

Island of Refuge

Acts 28:1-10

Introduction

When we last left the apostle Paul, he was swimming for shore in the middle of a hurricane. Two hundred seventy-six passengers, now shipwrecked by the storm, swam for their lives, while others clung to pieces of wood and allowed the crashing waves to bring them to shore. It was an unfamiliar shore, by the way, and in fact, they will not know until some moments later, that they have washed up on the island of Malta.

I found it interesting to discover that the word “Malta” means, “place of refuge; safe haven.” Paul and the others had survived the hurricane. And now, although huddled on the beach exhausted, dripping wet, and cold in the wintry winds, the word of the Lord through Paul had come true. No one had been killed in the shipwreck or drowned at sea. All of them had made it safely to the “island of refuge”.

You might like to know that in 1964, this little island, which is barely seventeen miles long, gained its independence from Great Britain. Long before that day, however, many of Malta’s citizens were about to be liberated from the kingdom of darkness by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This island will hold some fascinating adventures for Paul, and it will reveal some surprising things for us as well.

A Revelation of Hospitality

I invite you to rejoin the castaways in Acts, chapter 28. Look at verses 1 and 2.

When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta. 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.

I think one of the first surprising revelations to Paul and the others was the hospitality of the natives. Exhausted and wet from their swim to shore, Paul and the other survivors could have easily still died from exposure. The cold November wind and rain were their enemies. It seems that Luke was especially moved by the kindness of these island people due to the words he penned in his journal. Notice verse 2a again,

The natives showed us extraordinary kindness . . .

That is another way of saying, “I couldn’t believe the way these people treated total strangers.”

Do not forget, by the way, that among these castaways were criminals; government prisoners guarded by soldiers. These islanders were helping prisoners; they were showing hospitality to total strangers.

An illustration of the church – Romans 12:13

I could not help but think that this is an illustration of the church. Romans, chapter 12, verse 13b, tells us that we are to be,

. . . practicing hospitality.

You only practice something that you can improve upon. So, he tells us to practice hospitality because none of us are naturally good at it. Some are better than others, but everyone is to practice.

The word could be rendered, “to hunt, to pursue the opportunity; to initiate showing care for others.”

You cannot help but be amazed at what we are told happened in the latter part of verse 2,

... they kindled a fire and received us all.

They did this for prisoner, commander, soldier, sailor alike. What incredible hospitality!

A Revelation of Character

Notice, in verse 3, a revelation of Paul's character.

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.

Now understand that the revelation of Paul's character is not found in the fact that he was bitten by a snake and did not scream or faint – or any of the options I would have chosen. No, the revelation of his character is in the first few words of verse 3, where we are told,

But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks . . .

What is Paul doing gathering firewood while everyone else is warming up by the fire? Paul is the man of the hour!

Paul is solely responsible for their safety. He had become, in practical terms, their leader. He should be on the front row roasting marshmallows and sipping hot chocolate, not out in the storm gathering sticks for the bonfire.

The truth is, Paul had character. Someone once wrote, "It is only the little man who will refuse the little task."

Paul reveals his humility in this act of service.

I remember reading a story about a man who wanted to develop more humility before people. So he painted a scripture verse sandwich board – one board in the front and another in the back – and walked down main street during rush hour with Bible verses on his front and on his back. He said that while he was out there walking back and forth, enduring the stares and snickers of people, he found himself saying to the Lord, "You know, Lord, there aren't very many people willing to do this for You anymore."

That is the trouble with humility. The moment you think you have it, you have proven you do not. The moment you believe you are humble, you are not.

That is why you do not arrive at humility, you act with humility. I Peter, chapter 5, verse 5, says,

... all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another . . .

The word "clothe" refers to the tying of a slave's apron around your waist as you prepare to serve someone else.

Here is the great apostle with an apron tied about his waist. And, in case you missed it, it is while in the process of serving that he is bitten by a poisonous snake.

Interrupted by suffering

Continue to verses 4 and 5.

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." However he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm.

Now between verse 5 and verse 6, I think Doctor Luke rushed to Paul's side and said, "Paul, are you all right? Here, let me look at that hand. . . . That's odd . . . there doesn't seem to be any swelling, Paul. Are you in pain? No? That's amazing!"

This is a display of the revelation of power predicted by Christ years earlier for His apostles. They could be bitten by serpents, according to Mark, chapter 16, verse 18, and be unaffected.

You might say, "I want to do that today!"

Well, go ahead and grab that rattler by the tail – but your story will be much different. You have forgotten – you are not an apostle.

There are people in snake handling movements today who die. Nearly every year, I read about more of them.

This revelation of power validated the apostle of God, who, without the validation of scripture as the litmus test, could prove he was indeed from God.

