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### When the Self-Righteous Barbarians Misjudged Paul

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WHEN THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS BARBARIANS MISJUDGED PAUL

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS  
NUMBER 140  
ACTS 27:41-28:6

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ACTS 27:41-28:6 "And falling into a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the forepart stuck fast, and remained unmoveable, but the hinder part was broken with the violence of the waves. And the soldiers' counsel was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim out, and escape. But the centurion, willing to save Paul, kept them from their purpose; and commanded that they which could swim should cast themselves first into the sea, and get to land: And the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land. And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita. And the barbarous people shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold. And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god."

Paul and his companions had moved across the Adria, which is the area between Greece and Crete on the East, and Sicily and Malta on the West. In the Adria the storm drove them eventually toward Malta, and in this passage we find they have arrived at a bay and the rocky coastline of Malta. As the ship moved toward the shore it caught on the sandbar and began to break up. This is where we left Paul and his companions in our last study. Back in verse 40 we saw the frantic activity of these capable sailors as they fought desperately to save their own lives. But their heroic efforts could not keep the ship from breaking in two.

ACTS 27:41 "And falling into a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the forepart stuck fast, and remained unmoveable, but the hinder part was broken with the violence of the waves." Where two seas meet you always find a sandbar. Both streams had deposited silt and sand until a great sandbar was formed and this is where the ship ran aground. The bow struck the sand, but the stern broke away under the violent sea.

ACTS 27:42 "And the soldiers' counsel was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim out, and escape." Here we move into a new emphasis and we might call these next verses "The fickleness of man." We are going to see the great difference between believers and unbelievers. We will discover that these unbelievers knew really nothing about thoughtfulness. Paul had been the human instrument by which they had all survived and yet they are not thoughtful and at one point they actually wanted to kill Paul. On the other hand, we have another group of unbelievers on the Island of Malta and they are a more generous type of people. Here in verse 42 we have a very strange conclusion. They decided to kill the prisoners, and the prisoners include Paul. The word for counsel is "boule" and it really means their resolution, their decision. The Romans, even in a desperate situation like this, were organized enough so they could hold a counsel and come up with a decision. The ship was breaking up, but they stayed cool and collected and held a counsel to decide about what should be done with the prisoners. These Roman soldiers were responsible for the lives of these prisoners, and they knew they could be court-martialed and killed if they lost those prisoners. Paul had earlier assured them that they would not escape, but the soldiers did not trust that conclusion, so they decided to kill the prisoners lest they should swim out and escape.

ACTS 27:43 "But the centurion, willing to save Paul, kept them from their purpose; and commanded that they which could swim should cast themselves first into the sea, and get to land:" The Centurion had rank and authority and he made a decision to save Paul. So we go from the noun "boule" to the verb "boulomai" and it means the Centurion made a decision to save Paul's life. So using his authority he restrained them from their purpose. "He commanded" is from "kaleuo" and this is a very strong command. He had authority and he exercised it. He had to get tough and he did. No matter what the sailors thought, this Centurion knew what was right and he got tough and exercised his leadership and authority. This is very important in any kind of effective leadership, either in the military or in government or in the church. Someone has to be the leader and someone has to exercise final authority. Now in our story before us, we are dealing with unbelievers. The only believers in the group were Paul and Luke and Aristarchus. There must be authority in the world if men are to survive. One reason for this is the inequality of mankind. All men are not equal and all do not have the same mental ability. These Roman soldiers were ready to kill Paul and the other prisoners, but the Centurion was a wiser man and exhibited his rank and authority. If there had been no authority, Paul and his companions would have been killed. Someone had to take the responsibility and the Centurion did it. Remember, rank has its privileges, but it also has its responsibilities. A correct reading of this verse is like this--"But the Centurion, deciding to rescue Paul, restrained them from their purpose, gave order for those who were able to swim, having thrown themselves overboard should make it to the land."

ACTS 27:44 "And the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land." This verse applies to the non-swimmers. The Centurion gave commands whereby they could survive and the last phrase of this chapter says that they all escaped safely to the land. So here is the result of the good leadership of the Centurion. Behind it all was the faith and stability of Paul. In a crisis, any crisis, strong leadership is always absolutely essential. This Roman Centurion had moral and intellectual courage. Paul set the stage for all of this to happen by following step by step the will of God as it was revealed to him.

ACTS 28:1 "And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita." The word "Melita" is the old word for "Malta." The word for escaped is "diasoza" and is an aorist, passive, participle. "Sozo" means to save, to deliver and "diasozo" means a complete rescue, to come safely through. Then "they knew" is from "epignosko" and it means to perceive something with complete accuracy. The population of Malta was Phoenician in origin. The Greeks had first conquered the Island, then the Carthaginians conquered it in 528 B.C. and finally the Romans conquered it in 242 B.C. So at the time of this storm, the Island of Malta had been under Roman rule for about 300 years.

