

# The Last Lap

## Introduction

- If you have your Bibles...

What do we do when we see our time coming to a close? When the end is near? Paul Must have known that his time was short... He didn't have much time left. Don't stop moving in your final hour

## Acts 28:1-10

28 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[b] 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. 15 And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. 16 And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

## Context

### The Power of Hospitality

- It was November, a very cold time of year in Malta. The natives of Malta were called Barbarians by the Greeks because the Greeks considered anybody who wasn't Greek to be a barbarian. However, they hardly acted like barbarians, and instead were extremely hospitable toward the shipwrecked men. They dragged them out of the water and brought them safely to shore. They built a bonfire to warm them and cooked food to feed them.
  - What a striking moment of unexpected mercy. Following the traumatic shipwreck, the survivors, including Paul and the crew, find refuge and are met with "unusual kindness" from the natives.
    - This simple act of humanity—kindling a fire and welcoming the survivors on a cold, rainy day—is a powerful reminder of the value of caring for

those in need. It is a reminder that what we receive from the hands of men is often God at work as He makes every creature a tool for His purposes.

- Also note how Luke continues to show that Pagans were far more receptive to the people and the message of God than the Jews ever were. If anyone should have showed Paul surprising levels of kindness it was the Jews, for they were “God’s people” They were his chosen ones. They had the very words of God. They studied them and memorized them. They were supposed to be closest to the heart of God. Yet it is the pagans who show kindness to Paul and Reception to his message.
- Prove
  - The Good Samaritan -
  - Leviticus 19:33-34 - When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. 34 You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.
    - Abraham did this with 3 strangers at his tent. They were messengers of God. The same is true here in Malta as Paul brings God’s message to them.
- Apply
  - You see, God’s common grace is so big it can even work through people who don’t know Jesus. He will use anybody to get you where you need to be, and we need to remember that what we get from the hands of men ultimately comes from the hand of God.
    - Hospitality from Pagans.
      - Some of the nicest, most hospitable people I have ever met are pagans.
      - Conversely, Some of the meanest, most inhospitable people I have ever met are Christians.
  - What does "unusual kindness" look like in our own lives? We may not be able to perform miraculous healings, but the principle of compassionate service remains.
    - Do not underestimate the power of a simple act of hospitality like providing a meal, or offering a listening ear, or just opening your home.
      - Every act of kindness is a potential bridge for the gospel, and every demonstration of compassion can break down barriers that are preventing the Message of Christ from getting through.

### See Misfortune As Opportunity

- Paul doesn't just sit there waiting for someone to serve him. He's a man who gets his hands dirty. He gets to work, gathering sticks for the fire, and that's when the viper comes out. It's coiled up, just waiting, and the heat drives it out. It fastens itself right to his hand.
  - The example of Paul reminds us that we must be "do-as-I-do" ministers. We must be willing to get our hands dirty in service for the sake of the kingdom.
  - Vs 4

- The locals see it and immediately jump to a conclusion. They're like, "That guy must be a murderer. He escaped the sea, but the goddess of justice is going to get him now." They're looking for a simple, superstitious explanation for his suffering. They're stuck on what the world sees: pain equals punishment.
  - There is a deeply ingrained human tendency to misinterpret suffering as an automatic sign of divine punishment. They believed that divine vengeance would come upon those who had committed great crimes, and in their minds, this event was a clear and visible sign of it.
- I love this... Paul is a real man. He does what real men do. He doesn't scream. He doesn't panic. He doesn't start questioning God. He just takes this deadly viper, and throws it off into the fire. Any normal person would want to go to the hospital. I would want to at least take it easy for a while. But Paul isn't fazed. He knows that God will protect him.
  - God has delivered him from far worse than a viper. Paul has been delivered through riots and stonings, and assassinations, and evil judges, storms, vipers, and illness.
- Romans 5:3-5a - Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame
  - Do we, like the natives, jump to the conclusion that suffering is a sign of divine punishment or random bad luck? Or do we understand that God is working in every situation, and no event is outside of His control?
    - Some of you have gotten bit by some trial and now you're just letting the venom fester in your life. You are laying down, giving up, throwing a pity party for all your misfortune. Maybe you have fallen into the trap of endless self pity. Or maybe you are clinging to unnecessary fear. Or maybe you have grown discouraged and despondent. Maybe you are just filled with doubt.
      - It's time for you to shake it off. Don't be a victim. The enemy wants to take you out, but God's plan is allowing you to go through this for a reason, and it is time to start looking for what that reason is.
        - For Paul, the snakebite gave him the opportunity to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

