**Stranded With Paul On an Island of Barbarians**

(Acts 28:1-16)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

A man who was stranded on a deserted island looked up one day to see a ship approaching. He managed to get their attention, and the first mate rowed the dinghy out to him, tossed him some newspapers, and told him, “The Captain says you should read these, and then decide whether you still want to be rescued!”

Speaking of being stranded on an island, here in our text in Acts 28, the Apostle Paul has just survived a shipwreck with 275 other people, and is now stranded on an island of *barbarians.* They story of their first day on the island begins in verse 1, where we read,

**“And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita” (Acts 28:1).**

Historians tell us that Melita is the ancient name of the island of *Malta,* a large island just to the south of Italy. It has a bay called St. Paul’s Bay, where tradition says Paul’s ship ran aground.

And both of those names, Melita and Malta, mean *honey.* And that’s symbolic of how—by this time in the Book of Acts—the people of Israel were supposed to be living in the kingdom of heaven on earth, in a land that *flowed* with milk and honey, a land God described in Ezekiel 20:15,40, saying,

**“...the land which I had given them, *flowing with milk and honey...*is the glory of all lands...in...there shall all the house of Israel...serve Me.”**

All saved Jews in the house of Israel are going to serve God in the kingdom, and all saved *Gentiles* in the kingdom will serve the Jews, waiting on them hand and foot, just as God promised the Jews in Isaiah 61:5, where the prophet quotes God as saying,

**“...strangers *shall stand and feed your flocks,* and the sons of the alien *shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers.”***

And that promise that Gentiles will serve the Jews even included Gentiles in remote islands like Malta, as we see when God *also* promised the Jews,

**“...the LORD shall comfort Zion...He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD...*the isles shall wait upon Me...”* (Isaiah 51:3,5).**

When God makes the land of Israel like the Garden of Eden, flowing with milk and honey, Gentiles in islands like Malta will wait on *God* by waiting on God’s people in Israel.

And that’s where the Jews were supposed to be by this time in Acts. But since the Jews rejected their kingdom when they rejected their King, the Lord Jesus Christ, we see the isles of the Gentiles waiting on *Paul* instead in verse 2 of our text, where we read:

**“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” (Acts 28:2).**

Now when we think of barbarous people like these barbarians, we think of people who are *cruel,* and even *murderous.* But in the Bible, a barbarian was anyone who didn’t speak Greek, as we see when Paul told the Greeks in Rome,

**“I am debtor *both* to the *Greeks,* and to the *Barbarians...”* (Romans 1:14).**

The Greeks thought they were the only sophisticated people in the world, so they called all *other* people barbarians.

But these barbarians on Malta were far from being a cruel people. Verse 2 of our text says they received “every one” of the 276 people who had just crash landed on their island.

Now we’re not told *where* they received them. You’d need a good-sized auditorium to take in that many people. But there are some really big *caves* on Malta, so you’d think that the islanders kindled this fire in a cave, to get the survivors in out of the rain and the cold. Here it helps to remember that the reason they got shipwrecked in the first place is that they’d sailed during typhoon season *in November,* so it was pouring down rain *and* cold.

But Paul wasn’t the kind of guy to let others do all the work, so we see him pitching in in verse 3, where it 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” (Acts 28:3).**

Paul may have been the great apostle of the Gentiles, but he wasn’t above foraging for firewood. But compare the stick-gathering that Paul did here to the kind of stick-gathering that was *supposed* to have happened in the kingdom by that time. Ezekiel wrote,

**“Thus saith the LORD God; Behold, I will take *the stick of...Israel*...and will put them with...*the stick of Judah,* and make them *one stick,* and they shall be one in Mine hand...I will...*gather them*...into their own land” (Ezekiel 37:19,21).**

Now “Judah’ was the name of the southern two tribes of Israel, and “Israel” was the name of the northern ten tribes. There had been a split between them in the days after Solomon’s reign *1,000 years* before Christ. But someday God will “gather” the sticks of all 12 tribes back together. And Ezekiel went on to tell us when that will happen in the very next verse, where God promised,

