

“PAUL ON MALTA.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Texts for the Sermon: Acts 28:1-10

Introduction.

On September 11, 2001, at 9:45 am, Ben Sliney, in his first day as the National Operations Manager of the FAA, ordered American airspace closed for the first time in history. There were 500 international flights inbound that were turned back or redirected to other countries.

38 jets landed in the little town of Gander, Newfoundland. The town of 6,700 people took in 7,000 passengers for five days. The residents quickly mobilize every available resource to provide shelter, food and clothes. Cots were set up in school gyms and social centers. People opened their homes to provide showers and meals. Bakeries went into overdrive production, hospitals staffed up, school bus drivers who were on strike came off strike to transport the plane people. One woman took on the feeding all the animals on the flights. The passengers were overwhelmed with the outpouring of unusual kindness and generosity.

Acts 28:1-2, unusual kindness.

On a fall day 2,000 years ago a ship left Fair Havens, on the island of Crete to sail 42 miles west to Phoenix to spend the winter. They were diverted and two weeks and 500 miles later they shipwrecked on a beach in Malta.

I am trying to imagine this scene. 276 men soaking wet, chilled to the bone, filthy, shivering, shaking, hungry and thirsty, having just crawled out of the surf, sitting on a beach in a cold rain. Absolutely miserable.

God sends a most unusual kindness. On this island, we see more evidence of the providence of God. He directly carried every man out of the water to safety on the shore. And then He sends upon them the most unusual kindness.

Foreigners who are not Christians exhibit unusual kindness to these strangers, many of whom are prisoners, criminals. They didn't ask for these strangers, for this inconvenience, but they rose to the occasion. This is given to us to learn from and imitate.

Hospitality is a human virtue that is valued in some cultures more than others. It is commanded to us as Christians to practice hospitality.

I Peter 4:8-9 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Romans 12:13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Hebrews 13:2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

God's faithfulness to His promises never ceases, He cares for us and provides for us. Whatever benefits we receive from others, come from the hand of God.

Let us be willing to do good by whatever means we have and are able to use wherever providence places us. Sometimes we entertain angels unaware, and maybe apostles. Do unto others as you would want done to you.

May our attitudes and actions imitate these pagans. May we show unusual hospitality in our homes, in our church, in our community, especially to the strangers and foreigners in our midst. Lynden and First Church more than Malta should be a place of unusual hospitality because of the unusual kindness of God toward us all.

Acts 28:3-6, unusual misfortune.

Notice the apostle Paul was out gathering wood for the fire. This labor was not beneath him. Don't let anything be beneath your dignity. Remember Dr. Luke on the ship helping the sailors secure the ship's skiff.

Notice the unusual providences of life. We can be doing a good deed, doing something from which we expect to gain some benefit, or going about our work, and be surprised by some misfortune.

What do you make of this unusual misfortune of a snake bite? Talk about bad luck, right? Is it bad luck? Is there any such thing as luck, fate, chance?

What do we make of the native's worldview and thoughts about this unusual misfortune? Their view is a universally common view in all ages and all places, and even among Christians. Have we ever thought, "What did I do to deserve this?"

People like to talk about karma, and who of us has taken some pleasure in watching some of those instant karma video compilations on YouTube, someone behaving very badly then very quickly having something bad happen to them, justice being served.

Someone finds a parking space right next to the front door of some business and says it is because of good, clean living.

The Maltese interpretation of why things happen, falls under the concept of retribution theology, which says if I get cancer it is because of some sin in my life. And if my business

prospers it is because God is pleased with me. Our strong sense of justice says good things should happen to good people and bad things should happen to bad people.

And the view is not entirely wrong. We see it in Genesis 3 with the fall. Noah and the flood are a clear example, Sodom and Gomorrah are another, the sudden deaths of Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5 yet another.

In order to get the world's attention and bring about a conviction of sin, God does sometimes pour out His just wrath and vengeance on sins in this life, on individuals and on nations.

God is God and He is the judge of the world, and He can and does exercise judgment. We should have a respectful fear of a holy God who is deeply offended by all wickedness and sin.

But yes there is a but, a word of caution. It is common for us to fall into the error of presuming every misfortune that happens to a person is directly connected to some sin.

Those who make a general rule that whenever something good or bad happens, it is what is deserved are wrong. God put the book of *Job* in the Bible to correct this very kind of thinking. Job's friend held strongly to the common worldview that God afflicted those who are sinful or hateful toward God. Job teaches the opposite view, the godly are sometimes afflicted to be tested or humbled or trained in righteousness or taught patience or endurance.

God put *Psalms 73* in the Bible to show that sometimes the wicked go through their whole life in luxury, easy, comfort. Not all the wicked are punished in this life, sometimes divine justice waits to the end.

The Maltese people were wrong in their thinking. They hastily jumped to a judgment about Paul without any knowledge of who Paul was or what he had done, and on who God is and what God is doing. They saw a snake bite him and instantly assumed he was a criminal who was now getting his justice, divine vengeance on his sin. They assume he is the worst kind of criminal, a murderer.

Scripture and this incident teach us to avoid their error.

We must learn to suspend judgment about why good or bad things happen to a particular person. Sometimes God afflicts the godly and spares the wicked for a season.

