

STORMS, SHIPWRECKS, AND SNAKES

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Acts 27:1–28:14
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Acts 27:1–28:14

When I first became a Christian back in the late 1970s, I imagined, as it turns out incorrectly, that becoming a Christian would make my life easy. I had been a drug addict and an alcoholic, and I thought Jesus would take away all my problems. I thought Jesus would give me a life that was essentially smooth sailing.

In once sense, Jesus did, of course, take away my biggest problem. He took away the sin that had separated me from God. He took me off the broad road and put me onto the narrow road, took me out of the kingdom of darkness and brought me into the kingdom of light. He also made me part of his family. He made me part of his spiritual family with many wonderful brothers and sisters.

However, as I soon discovered, becoming a Christian didn't mean that life would be easy. It didn't mean that my problems instantly disappeared or that life suddenly turned into a pleasure cruise. To be sure, over the years the Lord has given me many incredible moments. And yet, the truth is, he has also given me many challenging times—times when the difficulties seemed overwhelming and the problems unending.

The question for us this morning is: what is your expectation for Christian life? What do you expect a lifetime of following Jesus will be like? Do you imagine, as I did as a new believer, that it will be more or less problem free? Do you expect that it will essentially be smooth sailing? If so, I would suggest to you that you're going to find Christian life a disappointment. You're going to find that being a Christian doesn't meet your expectations, doesn't turn out the way you thought it would.

Today, we're going to be continuing our study the Book of Acts, looking at Paul's journey from Israel to Rome—looking at his voyage across the Mediterranean Sea as a prisoner on his way to stand trial before the Roman Emperor Nero. It's the story of a difficult journey, a journey with lots of problems.

Today's passage, Acts 27:1-28:14, recounts real events in Paul's life and the lives of those who traveled with him. It records actual history. However, in another sense, the passage also provides us with a kind of spiritual picture or metaphor that applies to our lives. It teaches us about Christian life. It teaches us about the kind of journey we should sometimes expect—a journey that will have its seasons of challenging storms, shipwrecks, and snakes.

As I said, today we'll be looking at the apostle Paul's voyage from Israel to Rome. As you'll recall, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and held as a prisoner in Caesarea for around two years. When his case failed to be resolved, he appealed to Caesar, which was the right of any Roman citizen, and the authorities put him on a ship for the approximately 2000 mile voyage to Rome.

As you'll also recall, the Lord had assured Paul that he would make it safely to Rome. He had told Paul, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so must you also testify in Rome" (Acts 23:11). The Lord had promised Paul that he would make it to his destination and had commanded that he take courage.

As we'll see today, the Lord's command for Paul to take courage, much like the Lord's command for Joshua to be strong and courageous before entering the Promised Land, was not an idle suggestion. Paul, like Joshua, would need tremendous courage for what lay ahead. The destination was guaranteed, but the journey, as we'll discover, would be hard. Similarly, for us, we need to understand that our own destination—a destination that is infinitely more wonderful than standing before Caesar—is also guaranteed but the journey, like Paul's, will at times be difficult as well and will require tremendous courage.

Our passage today is a very long one, Acts 27:1-28:14. It's essentially a chapter and a half. I wish we could go through the entire passage verse by verse, but that simply isn't possible in 35 minutes. I commend an in-depth study of entire passage to you. However, this morning, although we'll be reading the complete text, we'll only be focusing on certain verses.

Headwinds

As an introduction to the storms, shipwrecks, and snakes, there are two opening sections—two lead-in passages that set the stage. These two sections have to do with headwinds and ignoring good advice.

Acts 27:1-8:

And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. 2 And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. 3 The next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. 4 And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. 5 And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. 6 There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board. 7 We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. 8 Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

Chapter 27 begins with a summary of the first part of the journey to Rome—a journey where Paul and other prisoners, escorted by Roman soldiers, board a ship and make their way from Caesarea sailing up the eastern coast of the Mediterranean then along the southern coast of modern Turkey. The ship was apparently a smaller vessel—essentially a coastal schooner--and the Roman centurion eventually transferred the soldiers and prisoners to a larger vessel for the voyage across the open part of the Mediterranean Sea, the most direct route to Italy.