**“I will make them one nation in the land...of Israel; *and one king shall be king to them all:* and they shall be no more...two kingdoms any more at all” (Ezekiel 37:22).**

The 12 tribes of Israel will be one stick again *in the kingdom,* when Christ is king over them all. But when the Jews rejected the kingdom, God raised up the apostle Paul, and he reached out to the sticks of *individual* Jews with the gospel, and some of them believed it. But as we’ve seen in our study of Acts, the vast majority didn’t, and sadly ended up in the fire of hell, as we see pictured here when Paul laid that *bundle* of sticks on the fire.

Now getting back to the story, it’s not hard to understand how Paul could have picked up a viper with those sticks, for snakes are sluggish in cold weather. So this one didn’t say boo when Paul picked him up. He *did* object to being tossed into a fire, however, and when this viper was awakened by that fire, he became the active representative of that bundle of sticks that represented unsaved Jews. That will match what John the Baptist *called* unsaved Jews back in Matthew 3, where we read,

**“In those days came John the Baptist...and...when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, *O generation of vipers,* who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Matthew 3:1,2,7).**

John *also* compared unsaved Jews to *sticks* when he went on to say in verse 10,

**“...*the axe is laid unto the root of the trees:* therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, *and cast into the fire”* (Matthew 3:10).**

Do you know what happens when you lay an ax to the root of a tree? It falls down, and men chop it up, and it becomes a bundle of firewood. So John was warning those unsaved Jews that if they didn’t get saved and produce spiritual fruit, they were going to be cast into the fires *of hell.*

Now we know what kind of fruit tree represented Israel as a whole, because the psalmist prayed,

**“Thou hast brought *a vine* out of Egypt: Thou hast cast out the heathen, *and planted it”* (Psalm 80:8).**

God brought the vine tree of the entire nation of Israel out of Egypt, and then used Joshua to cast the heathen out of the promised land and planted Israel there. And he expected them to produce *spiritual* fruit, the way vine trees produce grapes.

And the thing about a vine tree is, if it *doesn’t* produce grapes, it’s good for *nothing,* as God told Ezekiel in Ezekiel 15:2-5, where He asked the prophet,

***“What is the vine tree more than any tree...*Shall wood be taken thereof to do any work? or will men take a pin of it to hang any vessel thereon? Behold, *it is cast into the fire for fuel....*when it was whole, *it was meet for no work:* how much less shall it be meet yet for any work, when the fire hath devoured it, and it is burned?”**

Now God wasn’t giving Ezekiel lessons in agriculture or vineyard dressing here. He was warning him about what would happen to the vine *of Israel,* as He went on to explain in the next two verses, where He said,

**“As the vine tree among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, *so will I give the inhabitants of Jerusalem.* And I will set My face against them; they shall go out from one fire, *and another fire shall devour them...”* (Ezekiel 15:6,7).**

God was telling Ezekiel there that if the vine *of Israel* didn’t produce any *spiritual* fruit, *they* were good for nothing.

And when they *didn’t* produce any spiritual fruit in the Old Testament, God the Father tossed them into the fiery trial of the Babylonian captivity, and left them there for 70 years. And they went out from that Old Testament fire to *another* fire in the *New* Testament when they rejected *God the Son.* And the Son warned them what would happen if they rejected God the Spirit, saying,

**“...*blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven* ...make the tree good, and his fruit good...*O generation of vipers...”* (Matthew 12:31,33,34).**

The Lord told the Jews to make their tree good by not rejecting God the Spirit. But the Jews *blasphemed* the Spirit when they stoned Stephen, a man that Acts 6:5 describes by saying,

**“Stephen, a man full of faith *and of the Holy Ghost.”***

When the Jews stoned a Spirit-filled man, they went from the fire of rejecting Christ to the fire of rejecting the Holy Ghost.

