

The Last Lap

Scripture: Acts 28:1–16

Code: 1801

INTRODUCTION

Acts 28:1-16 chronicles the events leading to Paul's arrival at Rome. Several years had passed since Paul first had the desire to go to Rome. Paul's reaction to that arrival is not recorded in Scripture, but perhaps in spirit he agreed with Psalm 107:29-30: "[God] maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they are quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven." God fulfills the desires of His servants.

In Acts 27 we saw that Paul exemplified the qualities of a faithful leader. In this passage we will see God blessing His faithful servant. The trip to Rome is a rich narrative because it gives us additional principles of leadership and also demonstrates the basis on which God blesses faithful leaders.

REVIEW

The last lap of Paul's journey began in Melita, or Malta as it is known today. His journey had already lasted two and a half months. Fourteen of those days he spent at sea as the crew of the ship that was carrying him to Rome fought against a terrible storm. They had no hope of being saved. They were unable to navigate because neither the sun, moon, or stars were visible. They arrived at Malta by God's providence as the bow of the ship stuck into a sandbar off shore (Acts 27:41). As the waves beat against the stern, the ship began to disintegrate. At that point the soldiers guarding Paul planned to kill the prisoners so they wouldn't escape (v. 42). However the centurion Julius prevented them from doing that (v. 43). Ultimately all on board the ship dove into the water. Some swam through the surf while others hung onto boards and debris (v. 44). Miraculously, they all made it to shore. Earlier God told Paul that the ship would be lost but everyone on board would be saved (v. 22). Everything God said came to pass. You can imagine that everyone from then on took Paul and the God he served very seriously.

So they arrived on the island of Malta, wet and exhausted. And they didn't know where they were.

LESSON

I. PAGAN HOSPITALITY (vv. 1-2)

Biblical Hospitality

One of the great virtues of Christianity is hospitality. It is to be characteristic of church elders (1 Tim. 3:2) and believers in general (1 Pet. 4:9). Hebrews 13:2 says, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers; for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." For example, Abraham and Sarah served dinner to two men who turned out to be angels (Gen. 18:1-15). Christians are to extend kindness toward strangers. Our homes are to be open and our lives available to meeting the needs of others.

1. Matthew 10:40-42--Jesus said, "He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me. He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no way lose his reward." As the disciples went out to reach people for Christ, people who showed them hospitality would

receive the blessing of God. God has put a premium on hospitality, kindness, and gentleness toward strangers.

2. Luke 9:4-5--Jesus said, "Whatever house ye enter into, there abide, and from there depart. And whoever will not receive you, when ye go out of that city, shake off the very dust from your feet for a testimony against them." When the disciples were not shown hospitality, they were to treat the offenders as if they were Gentiles, which was a derogatory thing to a Jewish person.

3. Romans 12:13--Paul said, "Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality." Indeed, demonstrating hospitality is a necessity for all saints.

In Acts 28:1-2 we see the hospitality that the pagan people on Malta showed toward Paul and the others who were on the ship.

A. The Characteristics of Malta (v. 1)

"When they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita."

1. The topography of Malta

They didn't recognize it immediately because they came on shore by way of a bay now known as St. Paul's Bay. The main port of Malta is Valletta. It is likely that the sailors and soldiers had been to Malta before, but wouldn't have recognized this part of the island right away. But since the island is only about seventeen miles long and nine miles wide, it wouldn't have been long before they began to recognize features consistent with the topography of Malta. And surely the local people they met informed them where they were.

2. The history of Malta

The name "Melita" was given to the island by the ancient Phoenicians, who came to the island from Palestine. They were great mariners, having charted much of the Mediterranean. Melita is a Phoenician word that means "refuge" or "escape." The island lies about sixty miles off the southern tip of Sicily. Since the early nineteenth century it has been primarily dominated by the British, but was granted full independence in 1964. English is the common language, but the native Maltese language is a form of Arabic. That indicates Malta was established by people from the East, and it is believed that they were Phoenicians.

B. The People of Malta (v. 2)

"The barbarous people showed us no little kindness; for they kindled a fire, and received us, every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold."