Unfortunately, on both the smaller and the larger vessels, the opening verses emphasize that the ships encountered headwinds—headwinds that made it difficult to proceed. Headwinds make it difficult to make headway. They are winds that oppose a ship's attempts to move forward, unlike tailwinds that propel a ship in the direction it's seeking to go.

Sometimes, of course, it's like that in our own lives. We attempt to move forward—attempt to sail in a certain direction—and we encounter headwinds. We encounter people and circumstances that make progress difficult. We encounter opposition that slows us down or even jeopardizes our overall undertaking.

After boarding the larger vessel—a vessel, as we'll later learn, that carried 276 people—the ship, still encountering headwinds, arrived at a small port on the southern coast of the island of Crete, a port known as Fair Havens. Here, as we'll see, the crew faced a decision. It faced the decision of either continuing to sail onward or spending the winter in Fair Havens, waiting for better weather in the spring.

Ignoring Good Advice

The next section--the second introductory section--has to do with ignoring good advice. It has to do with ignoring wise counsel, something I suspect most of us have sadly done at one time or another. We've foolishly chosen to move ahead in spite of being told to stay in a safe place, to stay in Fair Havens. We've chosen to reject warnings that could have kept us from harm.

Perhaps, too, we've also had people ignore the good advice we've given them. We've given them a warning about some danger ahead and our warning has not been heeded. It's often that way for me in the recovery ministry working with addicts and alcoholics. I offer what I believe is good advice. I share what I believe is wise counsel, but the advice is frequently ignored. People leave Fair Havens and head in a dangerous direction.

Acts 27:9-13:

Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, 10 saying, "Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." 11 But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. 12 And because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore.”

One of the critical questions of life of course is: who are you going to believe? We all receive information and advice from multiple sources, telling us what we should and shouldn't believe and what we should and shouldn't do. The information, the advice, may be well-intentioned and sincere but obviously good intentions and sincerity doesn't make the advice good, at least in and of themselves. They don't necessarily mean that the advice will be helpful. Some well-intentioned advice may keep us safe, other equally well-intentioned advice may lead to incredible harm.

In these verses, we find the crew and the passengers in a dilemma. Due to the delays caused by the headwinds, it was now a dangerous time of year to sail on the Mediterranean. When it says that the Fast was already over, it means the Fast associated with the Day of Atonement, the only fast commanded in the Old Testament. This would have been during late September of early October, a time of year Roman sailors regarded as increasingly dangerous for sailing.

A decision needed to be made. Should the crew and passengers spend the winter in Fair Havens, which (contrary to what the name might suggest) was not an ideal place to stay, or should they take a chance and sail to the larger port of Phoenix about 40 miles away? Paul's advice was to stay, the pilot and owner's advice was to sail. Ultimately—and, as we'll soon see, unfortunately—Paul's advice was ignored while the pilot and owner's advice was followed. Moreover, a period of pleasant weather seemed to confirm the wisdom of the decision to sail.

No doubt there are times in life when we should to 'go with the experts'—times when we should follow the advice of those who claim to have expertise in a given field. In the passage we're reading, the pilot and the owner of the ship were clearly the experts. They were the ones with the official credentials, the ones who supposedly knew what they were talking about. However, Paul had certain credentials of his own, although those on board may not have been aware of them. According to 2 Corinthians 11:25, Paul had already been shipwrecked three times, making him very aware of the dangers of sailing in the Mediterranean. Even more importantly, Paul was in touch with the expert of all experts. He was in touch with God who may have given him insight into the dangers the ship would encounter, although the text doesn't specifically say so.