ACTS 28:2 "And the barbarous people shewed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold." The word "barbarous" can be easily misunderstood here. It doesn't mean there were heathen ignorant people on this island. The word "barbarous" comes from the idea that here were people who spoke a different language and their speech sounded like "bar-bar-bar" so they called them "barbarous." They spoke a Phoenician language rather than Greek. This phrase means that the natives of this island showed them no little kindness, and the language really means they showed them a type of kindness you don't meet every day. They were unbelievers, but please remember unbelievers can be kind. This was a noble fantastic type of kindness coming from people who didn't understand the grace of God. "The barbarians offered them an unusual type of kindness." This means that they were honest. They didn't prey on shipwrecks. They didn't try to capitalize on people who were in distress and needed help. It was quite cold, so they built fires to warm these almost-frozen sailors. These Malta people were indeed very kind and courteous and helpful.

ACTS 28:3 "And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand." We are now going to learn something from a snakebite incident. Paul evidently could swim, for he had been in many shipwrecks before. But once Paul hit the shore he went to work gathering wood. Paul never could sit down and fold his hands and let others provide for him. Even in the Roman prison he was not idle but wrote some of the greatest books in the Bible. During his first Roman imprisonment, he wrote Philippians, Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians and in the last Roman imprisonment, he wrote 1st and 2nd Timothy and Titus. So here we see that Paul got to work and showed great stability and calmness in the crisis. Paul didn't know that Malta was infested with this very dangerous type of snakes. As he picked up the wood and placed it on the fire one of these snakes fastened onto the hand of Paul. The warm fire activated the hibernating snake and for the snake all of a sudden winter was over and that viper realized it was time to strike. The word for struck here is an aorist, active, indicative of "kathapto." "Apto" means to strike but "kathapto" means a good firm strike. The viper struck and just kept hanging on to the hand of Paul.

ACTS 28:4 "And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live." When Paul lifted up his hand with the snake hanging on, all the natives saw it. "Therion" is the word here translated beast and it means anything that is dangerous to man. "He kept on being suspended to Paul's hand" is from "kremannumi" and means he held to Paul long enough to literally fill his blood with venom. There was enough poison here for Paul to fall over dead, and that is exactly what the natives expected. "Echidna" is another word for snake and is translated here "viper" and it means a very poisonous snake.

These very friends, nice, accommodating people on Malta were also very self-righteous people and they showed this by their conclusions. Notice "They said" and it is an imperfect, active, indicative and means they didn't say it once, but they kept on saying it many times. They stopped being kind and they started judging Paul. Please notice they didn't know any facts about Paul, but they superimposed on him their self-righteous attitudes. Please notice this principle--Don't act like the kindly heathen. They were motivated by self-righteousness. The Holy Spirit had this snakebite incident recorded because he wanted to teach us something. It is quite evident that many of the things that happened to Paul are not recorded in Scripture. But why was this strange incident recorded in detail? It is to show us that the true grace of God was not involved here. They didn't have the facts and they were quick to judge. Notice how quickly they turned on Paul and said. "No doubt this man is a murderer." But the Greek says, "Of a truth we are very sure that this man keeps on being a murderer." The word they used for murderer is "phoneus" and it means a homicidal type of murderer. Self-righteous people are always quick to judge others and always hasty to reach false conclusions. Please notice this truth. The venom in that viper was nothing to be compared with the self-righteous venom of those misinformed people who were so quick to judge Paul. In other words, they said, "There is absolutely no doubt in our minds that this man is a murderer." Self-righteous people never get all the facts and they always go off half-cocked. Then they reached the conclusion that though he had escaped out from the sea, yet justice finally caught up with him. The word translated vengeance here is from "dike" and means "justice." So the real danger here is not the venom from the snake, but it is the venom from these self-righteous people who were standing around that fire. Your danger and mine is not mainly from snakes, but from self-righteous people who go off half-cocked without the facts. So from this story we get this principle--Beware of nice, loving, soft-talking, self-righteous people, who always appear to be something that they are not. Scratch under the surface and you will find that you are dealing with a whitewashed old sin nature. So they said, "The justice will not permit him to live." So with a rosy glow of self-righteousness they formed a conclusion without any facts. In reality, they were accusing a man to be a murderer who was, in fact, the greatest living Christian in all the world.

ACTS 28:5 "And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm." Now here we get God's answer. He shook off is from "apotinasso" and it means he not only shook off the snake, but he shook off their self-righteous judgments as well. This is the picture of a great man. He didn't in any way react to their self-righteous judgments. The phrase "And he felt no harm" is one of the poorest translations in the New Testament. The Greek phrase is "Epathen ouden kakos" and it means "He suffered nothing evil from it" and it means from the venom of the snakebite and the venom from their self-righteous attack. This was indeed a miracle from God, and here is a picture of how God takes care of his own.

ACTS 28:6 "Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god." This is a fickle crowd. Notice "They changed their minds." The word is "metaballo" and it means they threw their thoughts back and forth from one side to another. Now they go to the other extreme and they say that Paul is a god. One minute Paul was a murderer and the next minute he was a god and neither conclusion was correct.

Remember, self-righteous people never can be accurate.