

**Acts 28:1-16, No. 53**  
**“The Spectacular and the Ordinary”**  
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Paul and the 275 others on the ship had made their way safely to shore on what proved to be the island of Malta.

**Text Comment**

- v.2 “Native people” is literally “barbarians,” a term which in that time probably meant simply someone who didn’t speak Greek, though it may well have carried the connotation of rustic and uneducated. “Barbarian” conveys a picture to the first readers of Acts that “islanders” does not.
- v.3 Paul was a helpful sort as we all ought to be; he pitched in and he certainly didn’t stand on his privileges as an apostle or as the one who had saved the ship’s company from death by drowning.
- T.E. Lawrence, the famous “Lawrence of Arabia,” relates a similar case from his own experience. In his book *Revolt in the Desert* (107) he relates this incident. “When the fire grew hot a long black snake wound slowly out into our group; we must have gathered it, torpid, with the twigs.” We are told that there are no vipers on Malta today, but, of course, those sorts of changes in the fauna of a place are commonplace, especially over a period of 2,000 years. Think of snakes that once were found in Ireland, but are no longer. By “fastened on his hand” is meant that the snake bit him as vipers do not coil. [Bruce, 521-522]
- v.4 “Justice” is rightly capitalized. It is a reference to the goddess Dikē, the personification of justice. The Maltese were thinking that the goddess had obviously not been outwitted by Paul’s escape from the storm. There is a Greek poem of the period that tells precisely such a story: a murderer escaped from a storm at sea, was shipwrecked on the coast of Libya, but was then killed by a viper. [Bruce, 522n]
- v.6 We have all heard of “snake-handlers,” especially in American Appalachia, who prove their faith and the power of the Spirit by handling poisonous snakes without harm to themselves. You may also remember that in the so-called long ending of the Gospel of Mark, that part of chapter 16 that is usually regarded, and for good reasons, as a later addition to the Gospel, we find the promise that the Lord’s disciples would be able to do this. “They will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them” (Mark 16:18). In all likelihood that text is based on this incident, rather than *vice versa*. In any case Luke seems to find some humor in the fact that first they thought Paul was a murderer and a few moments later concluded that he was a god!
- v.8 The man was suffering from a typical Maltese affliction, so typical that it came to be known as “Maltese fever.” The micro-organism that causes it was identified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

and traced to the milk of goats. A vaccine was developed but if the fever takes hold it usually lasts for months and sometimes for several years.

- v.9 These are the last recorded miraculous healings or, for that matter, miracles of any kind found in the New Testament. Indeed, in 2 Timothy, written several years later, Paul writes that he had to leave his aide and friend Trophimus “ill at Miletus.” No miraculous cure for him even though Paul was in great need of his companionship. The age of miracles was over. In any case, we have here a splendid example of what we might call the “bottom line” in the identification of an actual miracle. Do *unbelievers* recognize that supernatural power is being wielded? That is the true test in the Bible and in life.
- v.10 It is interesting that nothing is said of Paul’s preaching to these people or of some of them becoming Christians. In all likelihood both happened but Luke was simply running out of space on the scroll.
- v.11 Another of Luke’s many eye-witness touches. The prow of the ship was decorated with figures of Castor and Pollux, the sons of Jupiter and the patrons of navigators. They had had to wait the three months for sea travel to begin again. It was by then perhaps mid-February.
- v.12 Since the length of stay is of no importance, this too is an eyewitness touch. Syracuse is northeast of Malta on the coast of Sicily. Rhegium, their next stop, is in the toe of Italy.
- v.13 Made a circuit probably means that the winds required a good bit of tacking. Luke was impressed that a favorable wind had enabled them to make the nearly 200 sea miles from Rhegium to Puteoli in a single 24 hour period. Puteoli, then as now, was the most sheltered part of the Bay of Naples. [Bruce, 526] There was an important Jewish community there, which probably explains why there was likewise a Christian community.
- v.14 Paul was not a free man and so his week-long stay in Puteoli was no doubt due to the fact that for one reason or another the Centurion had business there that delayed their progress for that week. Just a few miles from Puteoli they would have reached the Appian Way, the great Roman road that led south from Rome. The week’s delay allowed for news of Paul’s approach to be sent ahead to the Christians in Rome.
- v.15 Some of the brothers traveled as far south of Rome as the Forum of Appius, some 43 miles from the capital, others only as far south as Three Taverns, some 33 miles from the city.