As I said, the sermon is entitled “Storms, Shipwrecks, and Snakes”. Those are the main difficulties Paul and his companions are about to face on their voyage to Rome. The introductory sections—the sections we've just been looking at--have primarily been stage-setting and foreshadowing. The headwinds and the ignoring of good advice have set the stage. They have been foreshadowing of the ominous events to come—events we'll now hear about.

Storms

After failing to heed Paul's advice, the sailors departed from Fair Havens trusting that the gentle breeze would carry them 40 miles safely to Phoenix. The circumstances appeared favorable and the distance short. However, as we're about to find out, the sailors had been lulled into a false sense of security, imagining that the gentle breezes would continue. Many of us I'm sure have had similar times ourselves—lulled into a false sense of security, imagining that gentle breezes, the pleasant circumstances, would somehow last.

We come now to the storm itself.

Acts 27:14-26:

But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. 15 And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. 16 Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. 17 After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. 18 Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. 19 And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. 20 When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

21 Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. 22 Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. 23 For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to

whom I belong and whom I worship, 24 and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ 25 So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. 26 But we must run aground on some island.”

Circumstances can of course change suddenly and without warning. One moment the situation appears under control, our lives are sailing smoothly along, and the next moment, without warning, everything changes. A storm arises, an unexpected event occurs, and we find ourselves at the mercy of forces beyond our control. Indeed, I suspect each of us will have times when the storms of life bring us to a point where we feel like giving up, where we feel like abandoning hope of ever being saved.

Personally, during my addiction to drugs and alcohol, there were some times like that. I can remember, for example, lying on the floor at a Grateful Dead concert in San Francisco in the 1970s, high on LSD, alcohol, and marijuana, convinced that I was about to die—convinced that I had overdosed. It was a terrifying experience, feeling that everything was out of control and that I was only moments from death.

The people on the ship clearly had reached a similar point. They had come to the point where things were out of control, and they were resigned to their fate, resigned to death. They had done everything possible to save themselves and had failed. Now, with all hope apparently lost, they simply waited for the ship to go down and for their lives to end.

In some respects, the story we’re reading in Acts is similar to the story of Jonah when he was caught in a storm on the Mediterranean. The crew on Jonah’s ship also threw the cargo overboard in a last-ditch attempt to keep the ship from sinking. The story is also similar to the story in Mark 4 when a storm arose on the Sea of Galilee while Jesus was asleep. The waves came crashing into the boat, and the disciples cried out in fear believing they were going to drown.

Storms can arise for a variety of reasons. They can arise, as in Jonah’s case, because of disobedience or they can arise, as in the disciples’ case, while they were seeking to follow what the Lord had told them to do. Storms come for both the disobedient and the obedient. Storms come, as Jesus says in Matthew 7, both for those who build their house on the sand and for those who build their house on the rock. Storms are part of life in

this present world, whether we follow Jesus or not. The difference is, for those who rely on the Lord, the storms will not prove our ultimate undoing. They will not cause our ship to sink or our house to come crashing down.

Perhaps the main value of storms is this: storms bring us to the end of ourselves. They bring us to the point where we confront our own powerlessness, our own personal inability handle life in our own strength. This can be a terrifying place, as it was for me when I was high on LSD, confronting immanent danger and feeling completely inadequate. And yet, from a spiritual standpoint, coming to the end of ourselves can also be a place of great opportunity, painful as it may be. For those who don’t know the Lord, storms can be an opportunity to call out to him for the first time. For those who do know the Lord, they can be an opportunity to encounter and trust him more deeply than ever before.

By the way, this idea—the idea of storms bringing us to the end of ourselves—is at the heart of Step 1 of Alcoholics Anonymous. Step 1 says, “We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.” Step 1 involves a recognition of personal powerlessness and inadequacy. It involves admitting that we don’t have what it takes to survive the storm of alcoholism and drug addiction. Until that point is reached—until we come to the end of ourselves and our own efforts—we will never begin trusting God, trusting in a power that is greater than ourselves.

