

## WHY DO CHRISTIANS GET SNAKE BIT?

Acts 28:1-10

Bob Bonner

December 27, 2015

A young soldier serving a tour in Iraq received a “Dear John” letter from his girlfriend back home. In it, she told him that her parents’ home had burned down and she had lost all of her personal possessions, including her computer, her phone, her photographs--everything. But the good news was, she fell in love with a fireman who had come to put out the fire, and they were engaged to be married. So, she was not only telling him “Good bye,” but adding insult to injury, she asked him, “Will you please return my favorite photograph of myself? I need it for my engagement picture in the local newspaper.”

Well, the poor guy was devastated. But his buddies in his unit, when they found out about it, came to his rescue. They went throughout the entire camp and collected pictures of everyone’s girlfriends. Then they put them all in a shoe box and sent it to the girl back home, along with this note, “Please find your picture and return the rest. For the life of me, I can’t remember which one you were!” Don’t you love it!

You know, there are all sorts of ways we can get snake bit in life, and none of them are much fun. There is always pain associated with it. Sometimes good can come from it, but often it is hard to see.

Our passage of study for this morning, **Acts 28**, finds us in just that sort of situation. We left off last time with the Apostle Paul and 275 other shipmates abandoning their shipwrecked vessel and swimming for their lives through a stormy sea toward a beach on the island of Malta. As we

open our study this morning, all of them are standing in the midst of a cold November wind and rain on the beach, wringing wet from a long swim. They must have been quite miserable!

Before we read, let me give you a bit of information that will help us get a better feel for the social/community life on the island Malta. According to the historiographer Diodorus, the Phoenicians sailed their mercantile ships as far as the Atlantic and used Malta's excellent harbors as a place of refuge. The island is sixty miles south of Sicily and 180 miles north of the African coast. When the weather is good, it is a very short sail from Malta to the southernmost tip of Italy. But during the winter months, sailing those waters is treacherous. As we will discover later in **Acts 28**, Paul and the rest of the passengers wanting to get to Italy were held up on this island for three months.

Malta is not very big. It is smaller than the little Hawaiian island off Maui known as Lanai. It measures eighteen miles in length and has a breadth of eight miles.<sup>1</sup> However, it was quite populated for its size, and the inhabitants were relatively wealthy.

The people of Malta were descended from Phoenicians sailors who had settled there in preceding centuries. In Middle Eastern Semitic languages, the word Malta was an expression used to describe a place of refuge.<sup>1</sup> Like the Phoenician settlers on the neighboring islands Gozzo and Comino, they eventually recognized that this place of refuge from storms was perfectly situated for shipping companies to do business in the exchange of goods. And thus it became a hub, so to speak, for<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kistemaker, S.J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953-2001). *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Vol. 17, p.946). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

shipping as well as a well-known refuge in winter for sailing vessels. As a result, those living on the island prospered greatly from trade.

With that brief introduction, let's read the first portion of our passage, **verses 1-6**, where we see the kindness of the citizens of Malta who provided relief. We read:

**<sup>1</sup>When they had been brought safely through, we found out that the island was called Malta. <sup>2</sup>The natives showed us extraordinary kindness; for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all. <sup>3</sup>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 itself on his hand. <sup>4</sup>When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they began saying to one another, "Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." <sup>5</sup>However he [Paul] shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm. <sup>6</sup>But they were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to**

**him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.**

At the end of **Acts 27**, Luke informed us that there were two groups of passengers sent to shore from the sinking wreckage of the ship. The first group was made up of those who could swim. The second was those who could not swim but used parts of the wrecked ship as floatation devices to enable them to paddle ashore.

As the first wave of swimmers stumbled onto the beach, some of the island inhabitants, who could see their situation from the land, must have rushed down to the shore to help. It did not take long for them to build a fire. In order for the 276 shivering passengers to get warm, that fire must have been a very good size.

The second wave of survivors next began washing up on shore. These were the non-swimmers, floating in on pieces of wreckage. They would have needed help much more than the swimmers to get to the beach; but when they arrived, they would have been greeted with the warmth of the fire, already kindled and beginning to blaze.