In mid-November the weather there would be biting cold. The men were wet and exposed to the wind, so the natives came and prepared a fire for them.

The Greek word translated "barbarous" (barbaros) referred to anyone who spoke a non-Greek language. So Luke was indicating that the natives of Malta spoke a foreign language. It was not a derogatory term.

1. Pagan kindness honored

a) In Scripture God takes note of the kindness that pagan people show to the children of God. In Genesis 12:2-3 God tells Abraham, "I will make of thee a great nation.... And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee." God is concerned about how the world treats His people. The judgment of the sheep and goats is based on how the nations of the world treated God's people (Matt. 25:31-46). The attitude the disciples were to have toward people as they traveled was determined by the kind of reception they received from them (Luke 9:4-5). When pagan people show kindness toward God's own, He blesses them. b) In Malta Acts 28:2 says that the people of Malta "showed ... no little kindness." That means it wasn't just ordinary politeness, but that they showed extraordinary kindness toward the shipwreck victims. An important topic in conservative, fundamental theology is the depravity of man-- that men and women without Jesus Christ are totally sinful and depraved. Yet to begin with we were made in the image of God, and so we find there is something that frequently compels people to do kind deeds in times of great need.

2. Pagan kindness illustrated

A classic illustration of such kindness is Luke 10:30-37: "Jesus ... said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. Which, now, of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that showed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise." Here our Lord told about a man who extended kindness to someone in need, although he may not have been a religious man. Even unbelieving people have some capacity to do good things. Some of the greatest philanthropists in the world have been unbelievers.

3. Pagan kindness explained

Romans 2:14-15 says, "When the Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves; who show the work of the law written in their hearts." The kindness of the Maltese people illustrates the internal revelation of God to the pagan. Here we see people without a knowledge of Jesus Christ or the Mosaic law having the sense to do what is right in a time of need. Why? Because the law of God is written in their hearts, their "conscience ... bearing witness" (v. 16). Verse 27 says, "Shall not uncircumcision [pagans] ... if [they] fulfill the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law?" The pagan who obeys the law internally is better off than he who knows the truth but disobeys it. God has generally revealed Himself to everyone in one way or another--even to pagans. Many people wonder how the heathen will know about God. They can know Him because He has written His law onto their hearts--they have a sense of morality, of right and wrong, of kindness and love. So when they eventually hear the specific revelation of His Word, that's one way they can know it is true.

II. POTENTIAL HARM (vv. 3-6)

A. Paul's Humble Example (v. 3a)

"When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks."

1. The example of Paul

Paul was busy gathering brush wood to keep the fire going. He was as anxious to perform the little tasks, such as gathering sticks for a fire, as he was of performing the large tasks, such as confronting Caesar. Since he was a prisoner he may have been chained while he gathered the sticks. But in the eyes of the men from the ship, he was not perceived as a prisoner. He had established a great deal of credibility with them--from taking charge when they needed a cool head to forecasting that they would all be spared despite losing the ship (Acts 27:21-44). Yet when it came time to gather sticks, we don't see Paul directing others to do it; he went and did it himself.

Most leaders avoid simple, humble, menial tasks because they expect everyone else to do them. But a true spiritual leader will stoop to that level when the occasion calls for it. After fourteen days of fighting a storm, being weak from a lack of food, and enduring an icy swim to shore, you would think Paul would stay by the fire to keep himself warm. But it is he who gathered fuel to maintain the fire while the others stayed warm. A true leader has a servant mentality, and Paul never lost that perspective. He was always making sacrifices for others.

2. The example of Christ

Jesus said, "The Son of man came, not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). True spiritual leadership includes an eagerness to do the humble

task as well as the exalted ones. Humility is a must for the servant of God. After washing the disciples' feet Jesus said, "I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). Lead with a servant mentality; stoop to meet the needs of one another. If anyone is too important to get dirty, wash feet, or pick up sticks, he isn't as important as he thinks.

B. The Snake's Sudden Appearance (vv. 3b-4)

1. Paul's predicament (v. 3b)

"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."