Paul’s first words to those who had lost hope might initially seem petty. It sounds like he’s saying, “See, I told you so. I was right and you were wrong. If you hadn’t ignored my good advice, none of this would ever have happened.” However, since Paul’s message is ultimately one of hope and encouragement, it seems more likely that he is simply setting the record straight to establish his credibility. He is essentially saying, “I told you the truth before, and you didn’t believe me. Hopefully, you’ll believe me this time.”

Interestingly, Paul’s own faith appears to have been shaken during the storm as well. The text says, “...all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.” ‘Our’ seems to imply that Paul, Luke, and the other believers on board may also have abandoned hope. Also, the angel’s first words, “Don’t be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar,” seem to indicate that Paul himself had become fearful and was in need of encouragement.

Interestingly, too, the angel's words—the words Paul shares with those onboard—convey God's grace and encouragement to everyone on the ship, both believers and unbelievers. No doubt the Lord could have allowed only the believers to survive and the unbelievers to die. And yet, in testimony to his incredible grace, he extends his hand of protection to all, regardless of their faith or lack thereof. There were many times in my own life when God protected me from harm long before I became a believer, and I suspect most of you can say that same thing.

Nonetheless, although the angel's message was full of encouragement and grace, it was essentially good news/bad news. The good news was, everyone would live. The bad news was, there was going to be a shipwreck. The outcome would be good, but, before then, things were going to get worse.

Shipwrecks

Act 27:27-44:

When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. 28 So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms. 29 And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. 30 And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, 31 Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." 32 Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it go.

33 As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. 34 Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you." 35 And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. 36 Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. 37 (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) 38 And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. 40 So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. 41 But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. 42 The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. 43 But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, 44 and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

After fourteen days of being tossed by the storm, the sailors realized that the water was becoming shallower and shallower. They realized that they were about to run aground. To further complicate matters, it was night, and they were unable to tell if the ship was approaching jagged rocks or a smooth sandy beach. Understandably, some of the sailors began to panic, climbing into the lifeboat under the pretense of dropping additional anchors to help secure the ship.

In contrast to the sailors' panic, Paul remained under control and took charge. The prisoner became the leader, first telling the centurion and the soldiers to prevent the crew from escaping and then encouraging everyone to eat before intentionally lightening the ship and sailing it toward the beach. For this to happen—for a Roman centurion and a crew of sailors to begin obeying a prisoner—may well be evidence of their dawning faith. It may well be evidence of their willingness to trust Paul and, in a deeper sense, to trust the God in whom Paul himself believed.

Although the text doesn't specifically say so, it would also seem likely that everyone's faith increased as a result of their safe arrival on shore. Paul had declared that no one would perish and no one did. The chances of that happening—the chances of all 276 people surviving storm-tossed waters after a shipwreck—would appear virtually zero. A miracle had occurred and no doubt everyone sensed it. Paul had spoken prophetically, and against all odds, his prophecy had come true.

As I said earlier, the reality is, God often allows the storms of life, as well as the shipwrecks and snakes, to provide opportunities for faith. Either they provide opportunities to begin having faith for the first time, or they provide opportunities to grow in that faith. When we arrive at the end of ourselves, we also arrive at the beginning of an opportunity to trust in One who is far greater than ourselves.

To develop this idea a bit... I often speak of the School of Faith--a school that God wants everyone to enter and attend. Initial entrance to this school is through faith in Jesus Christ. We enter the School of Faith when we first place our faith in Jesus. Once enrolled, we begin attending various classes—classes aimed at deepening our faith, deepening our dependence on God.

In the School of Faith, there are lower division, upper division, and graduate level classes. In a lower division class, when we have a problem, we pray, and the problem goes away. In an upper division class, when we have a problem, we pray, and the problem doesn't go away. In a graduate level class, when we have a problem, we pray, and the problem gets worse.