And that’s when the Lord raised up Paul and sent him to the Gentiles. But unsaved Jews didn’t like it when the Lord sent Paul to the Gentiles, as we saw back when Paul *told* the Jews that the Lord had sent him to the Gentiles in Acts 22:21,22:

**“...He said unto me...I will send thee far hence *unto the Gentiles.* And they gave him audience *unto this word,* and then lifted up their voices, and said, Away with such a fellow from the earth: *for it is not fit that he should live.”***

And here in our text in Acts 28, we’re seeing that hatred for Paul and his Gentile ministry symbolized when this viper that represented unsaved Jews leaped out of the fire and bit Paul as he was helping *these* Gentiles build a fire.

And we know that this was a *venomous* viper, because it says in verse 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” (Acts 28:4).**

Those superstitious barbarians figured Paul was a killer, and the gods they worshipped were making sure he got what was coming to him.

But you’ll notice it says that the viper *hung* on Paul’s hand. It didn’t just bite him once and be done with him. That symbolizes how unsaved Jews lashed out at Paul in the beginning of his ministry, *and never let him go,* throughout the entire time covered by the Book of Acts.

And it’s ironic that the viper bit Paul *on the hand,* because in Acts, God was using Paul to do what it says in Romans 10:21, where he wrote,

**“...to Israel He saith, All day long I have stretched forth *My* hands *unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.”***

After the Jews rejected Stephen and the 12 apostles, God was *still* stretching forth His hands to Israel *through Paul’s ministry,* for he shared the gospel with Jews as well as Gentiles. And here in our text, we see the Jews symbolically biting the hand that feeds them, so to speak, biting the hand of the Apostle Paul as he tried to feed them the very gospel of salvation.

But God hadn’t let any unsaved Jews kill Paul during the Book of Acts, and He didn’t let this viper kill Paul either, as we see when verse 5 of our text says of the apostle,

**“And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm” (Acts 28:5).**

Now here, unsaved Jews would know that the ability to not be harmed by vipers was a sign that God was speaking through a man, because when God wanted to speak through *Moses,* Exodus 4:1-5 says

**“Moses...said, *they will not believe me...*they will say, *The LORD hath not appeared unto thee.* And the LORD said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. And He said, Cast it on the ground. *And*...*it became a serpent...*And the LORD said...Put forth *thine hand,* and take it by the tail...and it became a rod *in his hand.* That they may believe that the...God of their fathers...hath appeared unto thee”**

The ability to not be harmed by a viper proved that God was speaking through Moses. Then later in the New Testament, when God began to speak through the Lord’s 120 followers, He predicted that

**“...these signs shall follow them that believe; In My name shall they...*take up serpents”* (Mark 16:17,18).**

And that was a sign that God was now speaking *through them.* But when the Jews rejected the Lord’s followers, God gave *Paul* the power to handle serpents, as a sign that God was not speaking through *him.*

But the thing about unsaved Jews is, they thought God was still speaking through *them—just because they were Jews.* So you’d think they’d get jealous when they saw a sign that God was now speaking through Paul—and that’s exactly what God wanted, as we see when Paul wrote,

**“I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: If by any means I may *provoke to emulation* them which are my flesh, *and might save some of them”* (Romans 11:13,14).**

God hoped that speaking through Paul would provoke the Jews to jealousy, and make them want to emulate Paul and get saved like he did. And some of them did. But most didn’t, and sadly ended up in hell.

Now we don’t know the exact kind of viper that bit Paul’s hand, but the islanders must have known, for it says in the next verse of our text,

**“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” (Acts 28:6).**

The barbarians knew that whatever kind of snake had bitten Paul, it was a *particularly* venomous kind that would cause a man to swell up and die in a matter of moments. When Paul *didn’t,* they quit thinking he was a murderer, and began thinking he was a god.

