

Christ in all of Scripture

Paul on Malta

Acts 27:33-44; 28:1-10

Read the Passage



“Saint Paul and the Viper on Malta”

Acts 27:33-44

³³And as day was about to dawn, Paul implored them all to take food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day you have waited and continued without food, and eaten nothing. ³⁴Therefore I urge you to take nourishment, for this is for your survival, since not a hair will fall from the head of any of you.” ³⁵And when he had said these things, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat. ³⁶Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves. ³⁷And in all we were two hundred and seventy-six persons on the ship. ³⁸So when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship and threw out the wheat into the sea.

³⁹When it was day, they did not recognize the land; but they observed a bay with a beach, onto which they planned to run the ship if possible. ⁴⁰And they let go the anchors and left them in the sea, meanwhile losing the rudder ropes; and they hoisted the mainsail to the wind and made for shore. ⁴¹But striking a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves.

⁴²And the soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape. ⁴³But the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, ⁴⁴and the rest, some on boards and some on parts of the ship. And so it was that they all escaped safely to land.



Acts 28:1-10

¹Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta. ²And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold. ³But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand. ⁴So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live." ⁵But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. ⁶However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

⁷In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days. ⁸And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him. ⁹So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed. ¹⁰They also honored us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary.

Gospel Preview in the Text

JESUS' SUFFERING & GLORY

1. Jesus **took bread and giving thanks, broke it** and gave it to his disciples (Luke 22:19).
2. Jesus was crucified, receiving lethal wounds to his **hands** (stigmaton) (Luke 23:33).
3. Jesus, crucified with thieves, was regarded as a criminal, taking the place of Barabbas, a **murderer** (Luke 23:18-19,33). After he showed his power over death, he was worshiped as **God** (Acts 2:36, cf. Matt 28:17, John 20:28).
4. **After three days**, Jesus came forth from the grave (Luke 24:7).
5. Jesus commissioned his disciples **to proclaim the gospel** to all the nations (Luke 28:47).

PAUL'S SUFFERING & GLORY

1. Paul **took bread and giving thanks, broke it** and gave it to those on the ship (Acts 27:35-36).
2. As Paul gathered wood for a fire, a viper came out of the wood and fastened onto his **hand** (stigmaton) (Acts 28:3).
3. Paul was regarded as a **murderer** by the Maltese, who thought justice¹ was exacting punishment upon him through the viper. But when Paul suffered no harm from his lethal wound, they instead concluded he must be a **god** (Acts 28:4-6).
4. **After three days**, Paul worked miracles on Malta (Acts 28:7-8).
5. The island of Malta heard and received the gospel and blessed **the furtherance of the gospel** ministry of Paul (Acts 28:10).

¹ It is likely that "justice" would have been understood by the Maltese as the goddess Dike (justice).



Prophetic Narrative of the Gospel in the Text

1. The gospel pattern of Paul on Malta begins with the apostle encouraging his shipmates to take a meal. He says, "This is for your (lit.) salvation." It is an emblematic Eucharistic meal in anticipation of their imminent shipwreck. All who partake of the meal are promised deliverance, but for Paul it is ordained that he will be saved through a special kind of gospel suffering.
2. Once safely on shore on Malta, the shipmates gather wood for a fire and Paul assists them. Among the brush the apostle gathers is a viper that is particularly venomous. The Maltese know that its bite is lethal. The viper hidden in the brush comes out when Paul puts the brush on the fire.² The viper fastens onto his hand. The wound is a *stigmaton*, a wound of the cross.
3. Luke tells the account of Paul and the shipwreck through the eyes of the native Maltese. When the natives, who know the toxic pathology of the viper's venom, see Paul bitten, they assume he must be a murderer released from the prison ship. Though he escaped the storm, justice has not allowed him to escape his fate (Acts 28:4-5). When Paul suffers no harm from the viper, the islanders assume he must be divinely immortal (Acts 28:6). Jesus was likewise numbered with criminals in his condemnation, taking the place of the murderer Barabbas and crucified with thieves (Luke 23:18-19; 23:32). Yet in his resurrection from death, he received worship as God (Acts 2:36).
4. The "third day" is often the time of the manifestation of resurrection power. Jesus' resurrection on the third day corresponds in the account of Paul on Malta to the time three days after Paul received the viper bite, when he begins to work miracles of healing (Acts 28:7-8).
5. Jesus' commission to take the gospel to the nations, announced after the resurrection, is furthered as Paul departs Malta for Rome, where Paul announces that the nations will hear and heed the gospel of Christ (Acts 28:28).

Gospel Takeaways from the Text

1. Jesus said that all who follow him must take up their cross daily. Far from being an ominous and onerous duty, our experience of taking up our cross of suffering should be the chief joy of a disciple! Hebrews tells us that Jesus underwent his suffering in such a manner as to disregard the shame,

² The viper cast into the fire is language unique to the beginning of Luke and the end of Acts. John the Baptist warns the religious leaders of Jerusalem that they are the brood of the viper, about to be cast into the fire (Luke 3:7,9). The viper attaching to Paul rehearses the Lord's own struggle with the powers of darkness, using the same emblems and imagery. Luke elsewhere uses stigmatic imagery to correspond Peter with Jesus when he is struck in the side (Acts 12:7), recalling the spear that strikes Christ on the cross, and with Paul and Silas, when their feet are pinioned to the stocks (Gk wood) (Acts 16:24).



setting his heart on the joy set before him of winning the redemption of his people. So we can contextualize what “taking up” our cross should mean:

First, suffering is a grace. Paul says that it has been granted to us not only to believe, but to suffer for his name (Phil 1:29). If suffering is a gift, we can sweeten it by receiving it with thanksgiving.

Second, suffering is given to us only as the Lord counts us worthy. Peter and John were beaten by the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:40). After they were released, they left “rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41).

Third and finally, God has promised that he will always bring glory out of our suffering. “For our light and momentary affliction is working a far greater weight of eternal glory” (2 Cor 4:17). Stephen’s death resulted in the eternal life of the young man he prayed for named Saul. Peter’s release from prison encouraged the believers in the miraculous power of prayer. Paul and Silas suffered in prison to the salvation of the prisoners and the jailor. Paul on Malta suffered the wounding of the viper, but God used that circumstance to authenticate the divine power of the gospel Paul preached to the salvation of the entire island!

2. The pattern we see in the Book of Acts is that believers are being conformed to the suffering and glory of the life of Jesus. We Christians have the privilege to participate in a grand narrative far greater than we could ever imagine apart from divine revelation. There is a magnificent artistry to our redemption that reflects the gospel rhythm of suffering and glory. We see this pattern, as the inspired evangelist Luke tells it, in the Christ-like, gospel experiences of Stephen, Peter, Paul, and Silas. By understanding their experiences, we are invited to understand our own! The Christian life is a grand adventure! We should look for the cruciform images and stigmata of Christ’s suffering in our own lives. Such a sympathetic understanding of Jesus’ suffering will show us the way to love our Savior more!