When I first became a Christian, I usually attended lower division classes in the School of Faith. When I had a problem—when a storm would arise—I would pray, and the problem would go away, generally quickly. For example, I remember one time in the early 1980s when my wife and I moved to Berkeley to do church planting with Calvary Chapel. We had a two-year-old, and my wife was eight months pregnant with our second child. We were down to our last \$50, which was a challenge to our faith, and we felt like the ship was about to go down. However, we prayed, and the next day a check for \$3000 arrived in the mailbox. The problem went away. My Aunt Hattie had died some months earlier, and although I didn't even know I'd been included in the will, the executor sent me a check.

As the years have gone by, the Lord has had me attend more difficult classes. The problems, the storms, have lasted longer and have sometimes grown worse. The storms have sometimes been followed by shipwrecks. And yet, the Lord's objective is the always the same. His objective in the School of Faith is always to deepen our faith. His objective is to deepen our trust in him.

At this point in our passage, we've seen Paul in a graduate level class in the School of Faith. The problem didn't disappear quickly, and then the problem got worse. The storm was followed by the shipwreck. What comes next might be called a post-graduate level class

in the School of Faith. The shipwreck is now going to be followed by a snakebite. Worse is going to be followed by even worse.

Snakes

Acts 28:1-14:

After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. 2 The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. 3 When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. 4 When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." 5 He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

7 Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. 8 It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. 9 And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. 10 They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

11 After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. 12 Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. 13 And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. 14 There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome.

As I said, there may be times when we feel like we're in a graduate or a post-graduate level class in the School of Faith. One problem is followed by another, and then, just when we think the final problem is over—just when we're about to breathe a sigh of relief—we're ambushed by something else. It may well have been like that for the crew and passengers on the beach at Malta. The storm and the shipwreck were over, and then, just when they were about to breathe a sigh of relief, a venomous snake suddenly latched onto Paul's hand.

Before talking specifically about the snakebite, let me mention a curious detail in the story. Namely, before being bitten by the snake, Paul had been collecting a bundle of sticks to put on the fire. He had been doing what was clearly a menial task. He had been doing a task that would normally not have been assigned to a leader—or, more accurately, he had been doing a task that would normally not have been assigned to a leader in the worldly sense of the term.

And that, of course, is precisely the point. Paul was a leader, but he was not a leader in the worldly sense of the term. He was a leader as Jesus defined it. He was a living example of Jesus' words, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28). Christian leadership is servant leadership. It is leadership that seeks to serve and to bless others, no matter how menial the task, whether it means washing feet or collecting sticks for a fire on a cold and rainy day.

Hopefully, as we begin to understand the idea of servant leadership, we'll also begin to understand that the storms, shipwrecks, and snakebites of life are not only for our benefit. They are not only intended to deepen our own personal faith. They are also intended to benefit others. They are opportunities for God to use us in drawing others to himself. God not only works in us, but he also works through us. As people see how we conduct ourselves and how we go through the difficulties of life, our lives become a powerful witness to the reality of God. They become living evidence, living testimony, to God's presence within us.

Indeed, this is exactly what the Lord declared would happen at the very beginning of Acts when told his followers, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The power we receive from

the Holy Spirit is the power to be the Lord's witnesses. It is the power, as many have said, to make the unseen Jesus visible. Jesus is not only transforming us to become more and more like him, but he is also using us in his divine plan to draw lost, broken, and hurting men and women to himself.

In this process, there will be times when we will be misunderstood. There will be times when people will see what is happening to us and come, at least temporarily, to the wrong conclusion. They will see us behaving like servants, will see us encountering storms, shipwrecks, and snakebites of life, and will conclude that God must be against us, not for us. They will conclude that the difficulties we are going through are evidence of God's opposition rather than his support. This, of course, was what happened to Job when his friends saw him going through loss after heartbreaking loss and concluded that God was punishing him.