Even the disciples fell into this error (Luke 13:1–5; John 9:1–3).

We must also remember that God's purposes are far above us, and His purposes are not always quickly known. Two people can suffer the same affliction for entirely different reasons.

Finally, we must remember one day in the final judgment God will judge all mankind in righteousness and perfectly administer His justice and His mercy. We trust the Judge of all the earth to always do what's right (Genesis 18:25).

After a time the fickle Maltese reverse their beliefs. They are shocked and surprised that nothing bad happens to Paul. So they rush to the other extreme and make Paul out to be a god instead of a murderer.

Of the two opinions, which one would you prefer, being thought a murderer or a god? Which one do you think Paul would prefer? I can assure you Paul would have preferred to be thought a murderer or even worse. Paul would rather have been condemned and killed as a murderer, than to take anything away from God's glory and the glory of the Gospel of Jesus.

Remember in Acts 14 when Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra in Asia Minor, and Paul healed a man and the people immediately made plans to worship them as gods. When they discovered what was happening they tore their cloths and rushed to stop them. They were fearful of robbing God of any of His glory and honor.

But that is that we do when we make anything an idol and give it more honor or value or importance than God. We must always check our hearts for the ways we rob God of His glory. All our sin does that, it is unbelief and selfishness, which are denials of God. Do we have this fear of the Lord, this respect and awe for our God. Do our words and actions show it?

Let us all be warned against all idols and all superstitions, all belief in chance or luck. Anything we call our good luck charm, whether a rabbit's foot, a four-leaf clover, a horseshoe, the number 7 or our lucky game socks, any superstition transfers glory from God to an object, trust and belief in God to something else. They are a sign of ingratitude toward God. It is faithless, it is a belief in lies, rather than in what is true and good.

May we show our gratitude to God by putting our faith, hope, trust and confidence in God alone, as Paul did when he experienced this unusual misfortune without fear or panic.

Acts 28:7-9, unusual healing.

Publius is a Roman name, so he is not an island native. He was a wealthy landowner. As a Roman, he may have extended hospitality to the Roman centurion, Julius, who may have brought Paul, Luke and Aristarchus with him.

The providence of God brings Paul to this man at just the right time, for such a time as this.

Publius' hospitality was rewarded with God's healing of his father at the hands of Paul. This is yet another testimony to the power and presence of God. Paul didn't heal the man, Paul prayed, and God healed the man.

Again, Paul would have no part of anyone thinking that he healed the man, he wanted all the glory to go to God and none to himself. That miracle led to something unusual. This is the only instance I recall of Paul healing great numbers like Jesus did.

We know from the ministry of Jesus and the apostles that miracles were never meant to stand alone, but to confirm the Gospel and the authority of the one proclaiming the Gospel.

The angel on the boat confirmed Paul's apostleship and divine authority to those on the boat, now God miraculously proves his apostleship and divine authority to those on the island.

The sovereign God of the universe who causes, directs, allows, purposes all things, directed that snake to bite Paul so that it would bring glory to God and to the Gospel. God healed through Paul so the people would listen and take him seriously. So we are left to hope that this miracle opened the heart of Publius and many others on the island to faith in Jesus.

We can be sure that as Paul healed their bodies, he also spoke to them in a way to heal their souls through the proclamation of the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin. A healed, healthy body is worthless without a healed, healthy soul. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?

These same miracles confirm the doctrines of Christ as truth to us. Are we listening?

Acts 28:10, unusual provision.

Never were any people so blessed and enriched by a shipwreck on their coasts as these Maltese were. They had received much, and they gave much.

They saw how God honored Paul and they honored him with many honors. They thought nothing of being exceedingly generous, as a testimony of their respect and appreciation.

I am reminded of how the Israelites plundered the Egyptians before their long wilderness journey. There was no plundering here, only the willing and generous sharing of what they had to provide for Paul's journey to Rome.

What do you have that you have not received. And having received it, is it not great cause for worship and to be faithful and generous.

A people who have been given so much, should be the most joyful, the most humble, the most hospitable, the most generous, the most thankful.

May our worship and gratitude toward God for all He has done for us, look like this.

Implications and conclusion.

May God's providential and *unusual kindness* lead us to greater hospitality.

May God's providential and *unusual misfortunes* in our lives lead us to greater patience in affliction and wait on Him to bring about whatever good resolution He is pleased to give.

When bad things happen and they will, and when others judge us hastily or foolishly or unthinkingly, let us be patient and let God work all things for our good in His time.

May God's miraculous and *unusual healing* lead us to greater faith in His Word and promises.

May God's providential and *unusual provision* in our lives leads us to greater generosity.

Philippians 4:19-20 My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Prayer: Holy Father, thank you that just as you went before and with Paul every step of his life, you do the same with us. Thank you that you don't treat us as our sins deserve, and that when you afflict us it is not punishment but the loving discipline of a Father to a son. In all we say and do may we glorify you and take none of your glory for ourselves. Create in us hearts of gratitude. And now receive our thanks for this meal we are about to receive. Bless it, the hands that have so willingly and lovingly prepared it and bless the fellowship we share. It is all grace, and we give you the glory for it. In Jesus name, Amen.