

Acts 28:1-10 **From Mediterranean Mayhem to Mercy Ministry**

In a few days, my family and I plan to board a rather large vessel fit for the high seas. Our aim will be simple: Enjoy a few days of pleasure and solace, that will, hopefully, be vastly different from our normal, daily rhythms. Maybe on some level we're heeding the advice from the previous sermon—believe in the sovereignty of God to such the degree that we walk away from the noise, embrace rest, and remember that all aspects of life we're briefly leaving behind are in the LORD's more-than-capable hands.

Whether one is stepping on to a boat—a vessel that's been inspected and cleared for smooth sailing, or whether one is swimming away from a boat—battered by a storm and shattered to pieces by pounding waves, God's people are never adrift from God's sovereign care and power. That's an impossible drift. The life-giving reality spelled out from Genesis to Revelation is that the LORD Jesus reigns in and over our lives. And He does so with both absolute power and gentle attention to detail. The attribute of His almightiness coupled with His gentleness expressed towards His children are seen over and over in the book of Acts. Jesus is continuing His work through the Spirit, and as He does so, many of His excellencies come together magnificently.

A sermon worth a half-hour of your reading called *The Excellency of Christ: The Admirable Conjunction of Diverse Excellencies in Christ Jesus* by Jonathan Edwards makes the biblical case that in Jesus, we see One who is like no other. In His person, we lion and lamb. We see One who is infinitely exalted and One who condescends. In Christ meets infinite justice and infinite grace, highest glory and lowest humility, deepest reverence for the Father and equality with the Father.¹ Absolute power and comprehensive tenderness don't resonate with our earthly experiences of authority, but the King of Luke's gospel is no reflection or echo of earth's rulers. Paul will get to Rome, *exactly* as God has said. Paul has suffered, *exactly* as Christ prophesied in Acts 9:16.² Yet, Paul will know the meticulous care of this same Lord who stated years prior, "*Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*"³

In Christ, we live under a rule with no expiration date and no rivals, and we live under a compassion that never fails. Do we believe this? What I want us to notice today are these very truths rising out of Acts 28.

I. There are surprises discovered under Providence

Like many details of life, the trip from Fair Havens to Phoenix, the equivalent of Memphis to Somerville, didn't go as planned for Paul or any of his 275 co-passengers. Setting sail from Fair Havens with some measure of hope, and having that hope blown away by two weeks of unrelenting wind, they never lay eyes on Phoenix. But in the dark of night, perceptive sailors asserted that land was nearby, a welcome surprise for sure. The soundings taken told the story of potential relief on the way.⁴

a. The shore

¹ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Banner of Truth, 680-689.

² The Lord said to Ananias concerning Paul in Acts 9:16, "*For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name.*"

³ Matthew 6:26

⁴ Ajith Fernando, Acts, 613.

What shore?...they didn't know and it didn't matter to them in the moment! Aboard a ship for 1,500 miles with smooth sailing, and any of us would be ready for solid ground. Aboard a ship for 1,500 miles with little reprieve from hurricane force winds? We might brave anything for dirt between our toes and open fields beneath our feet! And whatever dangers or surprises might lurk around the reefs were non-factors as they jumped into the water at the end of chapter 27. The prospects of land held the promise of life and food and rest. But the surprises were just beginning.

¹When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta.

Who knows if any of Paul's fellow sailors considered the depths of God's kindness when they figure out that they are less than a day's travel from Syracuse?⁵ What a development of providence! "*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.*"⁶ Paul had read those words before. That ship could have wound up in thousands of different places, not the least the bottom of the Mediterranean. Maybe Paul was the only one that grinned with deep delight when he learned of their location.

Haven't we all experienced surprise at the way God's hand has moved and directed our lives? Walking with Christ at the helm and the rudder, perhaps you have had the unexpected-beach-of-Malta experiences. Maybe we've made a mess of things, to then understand the humbling was the pruning we needed for greater fruitfulness. Maybe you've been in the meat grinder of this world's fallenness only to later learn that pain enabled you for meaningful ministry to someone else. Maybe you thought that a particular destination was Christ's purpose for you, but His wise winds blew you somewhere else and the joy of His will is hard to summarize with words. The prophet Jeremiah helps us to understand the kind breezes of God for us in describing the new covenant ratified in Jesus' life and death. Listen to God's heart, "*I will make with them an everlasting covenant (think Jesus; think Hebrews) that I will not turn away from doing good to them.*" You think that sin is making Him turn away, think again! "*And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.*" Right fear of God is an anchor for our souls.⁷ Then, as with this intensity of emotion, God says in sending, crushing, and raising His Son, "*I will rejoice in doing them good...with all my heart and all my soul.*"⁸

Maybe landing on this shore was less of a surprise discovered under providence for Paul, but the Lord wasn't finished pulling things out of His endless storehouse for His servant.

b. The service

²The natives showed us extraordinary kindness; for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all.

