

Paul Ministers in Malta

Bible Background • Acts 28:1–10

Printed Text • Acts 28:1–10 | Devotional Reading • Ezekiel 34:11–16

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: KNOW how Paul helped people on the island of Malta; APPRECIATE the ways others minister to us; and MINISTER to those in need.

In Focus

Brenda knew she was driving too fast for the poor road conditions, but she just wanted to get home after a long day. She hit a particularly rough patch and suddenly, Brenda's car spun out of control on the slick highway. She nearly missed careening into a ditch before her car skidded to a halt. Thankfully, she was not hurt, but the car would not start. She used her cell phone to call for help, but was still waiting. Then, 10 minutes later a dark car pulled up and a man jumped out, offering his help. She was afraid to talk with him until he showed her his badge: He was an undercover detective on his way home from work. Sighing with relief, Brenda allowed him to check out the car. Although he couldn't help, he stayed with her until her emergency roadside assistance service arrived.

We sometimes forgo help from others who do not look like us or because of the situation in which we find ourselves. Helping one another becomes easier as we realize God will often send unlikely strangers to help us in our times of need. Paul was such a helper to the sick islanders.

Keep In Mind

"And it came to pass, 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." (Acts 28:8, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Beast (Acts 28:4, 5) therion (Gk.) — A wild animal.

B. Flux (v. 8) dysentery (Gk.) — A bowel sickness, such as dysentery.

Say It Correctly

Melita. muh-LEE-tuh

Publius. POOB-lee-uhs

KJV

Acts 28:1 And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita.

2 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.

3 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.

4 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.

5 And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm.

6 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.

7 In the same quarters were possessions of the chief man of the island, whose name was Publius; who received us, and lodged us three days courteously.

8 And it came to pass, 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.

9 So when this was done, others also, which had diseases in the island, came, and were healed:

10 Who also honoured us with many honours; and when we departed, they laded us with such things as were necessary.

NLT

Acts 28:1 Once we were safe on shore, we learned that we were on the island of Malta.

2 The people of the island were very kind to us. It was cold and rainy, so they built a fire on the shore to welcome us.

3 As Paul gathered an armful of sticks and was laying them on the fire, a poisonous snake, driven out by the heat, bit him on the hand.

4 The people of the island saw it hanging from his hand and said to each other, "A murderer, no doubt! Though he escaped the sea, justice will not permit him to live."

5 But Paul shook off the snake into the fire and was unharmed.

6 The people waited for him to swell up or suddenly drop dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw that he wasn't harmed, they changed their minds and decided he was a god.

7 Near the shore where we landed was an estate belonging to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us and treated us kindly for three days.

8 As it happened, Publius's father was ill with fever and dysentery. Paul went in and prayed for him, and laying his hands on him, he healed him.

9 Then all the other sick people on the island came and were healed.

10 As a result we were showered with honors, and when the time came to sail, people supplied us with everything we would need for the trip.

The People, Places, and Times

Barbarous people. The people of Malta were not barbarians as they are defined today. Rather, in biblical times, Greeks used the term for anyone who didn't speak Greek and was seen as an uncultured individual.

Malta. Also called Melita, it was an island located near both Sicily (60 miles away) and Syracuse (90 miles) and was in a strategic location for trade. It is clear that the island had an established government system and that its chief, Publius, was wealthy. He was able to lodge the 276 ship passengers at his estate (Acts 28:7).

Background

After surviving a brutal northeast storm, Paul and the other passengers either swam to the island of Malta or floated there on boards or pieces of the destroyed ship (Acts 27:44). The inhabitants warmly

welcomed the strangers out of the rain and cold. Rather than resting with the others, Paul gathered firewood. As he did, a snake rose from the fire and bit him. When the islanders witnessed the biting, they believed it was divine payback for some perceived crime and waited for Paul to die. Paul, however, simply shook the snake off. The fact that he was not harmed changed the islanders' opinion: They now thought he was a god.

At-A-Glance

1. Receiving Help from Strangers (Acts 28:1–2)
2. Divine Protection (vv. 3–6)
3. Ministering to Others (vv. 7–10)

In Depth

1. Receiving Help from Strangers (Acts 28:1–2)

While it is true that it is “more blessed to give than to receive” (from Acts 20:35, KJV), it is equally true that believers must learn to receive help during difficult situations. Family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors are among those who assist in time of need. And as Paul discovered on the island of Malta, strangers also may provide timely assistance.

