

Unexpected Ministry

Acts 28:1-16

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There are a lot of circumstances in life when we aren't able to see God moving until well after the fact. At the time, things may not feel like God is guiding things, but after the fact you can see He was moving all along.

My experience my first year in college is a great example of that. During one of my visits to SIUE, I met some other students and felt like they could be some good friends. They invited me to go out with them our first weekend there. I didn't question what that meant but agreed. Unfortunately, my first night on my own, I became violently ill (which was a great way to get introduced to my new roommate!) As such, I couldn't go out with them. While I was cooped up in my dorm room, my roommate had a guy visit him that he had met earlier. It turned out he was from Hamilton! We hit it off immediately as we began to share stories about our experiences.

I discovered this young man was also a Christian, and we decided to visit churches and campus ministries together. He had a Christian friend from Nauvoo who had already been down there for a year, so we visited his church that Sunday. I never attended another church for the next 5 years. He invited me to check out the Baptist Student Ministries, even though I initially wasn't interested because I said, "I'm not a Baptist." A year later, I was the President of that organization, where I got a chance to teach, preach, lead, and counsel, and it became apparent that God was calling me not into medicine, as I'd previously been so confident, but into ministry.

As I was in my dorm room feeling sick during my first night on my own, I would not have told you that God was working through whatever bad food I had eaten. But in hindsight, I believe He knew exactly what needed to happen and was leading me to exactly where I needed to be.

I share this story because I think this is much more common than we realize. Often, the Lord chooses to use events we would never have anticipated to accomplish His purposes. We've seen that consistently in the life of Paul, especially over the last several chapters of the book of Acts.

Today, we move into the final chapter of Acts, and we see this pattern once more. Paul's attitude in these times enabled God to use him in surprising ways. My hope is that we'll learn from and follow his example.

Snakebite

Last week we looked at the storm Paul and his companions faced at sea. Every aspect of the journey had been tough. When the owners of the ship decided to take a chance on trying to get a better port where they could spend the winter, their gamble became disastrous. After weeks adrift at sea, they ended up shipwrecked on the island of Malta.

They were relatively close to Italy by this point but would have to wait out the remainder of the winter on this island with no provisions. That's where we pick up the story today.

Once we were safe on shore, we learned that we were on the island of Malta.

² The people of the island were very kind to us. It was cold and rainy, so they built a fire on the shore to welcome us.

³ As Paul gathered an armful of sticks and was laying them on the fire, a poisonous snake, driven out by the heat, bit him on the hand. ⁴ The people of the island saw it hanging from his hand and said to each other, "A murderer, no doubt! Though he escaped the sea, justice will not permit him to live." ⁵ But Paul shook off the snake into the fire and was unharmed. ⁶ The people waited for him to swell up or suddenly drop dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw that he wasn't harmed, they changed their minds and decided he was a god. (Acts 28:1-6, NLT)

Thankfully for Paul and the other 275 people who were shipwrecked with him, the people of Malta took pity on them and were wonderfully kind to them. They decided to help them build a fire, because it was still cold and rainy, and these stranded people would need to keep warm.

To Paul's credit, even though he had become the de facto leader on the ship, he was not above pitching in to lend a helping hand. Instead of sitting back while everyone else gathered wood, Paul jumped up and began collecting and carrying wood back to the fire so they could stay warm.

As you may be aware, reptiles are cold-blooded. This means their bodies do not naturally regulate temperature, so their temperature fluctuates with their environment. During cold weather (which this was), many reptiles find a place to hide, and their bodies go into a low-energy state. They become somewhat rigid and unresponsive. You may have heard stories about how when it gets cold in Florida, they issue falling iguana warnings, because the lizards that live in the trees become cold and rigid, and they start falling out of the trees!

That is likely what happened with Paul and this snake. The snake had probably found a pile of sticks and hidden itself among them. Because it was cold, the snake had become rigid and didn't move when Paul collected the pile. But once the pile of sticks got near the fire, the snake began to warm up, and its defense instincts kicked in. The next thing Paul knew, he was carrying not just a pile of wood but also had a snake hanging from his hand by its fangs.

As someone who really doesn't like snakes, this story creeps me out. I would not have responded as calmly as Paul did. I would have likely made a major scene that would not have been befitting of a man of my size. Paul, however, responded calmly. He shook the snake off into the fire (which seems like a reasonable response to me) and then continued on about his business.

The islanders, however, were superstitious. They saw this snakebite as judgment from the gods or from the universe. They said that Paul must have been guilty, and though he had escaped the storm, the universe was not going to let him get away with his crimes. They expected he would drop dead from the bite of this poisonous snake at any time. But he didn't.