The word *natives* has a familiar ring to it in the Greek—*barbaros*, or where we get the word barbarian, or a non-Greek speaker in Paul's world. To some of the castaways, these natives were probably viewed as inferior. To Greeks, if you didn't speak the Greek language or adhere to Greek customs, you probably faced prejudice in some form.⁹ And though many on the ship were criminals from the region of Judea, it's not hard to envision similar initial prejudices expressed towards the natives. Humans bend in this direction by default. But far from barbarian or "uncouth savages," these natives had their

⁵ Syracuse, Sicily is just south of the motherland, Italy.

⁶ John 3:8

⁷ Shout out to Jim and Joe for the last 3 weeks in STINT.

⁸ Jeremiah 32:40-41...incredibly nourishing text!

⁹ Eckhard Schnabel, *ECNT: Acts*, 1049.

own surprise up their unfamiliar sleeves. For, *the natives showed* Paul and the sailors *extraordinary kindness*.

We're familiar with the English word philanthropic—promoting the welfare of others, usually through financial generosity. This word *kindness* here is a similar idea. The natives are promoting Paul and his shipmate's welfare, being hospitable. Paul might roll his eyes if he heard me say, "The natives are going overboard in their generosity." You get the idea. They didn't crawl up to the beach and kiss the sand to (only then) stand up with the resolve of presuming on the first person they might meet. They've lost almost everything. The equipment—gone. The ship is in disrepair at best. The wheat is ruined at the bottom of the sea somewhere. They needed food, water, warmth, and they find it by the welcome of these foreigners. Their kindness was extraordinary, something not usual and certainly an unexpected display of good will.

Theologians through the centuries, such as John Murray and John Calvin, have expressed that grace comes in two specific forms or expressions. The first is in the saving sense—for by grace you have been saved.¹⁰ But the second is what is typically referred to as common grace—rain falls on the just and the unjust.¹¹ A subset of common grace is that there are times and situations in life where those who haven't believed the gospel do good things.¹² It's easy to be self-righteous on this point, but believers haven't cornered the whole market on kindness in this world. We would do well to remember this while we hold to comprehensive depravity. Kind deeds will never accrue God's favor to forgive, and perhaps even our best deeds are soiled to some degree. However, when the unbelieving express kindness in this world, we should lead out in thanking them, and grateful that God's image has not been wiped clean from their lives. These *natives* are operating inside of God's common grace.¹³ The Lord is taking care of His apostle to the Gentiles and showing kindness to even the vilest prisoner in custody. Zechariah 9:17, "*For how great is His goodness...*" We've noted the surprise of "making" it to Malta and the unexpected, unusual kindness expressed from her residents, both astounding in their own right. Both, no doubt, viewed by Paul as God's pursuing mercies.

c. *The serpent*

³ But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand.

If we only stop at verse 3, then we just feel sorry for the guy. Being ushered into the presence of pomp politicians time and again with no real progress, battered by the winds and waves of the sea, and now with the prospects of a fatal snake bite, how can Paul refrain from a head scratch or two? But God's providence can impede, drown, and poison any and all of our best laid plans.

When I moved to Memphis, Jessica and I were convinced that a foreign land was in our near futures. We prayed. We dreamed. We hoped. We received counsel. We dove into the process to become gospel workers abroad through the IMB. Looking back, His wisdom and goodness prevailed, but coming to terms with His "No" or "Not now" has its growing pains. Those can feel like snake bites of the soul.

But, for Paul, one thing that keeps happening throughout the latter part of Luke is that God keeps vindicating him at every turn.

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:10

¹¹ Matthew 5:45, "*For He makes His sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust.*"

¹² Luke 6:33, "*And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.*"

¹³ John Frame has a helpful section on Common Grace in his work called *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*.

II. There are falsehoods endured under Providence

⁴When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they began saying to one another, “Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.” A knee-jerk reaction for sure!

a. Paul’s the worst—a murderer!

