

Acts 28

What a sense of elation and relief must have filled each of the 276 folks aboard the grain ship on its ill-fated voyage when they crawled out from the sea onto the wet beach of an island called Melita (28:1)! True, it was still raining and was cold, but as Paul had predicted, every life had been spared (27:22). The soldiers had counseled to kill all the prisoners but Julius stayed them from their purpose, desiring to save Paul (27:43). There have been some questions about just what island known to us today was "Melita"; but it is generally conceded that Malta was the site of their landing and that island has a bay called "St. Paul's Bay" which is traditionally the bay where Paul's ship ran aground and broke into pieces. If this is correct, the island Paul and his companions landed upon was an island about 10-12 miles wide; about 20 miles long. The inhabitants of the island (called Barbarians, not because they were either cruel or vicious but because they did not speak the language Paul and the others spoke) showed uncommon kindness to them. Perhaps the people had noticed the ship's struggles before it ran aground and had been watching with interest to see whether the ship could be safely maneuvered. Perhaps news of the ill-fated vessel became known as its passengers began climbing out of the sea's icy waters, but however they became aware of these folks, the islanders knew the first thing they needed was a fire to help warm them. Building a fire would be difficult with wet wood and a continuing downfall of rain, but at length they had one going. How welcome that fire must have been to the wet, nearly drowned passengers! Paul did not stand back and let others do the work, he set about to contribute what he could, gathering a bundle of sticks to cast on the fire (28:3).

At this point that Paul became the center of attention. A viper, a very poisonous serpent, came to life because of the heat and fastened itself on Paul's hands. The superstitious island folks had their own ideas about the incident for "they said one to another, no doubt this man is a murderer, whom though he had escaped from the sea yet Justice hath not suffered to live" (28:4). "Justice" was the name of one of the idol gods these people of Melita worshipped. According to their "theology", the work of "Justice" was to administer justice to all for evils they had done. It would have been ironic had Paul suffered, yet escaped all the trials of the sea storm only to suffer death at the hand of a viper on the island he found safety in! That would be alike to the warnings of Amos who spoke of Israel and her ultimate deportation into Assyria. He likened the perils they had gone through as a man who first escaped a lion, next escaped a

bear and reached home safely, only to be struck by a viper as he opened his door! (Amos 5:19).

But, as it is with superstitions, there was no ground for their assumptions and when sufficient time had lapsed in which Paul should have swollen up and fallen over dead and yet he showed no such symptoms, the people changed their mind, concluding that he was a god (28:6). The people of Lystra said the same of Paul when he worked a notable miracle among them (14:11f). And, like these on Melita, they changed their mind and stoned Paul, leaving him for dead. Paul suffered no ill from the serpent because Jesus had promised "you must witness of me at Rome" (23:11). Paul was not among the original apostles to whom Jesus said, "These signs shall accompany them that believe: in my name shall they cast out demons; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents and if they drink any deadly thing it shall in no wise hurt them..." (Mk. 16:17-18). Nevertheless, he was an apostle and what Jesus promised to the earlier apostles would surely have been His promise to Paul as well.

The chief man of the island was named Publius (28:7). Publius received and entertained Paul, Luke and perhaps others for three days. While Paul was in Publius' home, he became aware that Publius' father lay sick of fever and dysentery (28:8). Paul laid hands on the man and he recovered. A chain reaction set in from this miracle for "when this was done, the rest also that had diseases in the island came, and were cured" (28:9). Luke says nothing about Paul preaching nor of any converts to Christ in the island, but signs were given to the apostles to confirm the word they preached (Mk. 16:20; Hb. 2:3f). Without a doubt, Paul was busy preaching to these islanders for he was an apostle to the gentiles and the gospel was God's power to save them that believe (Rm. 1:16). Tradition has it that Publius was converted by Paul but we do not know, although we hope he was. Those healed were gratified for their healing and they "honored us with many honors; and when we sailed, they put on board such things as we needed" Luke wrote (28:1). Paul and his brethren with him had escaped from the sea with likely nothing more than the clothes on their backs. God, in His own way, made provisions for Paul's needs, just as He promises He will for all who seek first His kingdom (Mt. 6:33). After three months on the island, Spring is approaching and the sea can be navigated again! So Paul, in company with other brethren and the centurion and soldiers who guarded them, set out from the island in a ship which had wintered there (28:11). Luke names the places they touched at: Syracuse, Rhegium and Puteoli. Here the gospel had already reached for Paul found brethren here and he is allowed to stay with them for seven days (28:13-14).