There are certainly natural explanations for why this viper didn't kill Paul. Sometimes snakes can have a "dry bite", where they don't deliver any venom. While you could dismiss this as just a fortunate coincidence, I see it as another instance of divine intervention. Paul wasn't worried about the snakebite because he knew God had promised he was going to Rome. He wasn't there yet, so Paul reasoned (correctly) that this snake wasn't going to kill him. He continued working as he had before.

Eventually, the islanders took notice of this and changed their tune. Instead of Paul being a terrible murderer who was getting his just desserts, he must be a god! Paul surely put down this misconception but likely used it as an opportunity to point them to the One True God. Sometimes simply doing what is right in a hard time provides an opportunity to share our faith and testify to the goodness of our God. Paul was undeterred by the cold, the rain, or the snake. He just continued to be faithful—and that ended up being a powerful witness.

I should address a strange, false view that has arisen from this and one other passage in the Bible. Some have looked at this passage in combination with Mark 16:18, which says, "They will be able to handle snakes with safety, and if they drink anything poisonous, it won't hurt them. They will be able to place their hands on the sick, and they will be healed." (NLT) and concluded that Christians should intentionally handle poisonous snakes and drink poisonous things as an act of faith. This is a twisting of both of these passages of scripture. Nowhere does God tell us to behave rashly and foolishly. Rather, God is saying that the Holy Spirit can protect us from whatever may come against us. This does not mean He always will, but He certainly can.

The right way to look at this is to see that God is bigger than any obstacle we may face. It is not, however, telling us to create obstacles as a way of testing God. Paul didn't seek out hardship, but when hardship came, he faced it boldly, with the confidence that God was bigger than the situation and that He would use Paul for His purposes, no matter the outcome. That's the attitude we should take as well.

A Healing Ministry

While this got the attention of the islanders, Paul apparently also got the attention of the governor of the island, a man named Publius.

⁷ Near the shore where we landed was an estate belonging to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us and treated us kindly for three days. ⁸ As it happened, Publius's father was ill with fever and dysentery. Paul went in and prayed for him, and laying his hands on him, he healed him. ⁹ Then all the other sick people on the island came and were healed. ¹⁰ As a result we were

showered with honors, and when the time came to sail, people supplied us with everything we would need for the trip. (Acts 28:7-10, NLT)

Publius was the ranking Roman government official on the island. He had a large estate and welcomed at least some (maybe all) of the landing party to stay with him for three days. During this time, Luke says “it just so happened...” that Publius’ father was sick. This was Luke’s way of saying that God provided another unexpected opportunity for ministry on the island.

Most scholars believe Publius’ father may have been sick with a disease now known as Malta fever. In 1887, researchers discovered this sickness, which presents with a significant fever and symptoms like dysentery. The symptoms last for months, maybe even a year or more. It was a miserable disease. They discovered it was caused by a particular bacterium that was present in the milk of the goats of Malta. This disease matches Luke’s description of what this man was dealing with.

Paul prayed for him and he was healed. After that, all the other sick people on the island came flocking to Paul and he healed them all. After seeing all of this, Paul and his companions were treated with great honor on the island. When the time came for them to set sail, the people made sure they were well-provided for as a sign of their gratitude.

Surely Paul used this opportunity to share the gospel message with these islanders during the remainder of his three-month stay with them and likely left behind a fledgling church. But this leaves us with a question: Since miracles are a pretty good way to convince people of the truth of your message why didn’t Paul just do this all the time?

The same question was asked of Jesus. Jesus’ answer was that miracles don’t convince everyone. They only impact those whose hearts are already open. As Jesus’ ministry went on, His miracles became less frequent. He performed many miracles early on to get people’s attention so they would listen to what He had to say. But later, many simply wanted a spectacle or were only interested in what they could get from Him. The gospel is not about getting what we want from God, it’s about submitting to the God who has provided a means of forgiveness.

Paul could only do such miracles when the Holy Spirit enabled him. It seems that on the island of Malta, these miracles served to give him some credibility and open doors to ministry. We may not always know why God chooses to move as He does, but we know He has a purpose for how He moves. Paul was obedient, doing whatever the Lord asked of him in whatever situation he was in. That should be our posture as well.

To Rome

When the time came to leave, the islanders gave Paul a warm sendoff and at long last, he headed toward his destination.

¹¹ It was three months after the shipwreck that we set sail on another ship that had wintered at the island—an Alexandrian ship with the twin gods as its figurehead. ¹² Our first stop was Syracuse, where we stayed three days. ¹³ From

there we sailed across to Rhegium. A day later a south wind began blowing, so the following day we sailed up the coast to Puteoli. ¹⁴ There we found some believers, who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome. ¹⁵ The brothers and sisters in Rome had heard we were coming, and they came to meet us at the Forum on the Appian Way. Others joined us at The Three Taverns. When Paul saw them, he was encouraged and thanked God. (Acts 28:11-15, NLT)

They had spent three months on the island, waiting for good conditions for sailing. They secured passage on another grain ship that had wintered at Malta and made their way toward Rome, stopping in Syracuse, on the island of Sicily, then at Rhegium, on the boot of Italy, and then finally arrived at Puteoli, their final stop.