The citizens of Malta were very hospitable to these survivors. I imagine that many of their family members had found themselves in a similar situation before they had decided to make Malta their home. So in that society, helping the shipwrecked was part of their culture.

Luke implies, in **verse 1**, that when Paul and his friends came ashore, they asked the native people the name of the island. The answer they received was “Malta” or “refuge,” which must have had a pleasing ring to the ears of the seafarers who had been battling for their lives for two weeks in the midst of the storm aboard that Alexandrian freighter.

In ancient times, survivors of a shipwreck who managed to land on unknown shores expected to face either death or slavery. But this was not so on Malta, because since 218 BC, the island had belonged to Rome. When the islanders saw a centurion and soldiers coming to the island, they had the wisdom to show hospitality and kindness to representatives of Rome. Even then, Luke still reports that **“the islanders showed us unusual kindness by welcoming all of us.”** This statement becomes meaningful if we remember that the islanders had to meet the physical needs of 276 guests for three months, according to **verse 11.**<sup>2</sup>

The fact that all of the passengers had landed unscathed at Malta must have made a deep impression on Luke, the author of **Acts**, for he continually writes in the first person (we, us, etc.). Not one person had drowned! This was no small miracle, and every one there knew it.

Paul was probably in the first group who could swim, because we find him being a servant, gathering wood so as to keep the fire going to help others keep warm. However, he wasn't alone in his efforts. It would have taken all of them to keep that bonfire going. I don't believe as some do that it was Luke's point to make a big deal out of Paul's willingness to work. Luke's reason for bringing up Paul's collection of wood was to get to the part of his story where the snake bit Paul's hand.

I imagine that during the month of November, the heat of the fire revived a snake from its cold-blooded stupor brought on by the chill. Previously, the snake had been concealed lifeless in Paul's bundle of<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Kistemaker, S.J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953-2001). *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Vol. 17, p. 947). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

twigs; and as the apostle threw the sticks on the fire, it struck and fixed itself to his hand. Although today Malta has no venomous snakes, in Paul's day poisonous serpents lived in wooded parts of the island.<sup>3</sup>

The reaction of the natives to Paul's being bitten was typical. They expected him to die. Furthermore, having seen that Paul was guarded by soldiers, they knew that he was a prisoner on his way to Rome. Realizing this, they made a hasty evaluation of his character. They spoke reproachfully about him in **verse 4**, when several of them, commenting on the situation, called Paul "**this man.**"<sup>4</sup> They concluded that their goddess Justice was meting out divine punishment on an evildoer. He may have escaped death at sea, but not from the sentence of their goddess Justice.<sup>5</sup>

Allow me to stop at this point for just a moment of application. Recently we have had a series of various hardships and forms of suffering going on among our own church family. I have had a few individuals ask me about the reason that God allows suffering for Christians? They wonder if their sin has caused it.

It's amazing that for some reason, whenever a person has a major trial or tragedy, Christians and non-Christians alike jump to the conclusion that

---

3 Kistemaker, S.J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953-2001). *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Vol. 17, p.948). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

4 Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953-2001). *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Vol. 17, P. 948). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

5Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953-2001). *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Vol. 17, p. 948). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

it is due to their having sinned or done something wrong. You know, “What goes around comes around!” If you are being rejected by others, it’s because you have acted selfishly or previously done something wrong to someone else. But that is not always so. The Bible gives several reasons for suffering. Let’s quickly look at five reasons for suffering.

From the book of **Job**, we learn a lot about this subject. In Job’s case God was demonstrating before Satan and all the fallen and unfallen angels that a man will worship and serve God for who He is and not merely because God takes care of him and prospers him. Even when we get to the very end of Job’s story, we find that the meaning of his suffering has not been explained. The only reason we understand why Job is suffering is because at the beginning of the book, in **Job 1:1-2:11**, we are clearly told that Job was a righteous man, and that the suffering to follow in his life was not because he had been evil or selfish or ungodly or rebelliously living against God.