Now there is something here of no importance to the narrative but of some interest to American Christians brought up under the shadow of dispensationalism and its teaching of a secret rapture of the church seven years before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. According to this teaching, Christ will descend to a point near the earth, the believing church – both the dead and living – will meet him in the air and the entire company will return to heaven to wait for seven more years. I grew up hearing about the “rapture” and

watching movies about the sudden disappearance of Christians from the world. I know of one couple who never locked their door at night, but secured it with a plank under the door knob on the inside, all for fear that if the rapture occurred during the night, their little children would not be able to get out of the house!

The ESV properly renders the final phrase of the first sentence of v. 15 “to meet us.” Literally it reads: “for a meeting with us.” That same phrase is found in 1 Thess. 4:17 where famously, and only this once in the Bible, the saints are said “to meet the Lord in the air,” which meeting, according to dispensational thinking is the rapture, which, accordingly, would be immediately followed by the Lord’s return with his saints to heaven, there to wait for seven more years, the seven years of the Great Tribulation. But the use of the term here in Acts 28 contradicts that interpretation. The term seems to describe diplomatic practice, when a visiting dignitary was met outside the city by the city’s leaders so they might escort him into the city. These brothers came out to meet Paul precisely for the purpose of escorting him into the capital, to form his entourage and to accompany him the rest of the way to his destination. There is nothing here or in 1 Thessalonians about turning around and returning to the place from which he had come. The “rapture,” as the rest of the New Testament bears witness, is simply part of that event we call the Second Coming, the church meeting the Lord in the air to escort him the rest of the way to the earth. We come out to meet him and continue to travel onward with him to the earth. That’s the idea.

v.16 House arrest was a typical form of incarceration. Much of the time he would have been bound to a soldier wrist to wrist, the “chain” he mentions in v. 20.

With this final “we” Luke disappears from the narrative. But we know from Colossians and Philemon, letters written during this time, that Luke had remained with Paul.

The long travel narrative has reached its conclusion. After two years under arrest in Caesarea and after the ordeal of the sea voyage that ended in shipwreck, Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, is at last in the capital of the Greco-Roman world, where the Lord had promised to take him. Next time we will pay some attention to the obvious importance of Rome and of Paul’s having come to Rome in Luke’s narrative. But this part of the story of how Paul reached Rome is worth our attention. In some ways, the events narrated in these few verses are the details of a larger story – we might even refer to them as local color – but in the Bible even the details carry great weight and can be turned to our spiritual advantage.

We might easily pass over these verses as Paul quickly passed through these various places on his way to Rome. But accounts like these often have more to teach us than we realize and are often beautiful pictures, depictions, and illustrations of spiritual truth. What we have here, in fact, is a marvelously suggestive and accurate picture of your life and of mine as Christians.

It isn’t the picture, I’m sure, anyone has in his mind when he or she is first converted to God. It wasn’t the picture the disciples had in their minds when they first began to follow Jesus or in those first heady days after Pentecost when their assault on the unbelieving world around them produced one triumph after another and the entire world seemed to lie at their feet. What we

have here, as so often in the narrative of Holy Scripture, and what we have found in our own experience, as have all Christians before us, is this strange mixture of spiritual day and spiritual night, of power and weakness, of victory and defeat, of blessing and of disappointment. This chiaroscuro, this alternation of light and shadow, is a very important part or dimension of a biblical worldview, of a faithful understanding of the way of Christians in the world.

