

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Standing on the beach of an unknown island, freezing cold with both seawater and rainwater dripping off his nose, I wonder if Paul was a little puzzled. His plan had been to go to Rome and have an audience with the highest powers of his world and instead he is one of 276 half-drowned rats, at the mercy of a people who didn't even speak Greek.

Paul's plans were as wrecked as the ship being pounded to pieces by the storm just offshore. His ministry! His plans! His dreams! It was only after they made it to shore that they learn where they were. Acts 28:1 tells us that, "And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita," or Malta as we know it today.

In the midst of troubles, storms, and trials of every sort we need to be aware that God is still with us and that he is still in control. Paul's shipwreck was no mistake, there were miracles to be done and people to be saved.

It is no different today, God takes us through tough times and we are left wondering where he is in the midst of it all. Everything seems to crash in.

Those who had made it to shore were wet and miserable, according to verse two, "And the barbarous people shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold." The natives of the island quickly gathered at the shore to offer assistance to the passengers of the ship as they made it to shore. I can imagine that some of those natives even went into the water helping those who were exhausted and the non-swimmers, to the beach. Here they built a large fire to warm the shivering survivors.

Perhaps Paul may have thought to himself, "Good grief things can't get any worse." Well you know what usually happens when we think that, things can always get worse.

Verse three says, "And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand." When gathering wood for the fire, apparently Paul gathered more than just wood. A viper lying dormant among the sticks, came to life as Paul placed the wood upon the fire and fastened itself to Paul's hand.

Did you notice Paul's reaction to the snake bite, it was simple and decisive. Verse five says, "And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm." Paul did not in a moment of panic fling the creature from himself without regard to others around him, endangering them. Neither did Paul do anything super-spiritual, like immediately kneel in prayer or call for an impromptu prayer meeting, nor did he say some pious last words nor preach a sermon. He seems to have simply gone on with what he was doing.

I want you to notice that the natives have a nice little theological explanation for what had happened to Paul. In verse four when they see that he has been bitten it says, "And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live." According to them Paul is undoubtedly a murderer and although he has escaped death in the storm, fate in the form of the snake has now caught up with him. They held to the tenet still held by some today, "Calamity is always a proof of evil."

They thought that calamity was the evidence of divine punishment. They mistakenly thought all wickedness is punished in this life. They watch him waiting for what they knew must come, swelling and death. But as they watched and saw no harm come to him they realized that this was not the case and they changed their minds. Verse six says, "Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god." Notice how fickle public opinion is.

Paul's miraculous deliverance is such a surprise to the natives that they now conclude that Paul must be a god. That is quite a change of mind, having just concluded that Paul must of have been a horrible criminal to have been bitten by the snake.

Verse seven tells us that Paul and his friends were taken into the "... chief man of the island, whose name was Publius; who received us, and lodged us three days courteously." Here Paul learned that the father of Publius "lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux: to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him. So when this was done, others also, which had diseases in the island, came, and were healed." There is something here that we must ensure we do not miss. When Paul says that the father of Publius was "healed" he used a Greek word which means "instantaneous healing." But when he says the rest of the island who had diseases came and were "healed" in verse

nine, he used a different word entirely, a word that refers to a gradual cure. I believe we see here a unique blend of medical skill and divine healing. Luke the physician, in the three months, they were on the island was involved in the cures of the diseases of many of the islanders. The two are not contrary but stem from the grace and power of God. The father of Publius was divinely and instantly healed but others were healed through that agency of doctors and medicine, which both derive from God.

When after three months Paul left Malta, he left more like an honoured dignitary than a prisoner of Rome. Verse ten tells us, “who also honoured us with many honours; and when we departed, they laded us with such things as were necessary.”

I suspect that Paul had his own expectations of how he would arrive in Rome. Perhaps he envisioned a great preaching campaign or revival in the greatest city in the world but that is not how it was to be. In Verses 11-16 we find a description of the subsequent journey to Rome. “And after three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle, whose sign was Castor and Pollux. 12 And landing at Syracuse, we tarried there three days. 13 And from thence we fetched a compass, and came to Rhegium: and after one day the south wind blew, and we came the next day to Puteoli: 14 where we found brethren, and were desired to tarry with them seven days: and so we went toward Rome. 15 And from thence, when the brethren heard of us, they came to meet us as far as Appii forum, and the three taverns: whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage.”

God sent just what Paul needed. It says that when Paul saw the people who had arrived to welcome him that “he thanked God and took courage.” He is still some 120-130 miles from Rome in territory that he has never before visited yet there are believers here to welcome him. Two more companies of believers come out to welcome him, some of the believers walked the 40 miles to the Forum of Appius to welcome him and the next day he discovers more at Three Taverns still thirty miles from Rome.

Paul thanked God and was encouraged.

He had friends! And so God provided not only for his physical needs, but emotional as well. There are two things to take from this:

- i. Trust God to provide, and be available to be the one through whom God provides.

- ii. God has sent people into our lives, as and we should want to be available to be the one through whom God provides for the needs of others.

It may not have been as Paul expected but it was according to God's plan. Are we open to God's plans as we go about our lives? In Jesus' name. Amen.