Paul and the other passengers found this to be true as they landed on Malta, wet from the sea during winter. They had no clothing to change into, no firewood or matches by which to warm themselves, and no food to eat. The islanders, quickly assessing the situation, came to their aid. They built a fire, offering exactly what the stranded strangers needed most. They later provided lodging and months later gave the ship's passengers needed resources to continue to Rome.

During stormy seasons of life, we learn there is no such thing as a “small blessing.” Anything and everything that helps make a difficult situation easier to bear is big to the recipient. The residents of Malta built a fire. The ship's passengers were wise enough not to devalue the islanders' help or to reject it because of the givers' nationality. God recruits believers and nonbelievers to help Christians in distress. Learning to receive help from nonbelievers is especially difficult for some Christians.

It is not always how much we give or even what we give but that we are willing to be used by God to aid someone in distress. Our availability goes a long way in showing recipients God's providence and care. Using the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), Jesus taught that a neighbor is anyone in need of help, and the “good” neighbor is the person who provides help in the time of trouble. The parable teaches that we should be grateful givers and receivers.

As others rush to assist you, joyfully receive their gifts of time, talent, or treasure. If you struggle with asking or receiving help from others, ask God to make you a gracious recipient.

2. Divine Protection (vv. 3–6)

Soon after surviving the tumultuous storm at sea, Paul found himself shipwrecked on an island. Rather than sit back and allow the islanders to serve him, Paul also got involved in collecting firewood for the needed fire. As he began serving others, a viper came out of the fire and bit him. The islanders took this as a sign that Paul was a murderer who was about to reap a requisite punishment. What was Paul's response? He shook off the snake and continued his activities without any ill effects. That

one action, more than any words, served to remove any doubt from the islanders' minds that Paul was a criminal.

The fact that he was able to shake off the snake is reminiscent of Jesus' teaching after His resurrection. Jesus appeared to the 11 original disciples and gave them what is commonly called the "Great Commission." During His discourse, He discussed the signs that would follow believers. Among these, He said, "[T]hey will pick up snakes with their hands; and ... they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well" (from Mark 16:18, NIV). Paul exhibited both of these miraculous signs while on Malta. He did not do so to benefit himself but to help others. The people recognized something different about Paul because of these signs, which was evidence of his faith in Christ.

3. Ministering to Others (vv. 7–10)

Paul was able to minister to others in spite of finding himself in a trying predicament. Rather than fall prey to depression and selfishness because of his circumstances, Paul continued to use his gifts and talents in executing the ministry God had given him, with signs following. When it became known that the chief's father was sick, Paul did what he knew to do. He laid hands on the man and healed him. That ability to rise above the circumstances and continue to flow in God's anointing was critical to the islanders' perception that there was something extraordinary about Paul. His example teaches that we, too, can rise above our situations to help others in need. Further, it proves that in spite of any difficulties we encounter, God's gifts and callings can still work through us if we allow them to.

Search the Scriptures

1. Why did the islanders believe Paul was a murderer (Acts 28:3–6)?
2. What critical help did Paul provide to Publius's father and others (vv. 8–9)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. News reports are filled with stories about the dangers of helping or receiving help from strangers. What strategies have you discovered to overcome fear of danger while helping others?

Liberating Lesson

Distrust between races makes it hard for some people to receive help from people who aren't "their kind." How can God's love help believers break down barriers to communication and care for others?

Application for Activation

Paul did not allow his life storm to stop him from ministering to others. Is there an area of ministry or outreach that you have given up because of pressures from a difficult situation? If so, prayerfully ask God to help you resume using your gift to help others. Then, make an appointment with the appropriate ministry leaders to see what steps you must take to resume service.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Acts 28:1–10

1 And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita.

2 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.

Luke communicates his faith in God's care through his choice of two words in these verses. First, in verse 1 he adds an ending to a word that means we "were escaped" (Gk. diasozo, dee-as-ODZE-o), not "they" as in our KJV text. Secondly, Luke used a word here that meant to be rescued. That's why our text says, "we were escaped," instead of "we escaped." Luke clearly recognizes that the safe arrival on shore of every one of the ship's 276 passengers was solely the result of divine help. Although their ship became battered pieces on the shoreline's rocks, God confirmed Paul's prophecy from the angel's nighttime visit (Acts 27:23–24). It was not a fortunate accident by human effort but the manifestation of a promised deliverance by the God that Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus trusted with their lives.