Think of this for a moment in connection with the narrative we just read. We have Paul's immunity to snakebite. I wonder if it left him with even so much as an itch where the snake had bitten him. We know only too well how snakes terrify us! On my first trip to India in 1975 I stayed in the home of Bruce and Judy Fiol – PCA missionaries there for many years. And on one occasion Bruce and I fell to talking about snakes, because there are a lot of snakes in India, cobras especially! Bruce mentioned to me that one night when he was alone in the house – Judy and the kids were away in the mountains where the children went to school – and as he was preparing for bed he saw a krait slither from his bedroom into the bathroom. If you don't know, the krait's venom or the neurotoxins in it are very dangerous and too often lethal. It is a nocturnal animal and most encounters with humans occur at night. If bitten by a krait while sleeping, a victim may not realize he has been bitten, as the bite feels like that of an ant or mosquito. The victim may die without waking up. Yikes! But Bruce told me he had a discussion with himself as to whether he should bother to get the snake out of the bathroom or just go to bed. I couldn't believe it! I would have lain in bed, with my eyes wide open the rest of the night and would never have gone into that bathroom again. And here was a viper, obviously a deadly snake, hanging on Paul's hand. The Maltese obviously expected him to die from the bite. And...nothing. He simply shook the viper off into the fire. What must it have been like to be the Apostle Paul!

And from that event there came the opportunity to visit the island's governor and heal his father, from which healing came the opportunity to heal many sick people on the island. In a moment Paul was the most popular man on the Island of Malta. Everybody had heard of him, everybody wanted to see him. Another gospel triumph, because we can be sure that Paul did not allow the opportunity to explain who and what he was to be wasted. These people heard of Jesus Christ as they saw his power at work. Luke expects us to realize that. But what a magnificent experience to witness, still more to wield, God's almighty power oneself. Think of Luke and Aristarchus. They were not apostles, but they watched Paul at work, they saw the miracle working power of God. Tell me it didn't send chills up and down their spines!

And then, when they finally met some Christian leaders on the Appian Way some miles south of Rome and were welcomed warmly by them – someone who walks some 40 miles just to be the first to say "Hello!" obviously is enthusiastic about your arrival – Paul must have felt that his arrival in Rome was something of a capstone to his ministry. If the Roman believers admired him so much, if they were this eager to meet him, what could Paul conclude but that the Lord had honored his life and ministry in a most wonderful way!

And then the first sight of the city, walking through the gates after all the hardship he had endured getting there, after the attempts made to kill him, after the two years spent languishing under arrest in Caesarea, that must have been intensely satisfying, even thrilling to the great

man. Rome being Rome, meaning what it meant to the progress of the gospel, hard as it had been to get there, arriving in the city must have been one of the highlights of Paul's life.

Now all of us would love to live a life marked by so many spiritual triumphs and so many deep and lasting satisfactions. All of us would love to be so admired and valued by others, people who in our lives were the equivalent of the Maltese islanders or the leaders of the church in Rome. That's living!

But, of course, alongside all of that for Paul was the long, discouraging two years in Caesarea, day after day with no movement on his case, then the great storm and the shipwreck, and, who knows, Paul was no spring chicken at this point in his life. For all we know, supposing Paul was in his sixties at this time, the cold and the wet brought on a cold, or a walk of more than a hundred miles on the Appian Way may have left his joints aching something fierce, with no Advil or Tylenol to relieve the pain.

But, still more and supremely, his arrival at Rome was *as a prisoner*. It was all very well to walk through the gates of the city at last, to be in the company of fellow Christians as he did so, but all the while he was chained to a soldier – we must not miss the humiliation, the embarrassment, or the frustration at continued confinement! That first night in Rome he didn't go to bed in some wealthy Christian's comfortable guest room but in some government lodging chained to his guard.

What is more, while the Lord had told him he would reach Rome, he had not told Paul what the outcome of his trial would be or how long it would be before his case was adjudicated. There was still danger for Paul, an uncertain fate looming over him. And, as it happened, after the two years of incarceration in Caesarea we will read in the second to the last verse of the book that it would be two more years at least before his case would come to trial. He was under a very generous form of arrest, but he was still under arrest, still confined to the place where his jailer had put him.

This alternation of light and shadow, the mixture of joy and pain even in the same life at the same time, is a permanent feature of the Bible's description of the Christian life. And it is as well an emphasis in Paul's own teaching about the Christian life. It is something he knew only too well and something he knew would be the case in every other Christian life. He knew it wouldn't be only he who could on one occasion boast of having received surpassing visions and on another occasion mention the times he was beaten or stoned or confess the wretchedness he felt over his continuing sinfulness.

When I was in seminary in the 1970s everyone was talking about the new paradigm in biblical theology. We were reading the books of the Baptist theologian and New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd, and learning some new buzz words: inaugurated eschatology, the presence of the future, and, especially, the "now but not yet." The idea was that the Bible and Jesus especially seemed to teach that the consummation of all things was already with us in a proleptic form, in the way of anticipation; that is, it is a condition of life in *this* world not only in the world to come.