Similarly, in our present passage, when the snake bit Paul, the onlookers initially jumped to the wrong conclusion. They misunderstood what was going on, surmising that Paul was a criminal whom Justice would not allow to escape. In their view, Paul was a murderer, and the snake was his divinely appointed executioner. In their view, bad things didn't happen to good people. There were cause and effect. Bad effects didn't come from good causes, and good effects didn't come from bad causes. Criminals were punished, and innocent people were not. Otherwise, there would be no justice.

The problem was, Paul's onlookers had arrived at their conclusion, arrived at their verdict, before all of the evidence was in. They saw Paul bitten by the snake, assumed he would die, and concluded that he was a criminal being punished for his crime. However, as time passed and as Paul remained unaffected by the poison, the onlookers realized their assumption and their conclusion had both been wrong. When all of the evidence was in—when sufficient time had passed, and Paul continued to live—they changed their minds, concluding instead that he was a god. As you'll recall, the citizens of Lystra arrived at basically the same conclusion in Acts 14, deciding that Paul and Barnabas were Zeus and Hermes after a lame man had been healed.

In some respects, the onlookers' new conclusion was as mistaken as their first. Paul was not a god nor was he a murderer. And yet, in another sense, the onlookers' new conclusion was at least somewhat closer to the truth. Their new conclusion acknowledged divine blessing rather than divine opposition. Their new conclusion placed Paul in a favorable light rather than an unfavorable one.

Surviving a deadly snakebite clearly has deeper symbolic meaning and significance. In Numbers 21, the Israelites were healed of deadly snakebites when they looked in faith at a bronze snake nailed to a pole. Later, Jesus, referring to this event, told Nicodemus, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15).

Ever since the Garden of Eden, the devil has of course been likened to a snake, and sin has been likened to his venom. Sin is the venom that kills us spiritually, and, as the scriptures resoundingly proclaim, the only antidote is faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus is the only way to be healed from the otherwise deadly snakebite of sin. It is the only way to receive the healing we all so desperately need.

When the onlookers saw Paul survive the poisonous snakebite, they realized another miracle had occurred. They realized something supernatural had taken place. May the onlookers in our own lives sense the same thing about us as well. May they sense God’s miraculous work in us. No, we don’t need to handle literal snakes, as some (I believe without scriptural basis) have done. Rather, as God transforms us, as God heals us from the deadly snakebite of such things like addiction, anger, lust, greed, malice, envy, hatred, resentment, and bitterness, may it serve as a testimony to those with whom we come in contact. May it serve as a testimony to the miraculous and supernatural presence of God in our lives.

Unfortunately, we don’t have time today for an in-depth look at the remainder of Paul’s trip to Rome. We don’t have time to discuss what happened during the winter on Malta or the trip from Malta to Rome. The Lord had assured Paul that he would make it safely to Rome and, in short, the Lord fulfilled his promise. The Lord did what he said he would do.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the morning, I asked this question: what is your expectation for Christian life? Do you imagine, as I did as a new Christian, that Christian life generally will be problem free, that it will be smooth sailing most if not all of the time? If so, as I said, I would suggest that you’re going to find Christian life a disappointment. The reality is, although God gives

us many wonderful moments, he also gives us times of incredible difficulty—times that are filled with various storms, shipwrecks, and snakes.

When those times come, may we remember that this is to be expected as followers of Jesus. This is part of what we should anticipate as we seek to follow him. As Peter said, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:12-13).

Again, when those times come, I pray that God will encourage us. I pray that he will encourage us with a renewed understanding of his purpose—his purpose to bring us to the end of ourselves, to deepen our faith, and to use us in drawing others to himself. May he encourage us too in a way that is heart-level and gut-level, not merely theoretical and theological. May his encouragement permeate the way we actually live, the way we actually experience life.