Gradually, the survivors learned they were on the island Melita (Malta), in the Mediterranean Sea, south of Sicily and Italy. In straight-line measurements, they were 1,200 miles from Caesarea where they first boarded and still more than 400 miles from Rome. In the past two weeks, the storm winds had driven more than 500 miles from Fair Havens, where Paul had urged them to stay through winter (Acts 27:8–10, 21, NIV).

Our text describes the people of Malta as "barbarous." That doesn't mean they were savage barbarians. The word simply referred to people who didn't speak Greek. Luke marveled at the loving "kindness" (Gk. philanthropia, fil-an-thro-PEE-ah) shown repeatedly by the people of Malta. "No little kindness" means the care given went far beyond what was expected (28:2). To appreciate this incident, it is crucial to remember what the conditions were.

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3 And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper, and fastened on his hand.

4 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 escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live.

Paul was not a lazy person (Romans 12:11). Acts 28:3 says he “gathered a bundle of sticks” for the fire. One of those “sticks” could have been several inches thick, perhaps with loose bark that a little snake could slither under to hibernate during winter or maybe with a spot that had rotted away, leaving a hole where it curled up. That suggests that Paul wasn’t making a show of working. Rather, he was putting real effort into helping build up the fire. The surviving crew members, and other prisoners and passengers would have seen this. Paul was a man whose example garnered respect for what he said in witness to his faith.

As Paul dropped his armful of firewood into the fire pit, the heat wakened the snake, which crawled out and latched onto Paul’s hand. Although there are no poisonous snakes on present-day Malta, “viper” (Gk. echidna, EKH- id-nah), usually refers to a poisonous snake. The indigenous residents saw the snake hanging from Paul’s hand. They instantly jumped to the conclusion that he must undoubtedly be the worst kind of desperate criminal, such as a “murderer” (Gk. phoneus, fon-YOOCE).

The Maltese thought that justice demanded retribution for the presumed criminal’s evil deeds. Receiving a poisonous snakebite, after just surviving a shipwreck, implied that to them. KJV translated Luke’s word here as “vengeance” (Gk. dike, DEE-kay), but both NLT and NIV present the word to mean “justice.” However, NIV capitalizes “Justice,” as a reference to the Greek goddess of justice, whose name was Dike. This goddess was a companion of Zeus, the supreme Greek god. The people of Malta may have worshiped Greek gods and saw Paul’s snakebite as her act of punishment.

5 And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm.

6 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.

Undoubtedly Paul was wet and cold like all his shipmates. The description in verse 5 of his shaking the snake off his hand suggests determination rather than panic. “Shook off” (Gk. apotinasso, ap-ot-in-AS-o) is the same phrase Luke chose when quoting Jesus’ command to the apostles that they should shake the dust off their feet when leaving towns where their preaching of God’s kingdom was rejected (Luke 9:5).

In Acts 28, each time Paul approached the fire with more wood, the Maltese citizens watched and expected him to swell up in reaction to the snake’s poison or suddenly fall dead. Neither happened. Paul plainly “suffered no ill effects,” as 28:5, NIV words it. In verse 6 (NIV), Paul’s observers “changed” (Gk. metaballo, met-ab- AL-o) their original opinion of him. Instead, they now wrongly surmised that Paul must be a god.

7 In the same quarters were possessions of the chief man of the island, whose name was Publius; who received us and lodged us three days courteously.

8 And it came to pass, 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.

Near the site where the ship wrecked and those on board swam or floated to shore was the estate of “Publius” (Gk. poplios, POP-lee-os), Malta’s chief magistrate and leading citizen. The Greek term meant literally “the main one,” or as we say today, “the top guy.” Did the gracious and caring reception that the survivors encountered in their contact with the island’s residents reflect the influence of the person at the top? Publius must have been of great wealth. In verse 7, Luke says he “received us and

lodged us three days courteously.” “Received” did not mean to impersonally accept people’s presence but to actively extend hospitality in welcoming guests. The last word in verse 7, “courteously” (Gk. philophronos, fil-of-RON-occe), means “in a friendly manner.” “Us” may mean a few people such as Paul, Luke, Aristarchus, and maybe the ship’s captain, its owner, and Julius, the Roman official. Some commentators presume that all 276 stranded victims were housed. “Lodged” (Gk. anadechomai, an-ad-EKH-om-ahee) in KJV is rendered “treated us kindly” in NLT and “entertained” in NASB. The word can be interpreted in all these ways.