Instead, we are shown a scene in heaven in which God draws Satan’s attention to Job, a righteous man. Satan’s response is that the only reason Job worships God and lives righteously before Him is because God has prospered Job. At this, God tells Satan to test Job. Do what he likes to Job, short of killing him. Satan does, but Job still ends up worshipping God. By the end of the book, Job still does not know why all these disasters have befallen him. He never learns the truth about his troubles coming as a result of a cosmic challenge between God and Satan. Likewise, Satan can attack us to see if we will turn our backs on God because of the hardships we face. Remember, Satan is your enemy. He seeks to distract, deceive, discourage, and destroy you, your faith, and your effectiveness in living for Jesus.

In **Job 5:6-7**, we read of another cause of suffering. **“For affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble sprout from the ground, but man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.”** Suffering is the common experience of all human beings living in a fallen world. Even the righteous will occasionally suffer along with sinners who live unrighteously. Some people call it collateral damage.

A third purpose behind our suffering is spelled out for us in **Hebrews 12:5-11**. There we read:

**<sup>5</sup>And you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprovved by him; <sup>6</sup>for those whom the Lord loves he disciplines, and he scourges every son whom he receives.” <sup>7</sup>It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? <sup>8</sup>But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup>Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup>For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He**



**disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.**

**<sup>11</sup>All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.**

The purpose of discipline is not punishment, but instruction and correction. When we go astray, God sometimes brings hard things into our lives to bring us to our senses, so that we might mature and grow up in our trust and knowledge of Him. Hence, corrective suffering comes from our God who loves us.

There is another reason given in **Hebrews 12** as well as in **Romans 5:3-4** for suffering. In **Romans 5:3-4** we read, “**And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope.**” In short, God’s discipline is meant not only to be corrective, but instructive in a positive sense. Or, maybe a better way to put it would be to say that God uses constructive suffering to bring about maturity and veteran-like faith.

A final purpose behind earthly suffering in this fallen world is spelled out by Jesus in **John 9:3**. While on the Temple Mount, Jesus had just healed the man born blind. His disciples were curious, mistakenly believing that blindness was caused by someone’s sin. So they wanted to know whose sin had caused this man’s blindness, the man himself or his parents? Jesus answered, “**It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.**” Some Christ-glorifying suffering is simply to display God’s transforming power.

So you might be wondering, “Did God let that man be born blind and sit there all those years without sight just so that Jesus Christ could come along at that moment and heal him and just bring glory to God?” Yes, that is what Jesus was teaching. Some of us might think, “Boy, that doesn’t seem fair!” But that’s because we focus on the thirty-eight years of the man’s life, while God focuses on eternity. In the light of eternity, the short span of our lives fades into relative insignificance. Look at how God has mightily used our own Judy and David Squier as they deal with her disabilities. Look at Joni Erickson Tada and how God has blessed her worldwide ministries to special needs kids and families. Through such broken lives, Jesus has been on display; and as a result the hearts of thousands have been saved and transformed through the ministry to the disabled.

Nobody I know in their right mind seeks out suffering. But when it comes, one lesson I’m learning in small doses is to embrace it, not run from it. Use it to draw you closer to Jesus, as Paul and other great saints of the past have done!

Paul was not immune to suffering. In our passage we see him, a man who fully trusted his God to protect him from all life threatening danger. Why? And better yet, should we as Christians expect God to protect us from all dangers? The short answer to that last question is, “No, Christians today should not expect to escape all danger.”

“Then, why could Paul?” Because twice, once in his jail cell in Jerusalem and once aboard ship in the storm, God had told Paul that he would make it alive to Rome to bear testimony to the Gospel, but it wouldn’t be without trouble along the way. Furthermore, as an apostle, Paul knew Jesus’ promise to his handpicked disciples (not all of his disciples, but those early, handpicked men), as recorded by Luke in **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 will injure you.”** A snakebite would not deter Paul. He believed he would stand trial before Caesar in Rome. Hence, he did not panic; he merely shook the snake off his hand in plain view of all surrounding the fire.

Both at sea and on the land Paul performed extraordinary feats to indicate that he was a unique servant of God. The snakebite is not a freak accident but a divinely directed incident in which God displayed his power and might. That, put together with his prediction that none would perish as a result of the storm or shipwreck, set up Paul’s audience for future ministry on the island for the next three months. Although Luke does not give us many details about this ministry, it is obvious from what he does include that Paul became well known as a man of God on the island.