A viper is a certain type of poisonous snake. Today no such snakes remain on Malta. But at that time they must have been plentiful because the natives immediately recognized the snake and the severity of its bite. The snake was poisonous and was beginning to inject its venom into Paul's hand.

2. The natives' assessment (v. 4)

"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 justice alloweth not to live."

The Greek word translated "justice" (dik[ma]e) should be capitalized. Albert Barnes wrote that "Dik[ma]e, or justice, was represented by the heathen as a goddess, the daughter of Jupiter, whose office it was to take vengeance, or inflict punishment for crimes" (Notes on the New Testament: Acts [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975], p. 370). The natives expected Paul to fall dead as one of her victims. Again we have another illustration of their innate sense of right and wrong. They understood the concept of justice--sin must be punished. If Paul were to die in this way, they concluded he must have done something wrong. Romans 1:18-19 shows where this sense of morality comes from: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness, because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shown it unto them." Within man's heart is a sense of love and kindness. Here we see there also is a sense of morality and justice. However, their sense of morality was inconsistent: pagan religions speak of gods who won't tolerate murder but don't mind adultery and other sins. They made gods to accommodate their desires, but at least a germ of morality was present.

The citizens of Malta manifested kindness and love toward needy strangers, and an understanding that wrong behavior deserves judgment. Notice the contrast between the two: one is a sense of goodness and its consequences; the other is a sense of evil and its consequences. Good and evil are the two sides of morality. It all began when Adam and Eve bit into the forbidden fruit and received the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:6-7). All men and women have that sensitivity within them and that's why God holds them responsible for their actions. It is likely that as they continue to live up to the moral standard of God, and are faithful to what revelation they have, God will continue to reveal more of His truth to them (e.g., Cornelius in Acts 10).

C. God's Miraculous Deliverance (vv. 5-6)

1. A confirmation from God (v. 5)

"He shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm."

That kind of calmness is conspicuous. After receiving a snakebite, most people would run around in a panic, but Paul merely flicked the snake off his hand. God used miracles to confirm the works and deeds of His apostles. That is why this incident took place in the sight of the natives.

2. A change of opinion (v. 6)

"However, 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."

Pagan theology is very subjective. Paul went from a murderer to a god in their eyes. However Paul didn't want that kind of response--he wanted to be perceived as a representative of God.

Paul experienced a similar response earlier in his ministry. Acts 14:8-15 says, "There sat a certain

man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from birth, who never had walked. The same heard Paul speak; who, steadfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked. And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men. And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker. Then the priest of Jupiter, whose temple was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people; which when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of, they tore their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out, and saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God." Paul and Barnabas wanted no part of their proliferation of deities. They were representatives of the true God. So it wasn't surprising to Paul when the Maltese people perceived him as a god. But it was important for them to recognize that spiritual power prevented him from being harmed by the snake. That power enabled Paul to establish the credibility of the gospel. The people of Malta were idolaters. Perverting the internal revelation God had given them, they created gods after the image of man, four-footed animals, and creeping things (Rom. 1:23). So when Paul was not harmed by the snake, they perceived him to be a god. And although Paul didn't want that response, it did put him in high esteem, and gave him an opportunity to minister.

III. PUBLIC HEALING (vv. 7-11)

A. The Setting (v. 7)

1. Publius's title (v. 7a)

"In the same quarters [the vicinity of the shipwreck] were possessions [the estate] of the chief man of the island."

Publius was the number-one citizen of Malta--the man in charge. He lived in the vicinity of the shipwreck in a large estate. F.F. Bruce noted that the title translated "the chief man of the island" appears on two Maltese inscriptions that have been discovered in archaeological digs. One is in Greek and one in Latin. From those inscriptions we know that the leader of the island was called "the chief man" or "the first man" of the island (Commentary on the Book of Acts [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], p. 523).

2. Publius's estate (v. 7b)

"[His] name was Publius, who received us, and lodged us three days courteously."