Luke’s point is that everyone on Malta treated the ship’s survivors with exceptional care. An important lesson here for witnessing our faith is to remember, “all have sinned,” (from Romans 3:23, KJV). However, people without Christ are not automatically bad people. That is why Paul admonishes in Colossians 4:6 (KJV): “Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.” Peter gives similar emphasis in 1 Peter 3:15, NIV: “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,” (see also 2 Timothy 2:24). Likewise, as we saw in the previous lesson, being unapologetic and confident in sharing our faith does not mean being impolite or disrespectful.

While enjoying Publius’s generosity, Paul learned that his father lay confined to his bed by recurring bouts of fever and bloody diarrhea (Acts 28:8). Paul took the initiative to visit the man as he believed he should do to support the weak (1 Thessalonians 5:14). After entering the man’s room, Paul approached his bed, and as Jesus often did, laid his hands on the man and prayed (see Mark 6.5; Luke 4:40; 13:13). In Acts 28:8, Luke says what Paul did: he “healed him” (Gk. iaomai, ee-AM-om-ahee).

9 So when this was done, others also, which had diseases in the island, came, and were healed:

10 Who also honoured us with many honours: and when we departed, they laded us with such things as were necessary.

Our text, verse 9, gives no indication that Publius sought or expected Paul’s miraculous intervention. It’s likely that he saw his father’s condition was beyond hope of recovery. The average life expectancy then was well under 40. Over half of all babies died within the first year (Barclay, 188). When word got out that Publius’ desperately ill father had been healed, sick people from across the island flooded to where Paul was “and were healed” (Gk. therapeuo, ther-a-PYOO-o).

The immediate response to the father’s healing would not be a surprise (Ezekiel 34:13). What is remarkable is that, although our text uses the same English word “healed” for both the father and the islanders, Luke used iaomai in Acts 28:8 and therapeuo in verse 9. That doesn’t mean that the father was healed and the islanders weren’t. Both were cured. The different words suggest a difference in how this happened. The father’s healing described a miraculous, instant freedom from his ailments, whereas the basic meaning of the word for the others’ healing is “to serve.” When applied to sickness, it often referred to medical treatment. Our text doesn’t say the island’s sick people came to Paul; it simply says they came. A number of commentators write that the second word for healing applied more accurately to Luke than to Paul. In Colossians 4:14(KJV), Luke is called “the beloved physician” and the NLT describes him as a “beloved doctor.”

The different words may suggest two different forms of divine healing—through miraculous divine intervention when the condition is beyond human help and by Christian ministry. These sections of Acts 28 may describe Luke as the first Christian medical missionary. (Barclay, He also notes that some medical problems are not cured either way. For example, Paul— God’s instrument for healing

Publius's father— suffered unrelieved torment from a “thorn in the flesh,” (2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Galatians 4:13–14).

However, the Maltese people were cured. They saw loving care extended by people committed to a God who loved all people everywhere so much that He was willing to die for their sins.

Three months passed before another ship arrived to transport Paul and his other prisoners on to Rome (Acts 28:11). During those three months, in verse 10 Luke says the people showered “us,” not simply Paul, “with many honours” (Gk. timao, tim-AH-o). This also supports the possibility that ministry by other Christians other than Paul is at work here. Although Luke's word could refer to things of material value or price, here, the word points to expression of affection, respect, and deep feeling. As Paul sailed away to trial in Rome, the islanders showed their esteem by loading the ship with things needed to insure a pleasant journey.

Two major lessons stand out. One concerns our attitude toward those around us who may not share our knowledge or faith in God and His revelation in Christ. While all people are sinners, that doesn't mean they cannot do commendable deeds. The image of God that we possessed in ourselves at creation has been irreparably distorted by sin but not completely blotted out. Our marred instinct toward a God-like goodness waits to be restored by our decision to trust in God's power to repair our universal spiritual brokenness.

Another lesson is the importance for each Christian to consistently make God's love visible in order to give our verbal witness an attractive credibility. It is inconceivable that Paul, the great missionary-evangelist, would allow the opportunity with such a receptive audience to slip by him. In Acts 28, Luke illustrates how making God's love real through our actions can add convicting power to what we say about God's love through Christ.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

The Failure to Minister
(Ezekiel 34:1-6)

TUESDAY

God's Ministry to the Flock
(Ezekiel 34:11-16)

WEDNESDAY

God's Judgment of the Privileged
(Ezekiel 34:17-22)

THURSDAY

Extend Hospitality to Strangers
(Romans 12:9-13)

FRIDAY

Ready for Every Good Work
(2 Timothy 2:20-26)

SATURDAY

Do Good to All
(1 Thessalonians 5:12-22)

SUNDAY

Ministering to the Sick
(Acts 28:1-10)