And the chief of the island knew that if a god has come to your island, the chief should invite him to stay with him, and he did in verse 7 of our text:

**“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” (Acts 28:7).**

Now the “possessions” of the island’s chief there were probably some sturdy dwellings where the chief would go during typhoons to ride out the storms. I don’t know if even the chief of the island had enough possessions to house 276 people, so the “us” there may have been a reference to Paul, Luke and Aristarchus, the new god and his entourage. All we know for sure is that in verse 8 it says,

**“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).**

Now the word “flux” refers to fluid of some kind. And a *bloody* flux in the Bible refers to blood in the flow of your runny bowel movements. And if you’ve got blood in your flux, you have a *serious* condition.

How serious? The Greek word for “bloody flux” there is *dysenteria,* from which we get our word dysentery. And dysentery is a condition that causes a bloody flux and a fever.

And the reason God gave Paul the power to heal people like this was to provoke the Jews to even *more* jealousy. Remember, God didn’t just give Moses the power to handle serpents. The very next verses in Exodus 4 say,

**“And the LORD said furthermore unto him, Put now thine hand into thy bosom...and when he took it out...*his hand was leprous....*And He said, Put thine hand into thy bosom again. And he put his hand into his bosom again; and plucked it out...*and...it was turned again as his other flesh*...if they will not believe thee, neither hearken to the voice of the first sign...they will believe the voice of the latter sign” (Exodus 4:6-8).**

God gave Moses the power to heal his leprous hand, and when He gave the power to heal people to *Paul* as well, it was to provoke *more* Jews to emulate Paul and get saved.

And then to *really* rub it in, God had Paul heal *all kinds of people* in verse 9 of Acts 28, where it says,

**“So when this was done, others also, which had diseases in the island, came, and were healed” (Acts 28:9).**

A whole *island* full of people got healed here to *really* provoke the Jews to emulation. And this was no small island. Today, Malta is home to about a half million people.

Now if you’re thinking there *were* no Jews on Malta, you’d be right, at least as far as the record of secular history goes. *But,* there were 275 people who *witnessed* these healings, and when they finally got to Rome, I’m sure they told everyone and his brother how they saw Paul heal an entire island full of sick people. And since all roads led to Rome in those days, news of Paul’s healings would soon travel to the furthest parts of the Roman Empire, and Jews around the known world would hear about it and be provoked to emulation.

And this is why this is happening here in the last chapter of Acts. God was stretching forth His hands to Israel through Paul one last time, in a *mighty* way, before closing the book on Israel at the end of the Book of Acts. The supernatural gifts of the Spirit ended at the end of the Book of Acts. We saw them fading away in Acts, so you’d think they would have just tapered off. Instead, there was an *upsurge* of them here on Malta, because God wanted to present one last powerful testimony to Israel before closing the book on them.

All of this explains something we read in Acts 27, where Paul assured his shipmates that they would all survive the typhoon,

**“Howbeit we *must* be cast upon a certain island” (Acts 27:26).**

Notice that he didn’t say we “shall” be cast on a certain island. He said “we *must* be.” There was no reason they “must” be cast on Malta *to get to Rome.* The only reason they *had* to be cast on that *“certain”* island, and not just any old island, was because God knew that that certain island had a chief man with a sick father, and that when Paul healed such a high profile individual, that news of it would spread quickly to the entire island, and that would lead to the healing of hundreds if not thousands of people, and one last powerful testimony to the people of Israel.

Now as you can imagine, those barbarians were *very* grateful to Paul for healing every sick person among them, and we see them demonstrate their gratitude in verse 10, where Luke wrote of those islanders:

**“Who also honoured us with many honours; and when we departed, they laded us with such things as were necessary” (Acts 28:10).**

Now getting loaded down with gifts from Gentiles is what was supposed to have happened *to the Jews in the kingdom* by this time in Acts, as God promised them back in Isaiah 60, where God said,

**“...the Gentiles shall come to thy light...*they shall bring gold...*their silver and their gold with them...*and...minister unto thee”* (Isaiah 60:3,6,9,10).**

In the kingdom, the Gentiles will minister to the Jews in material things like silver and gold to thank the Jews for ministering to them in spiritual things. But when the Jews rejected their kingdom, we see *these* Gentiles ministering to *Paul,* for ministering to them in spiritual things like healing, and preaching the gospel to them. We’re not told that he preached the gospel to them, but it’s unthinkable to think that he didn’t.