### Focus on The End Goal

- The viper incident was a divine authentication. It was a billboard for the power of Jesus on an island where no one had ever heard His name. It got everyone's attention, and it opened a door for ministry. The chief man of the island, Publius, takes Paul and his crew in.
  - Well, the father of Publius had Maltese Fever, a recurring illness caused by bacteria that was common to the goats on the island. Luke correctly diagnosed the problem, and Paul healed him of it. When the word of the healing spread around the countryside, people with all kinds of diseases came, and Paul laid his hands on them, and they were healed.

- The hospitality of a stranger and the healing of a sick father were not ends in themselves but bridges for the gospel to take root.
- We must remember that the miracles of God are not the end goal. The miracles of God are bridges, signposts, prerequisites to the reception of the Gospel of Christ.
- John 6:26-27 - "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal."
  - The paralytic lowered down from the roof - "Your sins are forgiven"
  - The real miracle is not that an entire island of people got healed. It was how God worked (and still works) in the human heart to bring people from spiritual death to spiritual life!
    - When you pray, what perspective do you have? You can tell by what you are praying for. Don't make your prayers primarily about Physical healing, make them about Spiritual Life.
      - Physical healing lasts a few years. Spiritual Life lasts for all of eternity.
- After three months of fruitful ministry on Malta, Paul and his companions set sail on a new ship, continuing their journey to Rome.
  - This particular ship had in its prow the decorative carving of the mythical twins Casper and Pollux. These were (and are) constellations.
    - Today, only those who follow horoscopes believe that these constellations have any influence over the lives of people, but ancient mariners believed that these deities had particular jurisdiction over the sea
- When they get close to Rome, a welcoming committee of Roman Christians comes out for a full day's journey just to meet them on the road. Think about that. These are people Paul has never met. They just heard about him, and they came out to meet him. They were linked in spirit, in mission, and in love.
  - This is incredibly significant because if you will remember back to Acts 8 - after the martyrdom of Stephen. The early church is scattered by persecution. It was a dark day for God's people, but God had a purpose!
    - The first time the gospel left Jerusalem, it was not in the mouths of the apostles. Regular people went everywhere preaching the word. Not a single apostle was involved.
  - In fact, by the end of the first century, there were 3 major church planting centers in the ancient world. Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome. But they all had an incredible thing in common. Not a single one of them was started by an apostle.
  - The start of the church of Antioch is recorded in Acts 11. It says, "some brothers" whom Luke did not even bother to record.
  - A lot of people associate the planting of the church in Rome with Peter. But Peter didn't do it. Paul wanted to plant the church in Rome... (14 chapters of Acts) Paul tried to get the gospel to Rome for decades, and on His way, he was stoned, imprisoned, Shipwrecked, snake bitten, and beaten. And when he finally

drags his beaten body into Rome, Acts 28 records what happens. He is greeted by the brothers. THE GOSPEL WAS ALREADY THERE!

- The gospel's spread was, and is, an unstoppable force, a work of God that transcends the efforts of any single individual.

## **Community Changes Everything (Conclusion)**

- Vs 15-16
- Luke explicitly records the result of this meeting, stating that "when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage"
  - The great Apostle Paul, the spiritual warrior, the man who stared down storms and snakes, needed to see the faces of his brothers and sisters. He needed to be with them. He needed to link arms. His faith was renewed not just by an internal spiritual reality, but by the external, communal support of the body of Christ.
    - Galatians 6:2 - Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.
  - This is not a solo mission, guys. You are not meant to do this alone. There is a critical connection between community and perseverance! While our faith may be personal, our spiritual strength is often communal.
    - God always uses His people to encourage, lift up, and empower His people. The pull yourself up by your bootstraps christian is a myth. The individual who says, I don't need to be a part of the family of God is a fool. We have a biblical mandate to fellowship, to encourage, and to be encouraged by the body of believers! It is non-negotiable.
    - This is why our church is so adamant about Celebration Groups. This is where community happens. Look, I know it may be hard to step into a new group. Challenging to make time in your schedule, It may even be painful to open up. But consider your walk with Jesus. If you want to endure the trials that you are in, or the trials that may be coming, we need each other.
      - As one pastor put it. You need your community before you are hit with your crisis. Sign up for a group, get to know some brothers.