusion that the goddess of justice (*Dike*) was righting a wrong. In their pagan minds, they assumed that Paul was a murderer, for why would an innocent man suffer? When Paul showed no signs of succumbing to the venom they concluded that he must be a god. What else could explain his lack of suffering? It would be easy for sophisticated Westerners to shake their heads at such superstition. But the same sort of superstition infects much of contemporary evangelicalism: Good things happen to the faithful and bad things happen to the unfaithful.

In this fallen world the godly experience the same sorts of calamity suffered by the ungodly. At times it seems unjust to us. The Psalmist is not shy to ask the question: “Why do the righteous suffer?” Ultimately believers may take comfort in the truth that their sufferings are never random or without purpose. Even shipwrecks and snakebites; slanders and scourgings are under the watchful providence of God.