And when those 275 witnesses told *this* part of the story to the world, Jews would be provoked to even *more* emulation to get saved, when they saw Paul getting lavished with gifts from Gentiles like *they* were supposed to be getting in the kingdom.

Well, eventually Paul and his shipmates were rescued in verse 11, where we read,

**“And after three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle, whose sign was Castor and Pollux” (Acts 28:11).**

Now “Castor and Pollux” wasn’t the name of an ancient law firm, they were signs of the zodiac. If you were born in May or June, you might know them as the Gemini twins. NASA named their space capsules “Gemini” because they carried two astronauts who probably looked a lot like twins in those helmets and space suits.

And the reason this ship had an astrological sign was that the Gemini Twins were the patron saints of sailors. Did you ever hear anyone say, “By jiminy”? That saying stems from sailors who thought they were guided “by” the Gemini Twins, by jiminy!

And there’s a symbolic reason Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, mentions something as pagan as an astrological sign here. You see, the zodiac is man’s perversion of a story that *God* wrote in the stars, the story of the coming of Christ. God didn’t start writing that story *in the Bible* until 2500 years of human history passed. In the meantime, God had taught Adam how to read Christ’s story in the constellations of the zodiac, and Adam taught his children, etc., and it became a well-known, world-wide oral tradition.

The story begins with the sign of Virgo the Virgin, because Christ was born of the virgin Mary. And the story *ends* with the sign of Leo *the lion,* because lions in the Bible are associated with *kings,* as we see when Solomon wrote,

**“The king's wrath *is as the roaring of a lion”* (Proverbs 19:12, cf. 20:2; Ezek.32:2).**

And Revelation 5:5 calls Christ “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” because *His* story will end when He’s king of the world in the kingdom of heaven on earth. The ancients built the sphynx in Egypt with the head of a woman and the body of a lion so men would never forget how to start reading the circle of constellations in the zodiac.

Now according to Greek mythology, the Castor and Pollux twins were born of one mother, but Pollux was fathered by Zeus, so he was an immortal god like his father. But Castor had a human father, so he eventually died. When he passed away, Pollux missed his brother so much that he asked Zeus if Castor could share his immortality. Zeus answered by transforming them into the Gemini constellation, so they could live together forever as stars in the night sky.

And if you buy all that, I have a bridge I’d like to sell you.

That story is nothing but a perversion of what God *really* wanted taught from the Gemini twins. They symbolized Christ’s humanity and His deity, *and* His death and resurrection. He could *die* because he was a man, but He could *rise from the dead* because He was God. It’s kind of like those two goats in the Old Testament. One was sacrificed, and the other was released, to symbolize Christ’s death and resurrection. Those two birds symbolize the same thing.

And the death and resurrection of Christ was the message that was preached *before* Paul by the 12 apostles. They didn’t preach that Christ died *for our sins,* but they did preach His death and resurrection. So this Castor and Pollux ship was symbolic of the faith preached by the 12, just as Paul’s ship represented the ship of *his* faith, as we discussed in our last lesson.

Did you notice that verse 11 says that this ship had sailed to Malta from Alexandria, just as Paul’s ship had (Acts 27:6)? That represents how both ships were launched from the same source by God Himself.

But verse 11 says that the ship representing the faith of the 12 was wintering safely in this island, while the ship of Paul’s faith was being shipwrecked—just like the 12 apostles themselves are wintering safely in heaven while the ship of Paul’s faith is heading toward a shipwreck at the end of the dispensation of grace.

And when the faith of the 12 apostles *resumes* after the Rapture, they’re going to be carrying Paul’s message of “Christ died for our sins,” just like the ship representing the 12 carried Paul himself here.

