

The Serpent Bites, but Cannot Kill

Acts 28:1-10; Ephesians 6:12-13

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There are many trials and temptations that you will face from the world and the flesh, but the enemy that is not seen and wars against you as a Christian using the world and the flesh is the devil. The devil is not a make-believe character or a figment of the imagination. This is what he would like for you to believe. Satan is more likely to deceive and mislead people to destruction when they believe they are simply making their own decisions to please themselves and to do what they want to do in following their own dreams, when all alone they are listening to the whispers of the devil and being led to do his will (2 Timothy 2:25-26).

This battle against the devil is a real battle, and the real battleground is in the mind and in the affections (Ephesians 6:12-13). Let the enemy win there, and watch the eyes, the ears, the tongue, the hands, and the feet be more inclined to do his will.

Praise God that victory is assured to the child of God who puts not his confidence in the flesh, but in Jesus Christ alone. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Satan was legally taken captive and the child of God was legally set free from Satan's dominion—Jesus led captivity captive (Ephesians 4:8). However, Satan (like a venomous viper) can and will bite the Christian through trials, temptations, and sins, but he cannot kill the soul of the Christian that has been made alive in Christ (any more than he could kill the soul of Job who was sorely tried by the enemy, but who was protected and preserved by the Almighty hand of God).

The main points from our text are: (1) The Storm Strikes, but Cannot Destroy God's People (Acts 28:1-2); (2) The Viper Bites, but Cannot Kill God's People (Acts 28:3-6); (3) God Overrides All Attacks for His Glory and the Good of His People (Acts 28:7-10).

I. The Storm Strikes, but Cannot Destroy God's People (Acts 28:1-2).

A. As we now begin the last chapter in Acts, God has fully realized His promise that all 276 persons on the ship would safely arrive on shore—not one single life would be lost (Acts 27:24). Though the Lord used many different ordained means that were most difficult, He used them all to bring them to the shore of that island just as He promised (Acts 27:44). All those on the ship were saved because as the angel told Paul, "God hath given thee all them that sail with thee" (Acts 27:24). Likewise, all those given to Christ Jesus shall be saved and not one lost (John 6:39). Dear ones, the storms of life that come from the world and the flesh that would seek to destroy you cannot do so, because the Lord Jesus has promised you will safely arrive on that heavenly shore.

B. Now as we continue, Paul and the rest of those on the ship were no doubt in terrible shape (though alive). Without God's preservation, they would have died in getting to shore in that hurricane. They were emotionally and physically exhausted. They were drenched and freezing from the cold temperatures of the sea in November. Having collected what information they could about the island, they realized it was Melita (Malta). They were some 500 miles from Fair Havens on the island of Crete. There were Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus (and the rest on the ship) shipwrecked on an island, but once again the Lord rescues and saves them by means of a people who have no regard for the God of the Bible or for Jesus Christ (about whom they had likely never even heard).

C. Rather than ignoring those who were shipwrecked and helpless, we read that the natives of Malta "shewed us no little kindness" (Acts 28:2). They are called "a barbarous people" because they were an

indigenous people who culturally were not Greek or Roman (although there was a Roman official that ruled on the island, as we shall see). The Maltese people did not leave those marooned upon the shore to die, but cared for their needs by building a fire around which they could warm themselves from the cold rain and winds (likely in some protected area from the rain). What a mercy was shown by these Maltese natives.

1. God once again preserved Paul to whom He had promised a safe arrival in Rome; and once again all the others (soldiers, prisoners, and crew) benefitted from God's care of Paul. All those on the ship were preserved for the sake of Paul and all those who were desperately needy and helpless were attended to for the sake of Paul. God has you where you are to be salt—a preservative in the ancient world—in your family, at work, in the church, and in this nation (Matthew 5:13). It is not worldliness that preserves, but godliness. Dear ones, the only reason you are preserved physically and especially spiritually is for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ (you are in Christ). God is keeping His promise to the Lord Jesus that not one of you would be lost.

2. If “there is none that doeth good” (Romans 3:12), then what was this uncommon “kindness” (*philanthrōpian*) that was shown to Paul and the others? It was not a good work that proceeded from a heart of faith in and love for Jesus Christ, but it was an act of kindness that revealed the image of God in man (even though that image had become distorted and corrupted like a broken mirror). From where does man's moral nature come if man is merely atoms randomly connecting with one another and is the cause of all that man is? God reveals His mercy in restraining the many acts of hatred and violence that would otherwise be brought into the world. Man's moral nature even condemns him, for though man does acts of kindness, they are not done as an expression of faith in Jesus Christ, out of love for Jesus Christ, or to the glory of God (“Without faith it is impossible to please God” Hebrews 11:6). All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). They do not cancel out the many sins that we have committed against a holy God. Only Jesus Christ can do that.

3. If such acts of kindness and mercy are here noted in unbelievers, how much more ought they to be noted in those who profess the name of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 4:8-9)? How will the world know that you are Christians in truth and sincerity—by your love for and commitment to one another (John 13:35)? When is the last time you read through 1 Corinthians 13 and asked if this described you? If picking up sticks, or cleaning up a mess, or helping others in need, or showing kindness, or encouraging your spouse is too hard or too much beneath you, you reveal you are simply a sounding brass trumpet or a tinkling cymbal (you make a lot of noise), but you don't really know what love is—you don't really understand the gospel and love of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:25).