On this island, the people were still confused, however – they thought he was God. Notice verse 6.

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.

They do not know whether Paul is a murderer or a deity.

Did you happen to notice in this account that Paul was called to suffer still a little more? Oh, he

did not swell up or die, but imagine the shock and the pain of the snake's fangs digging into his hand.

Why is Paul made to suffer at this point? Hasn't God allowed him to go through enough?

One of my commentary friends took some time to refresh my memory over the different kinds of suffering believers are often surprised by and have to endure. Let me refresh your memory.

Common suffering

- There is common suffering.

This is simply the result of our fallenness. Diseases, aches, pains, and funeral services are constant, common reminders that we are part of a fallen race. And we look for a new heaven and a new earth where there will be no more common suffering.

Corrective suffering

- There is also corrective suffering.

This is the discipline of the believer for disobedience, as taught in Hebrews, chapter 12.

Constructive suffering

- Then, there is constructive suffering.

This is suffering that produces perseverance and spiritual maturity, as James, chapter 1, tells us. Even the Lord, as a man, according to Hebrews, chapter 5, verse 8b,

... learned obedience from the things which He suffered.

Christ-glorifying suffering

- Finally, there is Christ-glorifying suffering.

This is suffering that allows God's power to be revealed. This is the type of suffering that Paul just became involved in.

A Revelation of Power

Now, get ready for another revelation of apostolic, Christ-glorifying power. Look at verses 7 through 10.

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. 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.

(This healing power, by the way, was also the validation of the apostle, according to Hebrews, chapter 2, verse 4, and Mark, chapter 16, verse 18.)

After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured.

(In other words, when Paul left the island of Malta, the hospital was empty; disease had been annihilated.)

They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed.

So, Paul exercises the apostles' gifts:

- Snake bite is harmless.
- Sick people are healed.

Application

Let us make several applications for those who have found themselves shipwrecked on strange islands in unforeseen and unplanned events affecting their lives.

Sometimes God sends encouragement in the most unlikely environment

1. Sometimes God sends encouragement in the most unlikely environment.

Paul expected to be encouraged by his arrival in Rome, not shipwrecked on the island of Malta.

If we had been Paul, we would have been saying, as we dived out beside that roaring fire, "Okay, Lord, spell it out for me – I don't understand."

There was no answer from heaven, but it was not long before Paul warmed up to this Phoenician hospitality and discovered a people who were ready to hear the truth of Christ.

If you look over Paul's ministry past, you discover that nearly every town Paul entered, he was kicked out of, run out of, stoned, beaten, mistreated . . . but not in Malta. The final moments between Paul and these Phoenicians are easy to miss, so let us go back and drink in a rare moment for the apostle in chains. Look again at verse 10.

They also honored us with many marks [honors] of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed.

That is encouragement, sent by God in the most unlikely place and from the most surprising source.

Sometimes God requires availability and trust at the most unprepared times

2. Sometimes God requires availability and trust at the most unprepared times.

Trust was placed in God during the storm and after the snake bite. Now, I am sure most of us would not go through that scene exactly like Paul, but the question remains, what is it in your life that challenges your faith in God's care and providence? When do you feel most unprepared for life's twists and turns?

Suppose Paul had crawled up in a corner somewhere and put a sign on his door that read, "Do not disturb!" or "Leave me alone – I don't want to be here on this island – I want to be in Rome." He would have missed the moment; he would have not been in the position to serve others, and in the final analysis, to be richly served by others.

That leads me to the final lesson.

Sometimes God produces fruit in the most unusual harvest fields

3. Sometimes God produces fruit in the most unusual harvest fields.

Ministering to people occurred at a time when Paul could have curled up and waited for the next

boat to come along and the next order from the commander. Besides, God had already made it clear that he was headed for Rome – real ministry would take place before the emperor.

How many men on their way to see the emperor would care to speak to barbarians?

Frankly, Malta was not on Paul's ministry map. There is no telling how long it would have been before these people on this little island would have heard the gospel had Paul been silent.

Paul could have easily justified his silence, "Surely these primitive people wouldn't be interested anyway. They're pagans who believe in their Phoenician superstitions. They'd never listen to talk of one true God and our Savior Jesus Christ."

For you, this may be like that relative, or that co-worker, or that child, or that neighbor – they would never be interested. But Paul was willing to get involved with people in a place he had never even considered before.

According to church history, an evangelical church on Malta dates from the time of Paul's brief stay. Even to this day, in fact, the place where Paul and his companions swam to shore is called St. Paul's Bay. And, by the way, the first pastor of the church on Malta, church historians record, was a man named Publius.

So, this strange island of castaways became, indeed, an island of refuge, of ministry, of encouragement, and of spiritual fruit.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/4/1998 by Stephen Davey.

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