Well, in case you didn’t know that Syracuse, New York, was named after a city in Italy, verse 12 of our text says,

**“And landing at Syracuse, we tarried there three days” (Acts 28:12).**

Now Syracuse was a city on the island of Sicily, the football-shaped island being kicked by the boot-shaped nation of Italy. So Paul is resuming his journey to Italy’s capital in Rome to be judged by the Roman emperor Caesar.

And in our last lesson, we saw that Paul’s journey to be judged by Caesar is a type of *our* journey to be judged by the Lord at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Paul’s shipwreck symbolized how the dispensation of grace will end in failure, just like all other dispensations; but after it does, we’ll resume our journey to the Judgment Seat of Christ, just like Paul resumed his journey here.

Of course, before we can all appear at the Judgment Seat of Christ, the majority of the Body of Christ will first have to be raised from the dead. And we see *that* symbolized in verse 12 of our text when it says Paul stayed in Syracuse for “three days.” Three is the number of resurrection in the Bible because the Lord rose from the dead on the third day.

Then in verse 13 we read,

**“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” (Acts 28:13).**

Now since they were heading north to Italy—just as we’ll be heading north to heaven at the Rapture—a south wind was just what the doctor ordered. But that “compass” there wasn’t the kind that pointed north. I’m told that ships didn’t have those in Paul’s day. This is a reference to the the kind of compass that makes circles. To “fetch” a compass was a figure of speech that is used several times in the Bible, a figure that meant *to circle back,* as we see when I Samuel 5:23 says,

**“fetch a compass behind them, *and come upon them...”***

And when Paul’s ship circled back here, it was a picture of the *roundup* we’ll all have at the Judgment Seat of Christ, where all the brethren who have ever lived in the dispensation of grace will gather together, as we see pictured in verse 14 of our text, where it says of Puteoli:

**“Where we found brethren, and were desired to tarry with them seven days: and so we went toward Rome” (Acts 28:14).**

The brethren gathered for 7 days, and 7 is the number of *completeness* in Scripture. God gave Israel 7 feasts to represent His complete program for them in the future. Seven days make one week, and human history as we know it will end after the millennial kingdom, after 7,000 years of human history. And these 7 days here symbolize how the Body of Christ will be completely rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Every thing you have ever suffered in life will be completely rewarded by your Savior.

Then in verse 15, we read:

**“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” (Acts 28:15).**

When the saints in Rome heard that Paul was approaching the city, they went out to meet him at the Appi Forum and the Tree Taverns, a stopping point on what’s called The Appian Way, the most famous of the famous Roman roads. And what we’re seeing pictured *here* is what I believe will happen *after* the Judgment Seat of Christ.

The Judgment Seat will take place at the Rapture, “in the air,” where we’ll be caught up to meet the Lord (I Thes. 4:16,17), *before* we get to heaven. After that, we’ll continue our journey to heaven, as symbolized when Paul continued *his* journey to be judged by Caesar here. And I think it is very possible that what we are *also* seeing symbolized here is how the kingdom saints who are in heaven until the kingdom begins will come out to meet us—*including* some of the saints Paul executed before he got saved. And seeing that they don’t hold a grudge will give him “courage,” as we see Paul taking here when he saw those brethren coming out from Rome to meet him.

Then in the final verse of our text we read:

**“And when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard: but Paul was suffered to dwell by himself with a soldier that kept him” (Acts 28:16).**

Now part of the reason this centurion treated Paul so nicely is because Paul treated *him* with respect, as we discussed in our last lesson. But remember, this guy had also seen Paul do *tons* of miracles on the island of Malta, and that old him that he was a man of God.

Now you can’t do miracles like that, but you can do other kinds of miracles that can win you the respect of others, and get them to listen as you tell them about Christ. Miracles of kindness, and patience, and longsuffering, and faithfulness in the face of adversity. If you’re not exhibiting miraculous human behavior like that, why not consider implementing them in your life to bolster your testimony to others.

You’ll be eternally glad you did.