Of course, the viper was doing a bit of self-preservation with both slithering away from the fire and biting the apostle. Paul’s gathering sticks, showing that he’s not a celebrity missionary, doing the mundane to help warm the crew. As he does, he discovers a new, testy enemy. This is not the first time Paul’s gotten the message to stay away.¹⁴

The people of Malta form a quick opinion that maybe Paul is a person to stay away from. They conclude from the serpentine crime scene that he’s a worthless man from whom the gods are exacting judgment. Notice their foolish confidence rooted in false beliefs of the divine. ***Undoubtedly this man is a murderer.*** Their conclusion as to why this stranger has done something deserving the deadly venom?—***though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.*** In particular, the Greek goddess of justice and moral order, named Dike, was to blame for Paul’s impending doom.¹⁵ This is typical superstition ingrained in lost humanity. Superstitions still run rampant in the world and those that have faded are often superseded by the god of science.

Maybe you’ve seen the signs in your neighborhood. The inclusive vibe. The splashing colors. The powerful words, “No human is illegal. Science is real. Love is love. Kindness is everything.” In some ways, it’s a manifesto of the religion of secularism, a simple declaration full of the sensible and obvious conclusions for the “normal” people in our advanced, modern society. But it doesn’t take much to discern the underlying messages of those assertions, with their subtle twists and hidden meanings running antithetical to what God has revealed in His Word.¹⁶ The natives on Malta and the natives of our world aren’t really that far apart.

And the living and true God keeps enduring such theological and philosophical horseplay from mankind, who constantly centers himself as the voice of reason and wisdom. The Greek gods offered explanations for things that happened in the world, never personally involved in genuine transformation. The gospel that Paul lauded and preached carried with it death blows to puny gods and their empty threats and promises. The gospel he declared was one of resurrection to spiritual life, and a courage in the face of death because of hope more powerful than the grave. Trust in Christ carried with it the hard demands of repentance and cross-bearing, and with it a fundamental change of status with God and a reorientation of one’s life in relationship to his neighbor. To us, trusting Christ is the most reasonable response to the gospel. But the mind set on the flesh is death. Belief in the phantom gods of the Greeks only increased their enslavement to the flesh, with no power to deliver. Yet deliver, Jesus can and does so, in remarkable grace.

¹⁴ Acts 9:23, “When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill [Paul].” And Acts 13:50, “But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district.”

¹⁵ John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 394.

¹⁶ For a short treatment of this, Brett McCracken has written a piece at thegospelcoalition.org called *Your Neighbor’s New Creed: In This House, We Believe...*

But like any with faulty, groundless belief, the islanders are tossed to and fro by simply what they see with their eyes. Paul is the worst, until he's the best.

b. *Paul's the best—a god!*

⁵ *However he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm.*

⁶ *But they were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.*

From worthy of death to worthy of worship! It's so erratic and silly that it nears comic relief. Yet, such is the fickle heart beating in our own chest. The tendency to swing the opinion pendulum of others too far either way is a part of the deficiency of human wisdom. Moral equilibrium and fair-minded judgement—these are rare air apart from the steadying influence of an all-wise Maker and Savior. Without Him, we're inclined to exalt mere man to a place that he doesn't belong, a place he should never occupy. And like these residents of Malta, on a shiny dime and for no legit reason, we turn on that same man in James-3 fashion, "*With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.*"

But again, these island inhabitants were operating from a pagan worldview. Schnabel states, "The logic is understandable: a person who survives both a shipwreck and a snakebite must be someone in whom divine power is revealed."¹⁷ Indeed, it is possible to interpret a genuine miracle as support for a theologically false position.¹⁸ What's missing here, and what we might expect from Paul here, is a corrective. But, as another point of unexpectedness, Luke shows nothing of the kind in his documentation. With the information we have in verse 11, and with what we know about Paul, it would be unreasonable for us to conclude that Paul failed to set the record straight about himself. For God gave Paul the posture that we would do well to adopt and imitate, "*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.*"

Inside of a sea of this world's falsehoods, that God patiently endures, God provides His people with the right perspective on understanding ourselves and others. Life is not about us, but centrally about Christ as LORD. We serve others based on His service to us, with the gospel being the highest form of that service, "*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*"¹⁹ Paul would move about the island for the next 3 months with clear flashes of moving about like his Savior.

III. There is provision granted under Providence

a. *To keep serving others*

⁷ *Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days.* The hospitality well from the Maltese isn't drying up! It's likely that this leading man of the island, Publius, is only entertaining Paul and his companions at this point, not all 276 of Paul's shipmates. Again, seeing Paul

¹⁷ Eckhard Schnabel, *ECNT: Acts*, 1051.

¹⁸ David Gooding, *True to Faith: The Acts of the Apostles*, 492.