Just as in the Gospel of John *eternal life* is something believers *already have in this world, even if it is not experienced in its fullness until we are in heaven*, so in the teaching of Jesus and Paul the kingdom of God as it will be in the future has broken into this world in the present and believers see it and experience, if only in a partial way. To put it another way, the kingdom of God is both present and future – the same kingdom, the same reality, in varying degrees.

Now, typical of scholarship, what was being trumpeted as a new discovery, was only what ordinary readers of the Bible had long known and understood. At every turn they encountered this “now but not yet” character to Christian experience, as they encountered the description of it in their Bibles. David can speak of having “seen” God in the sanctuary, but the Bible also speaks of the change that will come over us when finally we *see* God. Paul can speak of having been delivered from bondage to sin and, a few verses later, of still struggling with his bondage and longing to escape from it. He can also describe the Christian as “sorrowful but always rejoicing.” We don’t *see* God now as one day we shall see him; we don’t experience the victory over sin that will someday be ours; and our hearts’ experience of joy in the Lord and in our salvation is not as it will one day be when unmixed with sorrow of any kind. But the kingdom of God has already broken into the world and into our lives.

In fact this now but not yet tension was reflected, and profoundly, in the life of George Ladd himself, who introduced us young men to the concept and taught us to think about the Christian life in this way. He had been converted as a teenager and found his way into biblical scholarship, eventually securing a PhD at Harvard. But before he was admitted he had been rejected for doctoral work at a number of other schools, rejections that wounded him deeply and which perhaps he never entirely got over, even after having made his reputation as a scholar of international fame.

He craved acceptance by the scholarly guild – his personal insecurities ran back deep into his childhood – and was devastated by the harshly critical review of his first book by a well-known liberal biblical scholar. His close friends spoke of the change in him after that review was published. Anger and depression followed. Though making great contributions to evangelical theology in the years that followed, his marriage teetered on the brink of divorce for some years and he slowly descended into the abyss of alcoholism. This good man provided immensely important service to the evangelical church, freeing much of it from its captivity to dispensationalism and encouraging evangelicals to engage in serious scholarship. The renaissance of evangelical scholarship over the past generation – now to the point that evangelical scholarship rivals, if it does not surpass, liberal biblical scholarship in sophistication and authority – owes much to Ladd’s example and inspiration. But his was a difficult life and in some ways a sad life. [cf. the reviews of John D’Elia, *A Place at the Table: George Eldon Ladd and the Rehabilitation of Evangelical Scholarship in America* by A. Donald MacLeod [Books and Culture (May/June 2009) 8; Michael Bryant, *WTJ*] It was not until he came at last to the gates of the city that he lost his chain!

Like it or not, in one way or another, to one degree or another, this is every Christian’s life. We think of Samuel Rutherford as a man who was closer to Jesus and had a deeper joy in fellowship with Jesus than we imagine it possible for us ever to have or enjoy, but we forget that he also struggled with doubts as to whether or not there even was a God! We think of the great

theologian Benjamin Warfield as one of the great defenders of the Christian faith, a man whose erudition takes our breath away. We tend to forget that he went home every day to a mentally invalid wife who was never again the woman he married after they were caught out in a thunderstorm in the Swiss Alps *on their honeymoon!*

Why are our lives like this? We can only say so much in answer to that question. But surely their being this way means that there is enough of the future triumph and glory and joy to whet our appetite and keep us believing in the reality of the kingdom of God. And there is enough of the old life and the old world and the old heart to keep us from ever forgetting that only the grace and power of God could save people such as ourselves and that our only hope of heaven rests in our keeping our hand tightly in the hand of the Lord. In the midst of our daily lives we must ask ourselves repeatedly: "Am I doubting the present reign of the Lord Jesus or am I doubting its future consummation and triumph?" In my experience and I know in many of yours it is always one thing or the other. Our failure is always a failure of one or the other: to embrace the *present* kingdom or to forget the *future* kingdom!

Better that we remember that if we have to be chained to a guard, we are, after all, on our way to the Eternal City!