II. The Viper Bites, but Cannot Kill God's People (Acts 28:3-6).

A. Paul is not a bystander who sits around waiting for others to take pity on him and serve him. Like the Lord Jesus, he was not called to be served but to serve others. Although Paul is an apostle, he doesn't see himself above others, but looks for ways that he can help with the fire in warming the many who are so cold and damp. Dear ones, true leaders (whether in the home, workplace, church, or state) are not those who crack the whip from behind, but are those who lead by example in both word and deed. Leaders blaze the path of truth and righteousness and then say by their example, “Follow me as I follow Christ.” Paul is a leader even when he is a prisoner. What excuses are you making for not setting a godly example? You are setting an example, but what kind of example? You don't have to be older—even you who are younger are called to lead by your example (1 Timothy 4:12). Godly leaders don't take the bullhorn and shout for everyone to look at them, but rather quietly go about doing what Paul does here.

B. As Paul is gathering wood and places it on the fire, a poisonous viper bites Paul and fastens itself to his hand (Acts 28:3). The Maltese people who witness this attack initially conclude that Paul must be a murderer (again this demonstrates that by nature, not by instruction from God's Law in Scripture, there was

an imprint of God's natural law upon their hearts, Romans 1-2). They also believed that murder deserved a just punishment (namely to be killed).

1. Paul (they reasoned) may have escaped punishment upon the sea, but vengeance (the goddess, Justice, *Dikē*) has caught up with him and is now punishing him for his crime (Acts 28:4). Paul's reaction in not freaking out but remaining in control (knowing God was in control) likely confounded those who witnessed the attack of the viper (as he shook the viper into the fire, Acts 28:5), but what even more amazed them was to see as minutes passed, Paul was not in the least affected by the attack (Acts 28:6). The Maltese people reverse their original conclusion that Paul was a murderer to Paul was a god (Acts 28:6)—he was neither. They believed that those who suffer have sinned against God, and those who prosper are blessed by God.

2. There is a similar wicked error that is circulated among many false teachers who proclaim that God doesn't want you to suffer, but rather to prosper in health and wealth. God, the Almighty certainly can heal, restrain illnesses, and prosper, as it pleases Him, but judge not what God is doing by what one receives by suffering or prospering—Job, against Trophimus (2 Timothy 4:20), against Timothy (1 Timothy 5:23), Paul (2 Corinthians 11:23-28), the faithful saints (Hebrews 11:36-38). What financial prosperity did Jesus enjoy? What suffering did He endure (take up your cross and follow Him). Your loving Father uses all that He brings into your life by His ordained providence to teach you, to grow you in faith in looking to Jesus Christ to finish the race set before you, to reveal sin in your life, and to sanctify you. He is not punishing you (He is not getting even with you)—He is training you as a child through His loving discipline (Hebrew 12). We usually grow more in sanctification through the suffering and trials God brings than through the blessings He brings (Psalm 119:71).

C. I believe the Lord would teach us here by His Spirit that just as He delivered Paul safely to shore (and will deliver you who trust Him to that heavenly shore) from the many storms, trials, afflictions, temptations, and sins that come against you from the world and the flesh, so God delivered Paul from the bite of the viper (and will deliver you who trust Him) from the attacks of Satan.

1. Satan may bite God's people (as Paul was bitten) and may cling and not give any indication of letting go through the relentless temptations and sins he brings into your life, but his bite will not bring one of God's elect to spiritual death and destruction in hell, for God will give grace to shake that conquered enemy from you through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Peter in Luke 22:31-32, Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Satan is a defeated foe through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus fought against Satan by means of the Word of God ("It is written" in Matthew 4). It is by reckoning yourself to be dead to sin and Satan and alive to Christ, by standing upon the Word of God and His promises that you resist the devil and he will flee from you. If you believe you cannot overcome his lies and temptations, if you do not act upon what Jesus has already accomplished for you, and if you do not stand upon God's faithful Word, you will give Satan a place in which to lay one snare after another (2 Corinthians 2:11).

2. This was an apostolic miracle God used to confirm Paul as an apostle of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 12:12). This is not an example of snake charmers to go about in pride and presumption in handling serpents (Mark 16), which was fulfilled here in Acts 28. Let me ask you: Which is the greater miracle—to be bitten by a viper without illness or death or to have one's name recorded in the Book of Life in heaven (Luke 10:19-20). There will be some who some who performed such miraculous deeds in the name of Christ, but will be turned away as those who never belonged to Christ (Matthew 7), but there will not be one who will be turned away whose name is recorded in heaven through faith in Jesus.

III. God Overrides All Attacks for His Glory and the Good of His People (Acts 28:7-10).

A. Let me briefly note that neither the violent hurricane at sea (the world and the flesh) nor the poisonous viper (the devil) could overrule God's purpose to use Paul to bring the gospel to the island of Malta.

In fact, all of those seeming tragedies were the means by which God would use Paul to heal the father of the governor of a fever and dysentery and to minister there for three months on that island. What you are going through now is God's preparation for greater usefulness in His kingdom (Romans 8:28). The blessing of the Lord had so overflowed to these people that when winter was passed (after three months), the Maltese people sent Paul off with "many honours" (Acts 28:10) i.e. with both honors of affection and esteem as well with honors of monetary value to care for Paul's bodily needs (1 Timothy 5:17). New converts so valued the ministry of the gospel that they would not send Paul forth empty-handed. The monetary honor was an outward expression of the affection and esteem with which they honored Paul.

Dear ones, the bite of the serpent (Satan) is fatal to those who will not come to Christ. For the gospel is the only remedy to overcome Satan. Listen not to the lies of the devil that would lead you to seek your own pleasure, that would lead you to follow your own dreams, that would lead you from the narrow path, follow Jesus Christ (Luke 9:23).

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