¹⁹ Mark 10:45

roast snake afforded Paul status, and if there was any level of shared communication, then Publius would have heard of the account of Paul's promise that all would arrive on land safely by the rescuing kindness of his God. And though Paul probably, in time, corrected the false conclusions concerning his identity as being nothing more than what he was, his next move would have increased the honor all the more.

⁸ And it happened that the father of Publius was lying in bed afflicted with recurrent fever and dysentery; and Paul went in to see him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him.

The Mercy-for-Malta ministry was now off the ground. The power of Christ entrusted uniquely to the apostles in healing ministry was on full display here. And like Jesus, who healed the body always with an eye to communicating that grace could do that to the sin-sick soul, Paul had the natives in his gospel crosshairs.

Our bearings are and should be the same when we cloth refugees, or paint hallways for public school workers and children, or when we mow the neighbor's yard while they're on vacation. If all we ever are is kind with our hands without conviction and courage to bear verbal witness, then we've missed it. If some half-crazed Bible teacher dresses up as Zane the Zookeeper at your local SWBCVBS to merely create laughter and stir the imagination of children without eventually speaking the gospel with clarity, then feed him to the grizzlies—he's missed it.

The 1,500 miles prior to our text were absent of the quiet scene found in verse 8, but as God sovereignly exerted His directing powers over the ship to save, He is exerting His healing powers on this island to show that Paul's God is worthy of trust and glory. Publius' dad was struck with misery. Paul's Father is adept at striking misery down. The gestures of praying and touching this man translate in any and every language. God's not just interested in His people doing ministry from a distance. The human voice of faith and the human touch of compassion are levels of communication that Christ blesses. It's the best choice when seeking to help the hurting.

Paul kept the peddle to the ministry metal. ***⁹ After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured.*** If you're having a familiar ping in your memory here, it may be because this is similar to when Jesus healed the relative of the one who hosted Him in Luke 4. Peter's mother-in-law was the sick recipient of Christ's touch then. And a point that we would do well to absorb here is that the Risen Christ is continuing His work and doing so to the uttermost parts of the world. He is being exactly who He said He would be, and doing exactly what He said He would do! To the end of our hallway, to the end of our street, or to the ends of the street, He will give us power to testify to Him. So let's hold Him out in word and deed, brothers and sisters. But the citizens of this island aren't finished with their benevolence quite yet.

b. To keep spreading Christ

¹⁰ They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed.

There was a certain sign of Publius' gratitude for his father's healing, but also for Paul taking the time and concern for the welfare of many who were sick on the island. And isn't this what we get when we have unbelieving co-workers and friends? In a morning conversation over coffee, it's clear that the god of this world, the ancient serpent, has poisoned their minds and they walk in dark unbelief. But

lunchtime rolls around, they buy us lunch with a cookie. The Lord anchors us temporarily in a world with many mixed bags. I don't think we have to guess what Paul thought about the outpouring of honor and supplies for the journey: God's common grace through others can be received by believers as the Great Groom's love for His bride.

With what they needed to make the last leg of the journey, there is provision under the providence of God to make it to Syracuse, and then from there to Rome.

Conclusion

In our text we see that under providence, surprises are discovered...shores of relief and unexpected kindnesses. In our text we see that under providence, God will stir even those outside of His saving grace to fulfill His purposes. In our text we see that under providence, we're not guarded from all dangers, physical or ideological dangers. The world, the flesh, and the devil will never stop hissing. In our text we see that under providence, doors of ministry will be opened for us to be conduits of Christ's compassion. And in our text we see that under providence, all our needs are supplied for every journey—Jesus has every resource at His disposal to equip His children for service and witness.

Christ is almighty! Rome is almost in sight. The winds were no match for its Master. Poison had no ill effect for His child. Christ is all-caring! In bonds, He stands by His people. In an atmosphere of self-preserving lies, the truth calms His servants. Northeasters serve the Lord's kind intentions for His own. Strange foreigners can behave in unusual ways for the good of God's peculiar people. The Jesus that exerted His boundless might for Paul also exerted His boundless love for Paul.

Do you know this Christ? There's no clearer place to observe God's infinite power and God's immense grace for sinners than the cross that Christ bore for His enemies. The unique power it took for Jesus to soak up the full measure of God's wrath for my sin and yours, and in the same act, the magnitude of grace that is expressed in Him doing so—what an *admirable conjunction of diverse excellencies!*

Saints, will you think deeply with me in these moments of Jesus' absolute power and gentle attention to detail in your life? Are we debtors who could never pay back His extravagant grace, or what? Let's worship Him now, and resolve to keep believing that no journey, no storm, is awash in Him.