When they arrived in Puteoli, they found believers there, who offered them hospitality for the week they were there. Why did they spend a week there? It's possible that Julius had to make arrangements for the final leg of their journey, or he may have just been gracious to Paul, allowing this time of refreshment before embarking on the last bit of their trip.

As they made their way toward Rome, Paul and his companions were greeted by Christian brothers and sisters coming down to meet them. Paul had previously written to the church in Rome, telling them he hoped to visit, but that had been years before. Somehow the news that Paul was in Italy got to these Christians so they traveled 30-45 miles to meet him and accompany him back to the city. This warm welcome encouraged Paul greatly and once again caused him to thank God for His provision.

This is a reminder that the simple act of showing up for someone else can mean the world to them. What seems like a simple choice on our part can communicate so much to another person. When we take the time to visit someone, pray with and for them, give them a call or send them a note, or give them words of encouragement, we show them they matter, they aren't forgotten, and it can give them renewed strength to carry on. These people may have thought what they were doing was nothing compared to the kind of ministry Paul had, but their ministry was vitally important as well. They gave Paul the lift he needed to keep doing what God had called him to do. Simply seeing one another and showing up for each other is a ministry each one of us can participate in.

Luke gives us one more detail at the end of this passage that gives us a sense of what Paul's time in Rome was like.

¹⁶ When we arrived in Rome, Paul was permitted to have his own private lodging, though he was guarded by a soldier. (Acts 28:16, NLT)

As Paul awaited his time for trial, it seems he rented a house and was permitted to stay there, though he was always under the guard of a soldier. He would have had a soldier chained to his wrist at all times during this time. The soldiers likely rotated in 4-hour shifts, and this too became a ministry opportunity for Paul, as he literally had a captive audience.

Conclusion

Next week, we'll finish out Acts and look at Paul's ministry in Rome, even while under house arrest. In all of this, we see the importance of embracing the unexpected opportunities for ministry the Lord puts before us. But as we conclude today, I want to draw some lessons from this passage.

First, we should embrace unexpected opportunities for ministry. This requires a change in mindset. Instead of looking at difficult times as frustrations, we should begin looking for the opportunities God has put before us. Choose to believe these things are happening on purpose and there is a unique opportunity in it. That change in mindset drastically changes our approach. Maybe you'll have a chance to interact with people you wouldn't normally get to. Maybe you can testify by your example to your faith in God. Maybe you'll be able to listen to and empathize with others who are struggling as well. When you find yourself caught off-guard by unexpected circumstances, look at these things not as accidents, but opportunities. Someone once told me that many ministry opportunities present themselves as interruptions to our lives. If we change our perspective, we'll be ready to seize the opportunities God puts before us.

Second, see the value of showing up for others. This is what the church is supposed to be good at—seeing one another, anticipating each other's needs, and doing what we can to help. This doesn't always have to be a grand and sweeping gesture. Sometimes it's as simple as listening to someone who is hurting, crying with someone going through a difficult time, a hug that lets them know they are seen, or a kind word that lets them know they are valued. It's easy to dismiss these things as unimportant, but if you've ever been on the receiving end of these kindnesses, you know how valuable they are. This is a simple way to minister to other believers—show up for them and let them know you see them, you love them, and they matter to you. That requires us to listen carefully to people, anticipate their needs, and then find simple ways we can meet them.

Finally, we see the value of steady faithfulness. Most of what Paul did during this time (with the exception of the miraculous healings) wasn't flashy. He was just quietly faithful. Our quiet faithfulness can speak volumes to the watching world. Our friends, our families, and even strangers are watching us to see if our faith is just something we talk about or whether it really impacts our lives. I remember one night in college when I came home late. I usually would read my bible and work on memory verses on my computer before bed. But I was tired. As I got ready to crawl into bed, my roommate (who was not a believer), asked "No Bible tonight?" And I got back up to do it. He was watching, whether I realized it or not. People watch us when we struggle to see how we respond. They watch us in public, at ballgames, in our business dealings, and everywhere else. Strive to be consistent in your faith, because you never know who you might impact by your example of steady faithfulness.

We sometimes look at Paul and conclude we could never do what he did. But I think what Paul did best was hold onto the Lord and be faithful. That's something we can all do. The good news is that if we're willing, our Lord will help us do exactly that.

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