That will give you some kind of an idea of the size of his estate. He put 276 people up for three days. It was only temporary place for those men--they would have to spend the winter on Malta. But Publius housed them until they could make arrangements for winter quarters.

B. The Problem (v. 8a)

"It came to pass that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux."

The Greek word translated "fever" (*puretois*) means "gastric fever." It is rendered in the plural, which indicates that it was a recurring gastric upset. The Greek word translated "bloody flux" is *dusenteri[ma]o*, from which we derive the English word dysentery, an intestinal disease. F.F. Bruce said, "Malta has long had a peculiarly unpleasant fever of its own--'Malta Fever,' due to a microbe in goats' milk" (p. 523).

C. The Solution (v. 8b)

"To whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him."

1. Paul's healing ministry

Paul did two things: he prayed and laid his hands on him. Why did he pray? Because all power is from God. Why did he lay his hands on him? Because he wanted Publius and his father to see it was God's power that brought about healing and that Paul was the agent of that power.

2. Paul's preaching ministry

I am convinced that Paul also preached to them. I think the reason it's not mentioned in the text is that it is obvious. Christ didn't perform miracles without pointing out that they corroborated the testimony of the gospel. When Peter performed miracles he preached Christ (e.g., Acts 3:1[en]4:4). The same was true of Paul (e.g., Acts 19:11-19). So when Paul healed, you can be sure he preached. According to tradition, Paul founded the church at Malta and Publius became the first pastor.

D. The Reaction (vv. 9-10)

1. What the people received (v. 9)

"When this was done, others also in the island, who had diseases, came and were healed."

God showed kindness to those who had been kind to His representatives (Paul and Luke). He also established Paul's credibility. Since Paul remained on the island three months until winter passed, he had plenty of opportunity to follow up that confirmation with the gospel.

2. What the people gave (vv. 10-11)

"Who also honored us with many honors, and when we departed, they placed on board such things as were necessary."

Three months of preaching the gospel would result in one of two things: making Christians or making enemies. It is hard to imagine the people bestowing honors on Paul if they were upset at him for dealing truthfully with their pagan religion. This indicates that many of them became believers and that a church may have already been founded on Malta.

E. The Departure (v. 11)

"After three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle, whose sign was Castor and Pollux."

After spending three months of winter there, it was now time to leave. Paul, Luke, the prisoners, the soldiers, and the crew boarded another ship that was probably very similar to the one that had brought them to Malta. Castor and Pollux are names of the twins in the Gemini constellation. They were the mythical sons of Jupiter and considered the patrons of navigation. Navigators and sailors looked to them for security and safety, so their images were carved on this particular ship.

IV. PAUL'S HOPE (vv. 12-15)

A. The Journey to Puteoli (vv. 12-14a)

1. The itinerary (vv. 12-13)

"Landing at Syracuse, we tarried there three days. And from there we fetched a compass [they tacked], and came to Rhegium; and after one day the south wind blew, and we came the next day to Puteoli."

Puteoli is a port in the bay of Naples. Today it's called Pozzuoli. In the past it was a chief port for the grain fleet. Since Puteoli was about 145 miles southwest of Rome, the grain would still have to be transported by land after arriving in port.

2. The reception (v. 14a)

"Where we found brethren, and were desired to tarry with them seven days."

There was a large Jewish community in Puteoli. Since the city was a trade center like Corinth, Ephesus, or Antioch, many Jewish traders were there. Some commentators think that the churches at Puteoli and at Rome could have been founded as early as [sc] A.D. 50-60, so it's possible that Luke was referring to fellow Christians when he said, "We found brethren."

B. The Journey to Rome (vv. 14b-15)

1. The reception (vv. 14b-15a)

"So we went toward Rome. And from there, when the brethren heard of us, they came to meet us as far as the Forum of Appius, and The Three Taverns."

Paul would have had to travel from Puteoli to Rome on the Appian Way, named for Appius Claudius Caecus, the commissioning builder. All the way Paul was concerned about the kind of response he

would receive from the Roman believers.

2. The result (v. 15b)

"Whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage."