In the next paragraph, we see how God returned the island residents’ favor of kindness to them. We read:

**<sup>7</sup>Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days. <sup>8</sup>And it happened that the father of Publius was lying in bed afflicted with recurrent fever and dysentery; and Paul went in to see him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him. <sup>9</sup>After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured.**

**<sup>10</sup>They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed.**

We do not know how much time elapsed between the welcome on the beach (**verses 1-6**) and the invitation to the chief's home (**verse 7**). Luke gives the impression that immediately after his arrival, Paul was introduced to the leading person on the island. Apparently, Paul and his friends were taken directly to the chief's house.

Publius is called the "**leading man**" or the man with the highest authority on the island. We aren't told why this stranger hosted Paul and the rest for three days, but if that means that he hosted all 276 travelers for three days, one must know that this was indeed a wealthy leading man. He owned fields that surrounded the beach where the men had landed. He must have possessed dwellings and other buildings where the stranded crew and passengers could find shelter.

The kindness of the islanders in general and of Publius moved Paul, and upon hearing of Publius' father's illness, he went into his father's room and healed the man by praying for him and laying his hands on him. In other words, not Paul but Jesus, whose name Paul invoked, healed the ailing father (compare **Luke 4:38**). The news of the healing of Publius' father went from mouth to mouth with the result that many sick people came to the house where Paul was staying.

As Jesus had a healing and teaching ministry, so Paul in his ministry healed and most likely preached the Word of God to those who would listen.

In **verse 8**, Luke says that Publius' father was "**healed**." He uses a Greek word which means "instantaneous healing." But when he says in **verse 9** that these people were "**getting cured**" he uses an entirely different Greek word, which refers to a more gradual cure. In other

words, not all of these healings were instantaneous. Because of this, many scholars have felt that we have here a unique combination of medical skill and divine healing. It is quite possible that after prayer, Dr. Luke was involved as a physician. Note that in **verse 10**, when they left, Luke says that the people gave “**us**,” meaning Paul, Luke, and quite possibly Aristarchus “honorariums” which implies they were grateful to Luke as well as Paul for their medical service to the community. By the time Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus left Malta, they probably had new clothes and other necessities.

With our remaining time, I’d like us to just start looking at Paul’s return to the seas, in **verses 11-16**. We will simply touch on these verses and return to them next week.

**<sup>11</sup>At the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the *Twin Brothers* for its figurehead. <sup>12</sup>After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. <sup>13</sup>From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. <sup>14</sup>There we found some brethren and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome. <sup>15</sup>And the brethren, [meaning the Christians in Rome] when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet**

**us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. <sup>16</sup>When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.**

Having waited out the winter storms for three months, Paul's ship left Malta in early February AD 60. With him were Luke, Aristarchus, Julius, his guards, and the prisoners he was delivering to the prison in Rome.

With favorable southerly winds, the sixty mile voyage to the port of Syracuse in Sicily took one day. The ship stayed in Syracuse for three more days, either due to the transfer of cargo or because of weather. In February the weather remains unstable, so ships would only make coastal runs from one safe harbor to the next, preferably in one-day spans. Hence, the next leg of the voyage took one day to land in Rhegium. From Rhegium to Puteoli was another two day span. So from Malta to Italy took them seven days. That must have felt like a very short trip, having left Caesarea almost four months before.

The figure heads of the *Twin Brothers* was mounted on the bow of the ship. The twin brothers represented Castor and Pollux, the twin sons of Leda and the Greek god Zeus. Sailors regarded these two brothers as patron deities who would protect them from the dangers of the sea. When superstitious sailors could see their constellation in the night sky, it was always considered a favorable omen for a smooth voyage.<sup>6</sup>

In Paul's day, Puteoli was a busy harbor that thrived on the commerce

---

6 Polhill, J.B., (1992). *Acts* (Vol. 26, p. 535). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Rome conducted with the rest of the inhabited world, especially ports in the eastern Mediterranean. For many centuries, Puteoli was the only harbor for Rome. Travelers coming from the east would go through this port to proceed to the Eternal City, Rome. After Julius, his soldiers, and his prisoners disembarked, the centurion planned to travel to Rome on foot. This distance could be covered in about five days.<sup>7</sup>