It is about 150 miles from Puteoli to Rome and word that Paul is approaching the city has already reached brethren in the city. Two companies of brethren, learning of Paul's approach, strike out to meet him along the way. One company reached him at the Market of Appius and the other at the Three Taverns. The arrival of these brethren was a tonic to the weary apostle for when he saw them "he thanked God and took courage" (28:15). About three years earlier Paul had written his epistle to the Romans expressing his desire to come see them and to be set forward by them on his desired visit to Spain (Rom. 15:24). He had many friends and relatives there and perhaps some of these were in one or the other of the two groups that went forward to see him. How he would have rejoiced to see Aquilla and Priscilla with whom he had co-labored at Corinth and likely at Ephesus but who had made their way back to Rome from whence they had earlier come. Paul's love and debt to them is seen in his mention of them in his Roman letter "Salute Prisca and Aquila my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life laid down their own necks; unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles:" (16:3f). What a joyous moment it would have been if this couple had come to meet Paul before he got to their city! Then there were Ephanetus, Mary, Andronicus, Junias, Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, Aristobulus, Herodion, Narcissus who all were sent greetings from Paul and who were in the Roman capital (Rom. 16:5-11). And, even these do not exhaust the list of friends and relatives Paul mentions by name in his Roman letter (16:12-16)! Reason would have it that at least some of these were in both companies for people, unknown to Paul as well as he to them, might by pass one another unawares. Paul had earlier asked Romans to pray that he might safely reach them and surely they did (Rom. 15:30-32).

Paul loved his nation, his kinsmen according to the flesh. He had written the Romans, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God is for Israel that she may be saved..." (Rom. 10:1). Now he is in Rome and he wastes no time attempting to make contact with his countrymen and to make overtures to them about the gospel which he preached about Jesus. After three days "he called together those that were the chief of the Jews" (28:17). He is obviously a prisoner and he sought to explain why he was bound; that he had no quarrel with his nation. He recounted that Roman authorities desired to release him but for political reasons, they would not do so (28:17-19). He continued on to tell them that because the Roman authorities "caved in" to Jewish demands and that he had no hope of securing release in Jerusalem or Caesarea; he was forced to appeal to Caesar to get a decision (28:19). The Jewish audience pleaded ignorance of these circumstances saying, "we neither received letters

from Judaea concerning thee, nor did any of the brethren come hither and report or speak harm of thee..." (28:21). But, they were aware of Paul and his association with Christians as they said "we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest, for as concerning this sect, it is known to us that everywhere it is spoken against" (28:22). Their request would be music in Paul's ears!

A day was appointed by them and they came into Paul's dwellings in great numbers. From morning to evening Paul reasoned with them and he testified "the kingdom of God, and persuading them concerning Jesus, both from the law of Moses and the Prophets" (28:23). He made a valiant effort to show that it "was for the hope of Israel that he was bound with this chain" (28:20). When they agreed not among themselves, Paul dismissed them with one word, "Go thou unto this people and say, by hearing ye shall hear and shall in no wise understand; and seeing ye shall see and shall in no wise perceive For this people's heart is waxed gross and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest haply they should perceive with their eyes and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts and should turn again and I should heal them" (28:26-27; Isa. 6:9-10). As on other occasions when Paul had met the same attitude he said, "Be it known unto you that this salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles. They will also hear" (28:28).

For two years Paul abode "in his own hired dwelling and received all that went in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, none forbidding him" (28:30f). Not only was Paul preaching to those who came to him, he was busy writing letters to churches, encouraging them in the faith. It was during these years that he wrote his letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon and very likely to the Hebrews. Luke closes his history of the Acts of the apostles without telling us what was the outcome of Paul's appeal to Caesar. Tradition has it (and there seems to be much merit in it) that after two years, because no accusers came from Jerusalem, Paul was released and spent another 4-5 years preaching the gospel. How busy was this "called apostle"! How committed to Christ he has proven to be! How accurate his statement: "Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13f).

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