As he arrived in the caravan chained as a prisoner, Paul was greeted by the brethren. And that encouraged Paul. He was thrilled with this reception. It had been about three years since he wrote the epistle to the Romans and told them how he desired to come and minister to them (Rom. 15:24, 32).

V. PRIVATE HOUSING (v. 16)

"When we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with a soldier that kept him."

Paul was imprisoned in a house, chained to a Roman soldier (v. 20). I imagine whoever Paul was chained to heard the gospel often!

CONCLUSION

In this passage we have witnessed God's faithfulness to a faithful man.

A. God Surrounds His Servant with Kindness

Acts 27:2-3 tells us that Paul arrived in Sidon from Caesarea and immediately was refreshed and ministered to by the believers there. In Acts 28:1-2 we see his needs were met by the Maltese people. In verse 10 we read that they honored him.

B. God Ministers to His Servant's Needs

The believers in Sidon ministered to Paul's medical needs (27:3). Publius provided Paul with lodging (28:7). The Maltese people gave him what he needed (v. 10). The brethren in Puteoli ministered to him (v. 14).

C. God Encourages His Servant

When the ship was being battered about by the storm, God sent an angel to Paul to encourage him (27:22-25). Paul in turn encouraged the men on board the ship. The greatest encouragement might have been the Roman Christians meeting him some forty-three miles from Rome to express their love and affection for him (28:15).

D. God Protects His Servant from Harm

God rescued Paul from a terrible storm and a shipwreck (27:14-44). God also saved him from a snakebite (28:4-5).

E. God Blesses His Servant's Influence

Wherever Paul went, dramatic things took place. He had such a dynamic influence on those on board the ship, it is probable that some of them came to know Jesus Christ. He had such an impact on Malta that a church began there. We know he had a profound impact in Rome because many in Caesar's household were saved (Phil. 4:22).

F. God Fulfills His Servant's Desire

Paul wanted to go to Rome, and he made it. He wanted to be encouraged by the Christians there, and he was (28:15).

Paul was a faithful man who exhibited all the necessary qualities of a faithful leader. In turn God blessed him. Proverbs 28:20 says, "A faithful man shall abound with blessings." God is faithful, and He rewards those who faithfully serve Him.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is one of the great virtues of Christianity?
2. How did the shipwreck victims conclude that they landed on the island of Malta?
3. What is a better translation of the Greek word *barbbaros* than "barbarous?" Why is that

significant?

4. What does God generally do for people who show kindness to His people?
5. Characterize the kindness that the Maltese people showed to the shipwreck victims.
6. What does the kindness of the Maltese people reveal about them?
7. In what way did Paul exemplify humble leadership while on Malta (Acts 28:3)?
8. What did Jesus teach about the necessity for humility in leadership?
9. Why did the Maltese people initially believe about why Paul was bitten by the snake (Acts 28:4)?
10. What are the two sides of morality? Explain.
11. What caused the Maltese people to change their mind about Paul? How did they now perceive him?
12. Who was Publius? What did he do for the shipwreck victims?
13. How did the illness of Publius's father give Paul an opportunity to preach the gospel?
14. How did God show kindness to the Maltese people (Acts 28:9)?
15. How can we conclude that many of the Maltese people became believers (Acts 28:10-11)?
16. How did Paul respond when he was met by many believers from Rome (Acts 28:15)?
17. Cite the six ways God blessed Paul.

Pondering the Principles

1. Romans 12:13 commands believers to be hospitable. First Peter 4:9 says we are to be hospitable to one another "without grudging." That indicates it's not always easy. Yet both those verses are in the form of commands. How do you need to improve in your hospitality, both to believers and unbelievers? Commit yourself to improvement in this area. Ask God to give you opportunities to be hospitable to others. Purposely invite someone you don't know well to your home-- you might be surprised by the blessings God will give you through your time of fellowship.
2. Review the six ways God blessed Paul for his faithfulness. Looking back over your Christian life, record some of the ways in which God has surrounded you with kindness, met your needs, encouraged you, protected you from harm, blessed your influence, and fulfilled your desires. What should be your response to all that He has done for you?

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2026 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).