Upon disembarking, Paul and his companions contacted the Christians who resided in Puteoli. The Christians invited Paul, with permission from Julius and presumably under guard, to stay with them for seven days. What joy for these believers to have Paul in their midst for preaching and teaching, especially on Sunday, the Lord's Day! The believers also sent word to the Christians in Rome that Paul would undertake the last lap of his journey within a week. In turn, when Paul arrived in Rome, the Christians there would welcome him and provide for him.

Keep in mind that these Christians in Rome had never met Paul until now. They only knew Paul by reputation, and as the one who wrote them the well-known epistle of Romans some five years earlier. His arrival has long been awaited. In response, a group of Christians came down the main road from Rome, some reaching the Forum of Appius, forty-three miles south of the city. Others waited at Three Taverns, another well-known meeting place thirty-three miles from Rome. This was not just a big deal for those Christian, a two-day trip walking to be with Paul, but after all that Paul had been through, and after years of praying for the opportunity to be with them, it had finally arrived.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kistemaker, S.J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953-2001). *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Vol. 17, p. 954). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

Hence, Luke reports that when Paul met these fellow Christians, he **“thanked God and took courage.”** Paul realized that God was true to his word by sending him to the capital of the Roman Empire. He couldn't help himself. He had to praise God for his arrival to Rome!

When I step back to look at Paul's ministry thus far, since first being imprisoned in Jerusalem, I see that for two and a half years he faced quite a few tumultuous events. He was wrongly arrested and imprisoned, forced to travel on rough seas on three ships, and faced delays, storms, hunger, cold, shipwreck, and snakebite. Surely there were moments when his mind would drift from God's promises, and, just like us, he would become afraid and wonder if he would make it. But those periods for this apostle were few and short in longevity. Over all, Paul stood amazingly firm in his faith. Paul's mind was not on how others could help him or on what others thought about him. Rather, the secret to his successful walk through all these traumas was that his mind was focused on Jesus. As a result, through it all, God was working in Paul to touch the lives around him. Eventually God would work with Paul to bring him to Rome where he would bear witness for Jesus. What made the difference was that Paul was aware that God was with him. He knew God had a purpose for him.

Right now, I'm going to ask you to close your eyes and bow your heads. Take these moments as your own private time alone with God. I know you are in a room with others, but this time is for you. I am going to ask you some questions. As I do, remember God knows you inside and out. He knows your thoughts, even before you think them. Now would be one of those times when you need to be honest with yourself in how you respond to the questions. I will pause after each, giving you time to think and possibly sense the Spirit of God impressing something upon



you. I would encourage you to not dismiss too quickly anything He will impress upon your mind as we go through these questions.

To what degree do you believe that God has a purpose for your life?

Have you ever asked Him to show you a purpose for which He wants you to serve or live for Him?

Have you ever offered up your life to His service?

Have you ever said “No” to something God has impressed you to do? Perhaps it is to stop doing something, to start doing something, to forgive someone, or to end a wrong relationship.

If you have, you may want to change your mind about that. Maybe now would be a good time for you to turn to God and say “Yes” to what He has asked of you.

Have you seriously looked at a challenge He has laid before you as a purpose in serving Him?

Do you think God has a purpose for the snakebite incidents present in your life right now?

My friend, we are called to be as Paul was in the midst of snakebite situations: counting on God, resting in him, and moving forward steadily to do the work he has called us to do, regardless of obstacles.

Paul’s snakebite was a small incident, but it showed how Paul was loving and serving God regardless of his difficult circumstances.

Has anything been preventing you from living selflessly for others?

Maybe as we have been looking at Paul’s life, the Spirit of God has been nudging you about your selfish living and calling you to serve others sacrificially, not just when it’s convenient. Is God asking you to put

aside any pleasure or right of yours so that you can make it possible for others to draw near to Christ?

If God has placed a direction on your heart, why not make a commitment this morning that you will do what He is asking you to do?