



Central Peninsula Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

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Acts 28:1-16

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The Fire, The Healings, & The City

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

Recently I got to fulfill a life-long dream. I've always wanted to go deep-sea fishing but never had the opportunity. But a few months ago I was in Hawaii with my folks and my dad and I decided to go deep-sea fishing on our last day of vacation. I started off the day with lots of coffee and a big breakfast. The day started out beautifully—calm seas, gorgeous day, 75°, met up with other guys going fishing. I had a big breakfast and lots of coffee (see where this is going!?!). I was daydreaming about all the fish I was going to catch and how good they were going to taste!

About 30 minutes into the trip, the boat began to rock back and forth. And then my stomach began to rock back and forth, more and more. Now I'm feeling really sick. All I wanted to do was get back to shore. I was throwing up. I made three attempts to get back on land. Attempt #1 – I talked to the captain and asked if he could get me just a few hundred yards off shore and I'd swim in. No—we're fishing! Attempt #2 – I asked the captain if I could throw the life preserver overboard and put it on and wait until the trip was over. No—there are sharks. Attempt #3 – I pulled out my credit card and shouted to all the guys on the boat that I would pay them what they spent on the trip—approximately \$1000 for all of them—if they'd agree to ask the captain to take us back to shore. No—ever since I started throwing up they started catching fish. That's how desperate I was! But I stuck it out like a man for five hours. We made it back and soon I felt like myself again.

But I still caught a fish!

I imagine that 2,000 years ago the apostle Paul and his shipmates must have had a similar experience when their deep-sea adventure came to a close and they finally reached land. They must have had a similar feeling of relief that I had.

Reviewing chapter 27, Paul was headed to Rome. A storm strikes and Paul and the other men are tossed about for several weeks. They are shipwrecked and begin swimming for land. And now that Paul and the crew are safely on land, the adventure only intensifies. The story presents even more surprises. Now we're in Acts 28:1-16...a great story. We'll look at the story in three parts – The Fire, The Healings, and The City. As we explore the scenes of this story, I believe God has some important truths he wants to impress upon us.

Scene #1: The Fire (vv. 1-6).

Open your Bibles to Acts 28, v.1. **"After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island**

was called Malta." Luke is writing this. He's a Christian and a traveling companion of Paul's. And what Luke tells us here in verse 1 is that everyone made it. This is a miracle! Just as God had promised Paul in the midst of the storm, all of the 276 passengers survive a terrible shipwreck and make it safely to the island of Malta—a small island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. It's 17 miles long and 9 miles wide and the name Malta means "refuge." If you went to St. Paul's Bay today, that's where they landed.

Verse 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."** Paul and the sailors are not alone on this island. The island of Malta is filled with natives. And I imagine that when the shipwrecked men first spotted these natives they would have been afraid of them.

If you know anything about ancient history, what typically happens when a group of strangers, especially weak, defenseless, shipwrecked strangers, all of the sudden show up on somebody's island? Islanders usually don't like it. Battles ensue, cannibals show up. But these islanders are not that way. Any fear that the shipwrecked strangers may have felt quickly melts. The text says the native people showed them "unusual kindness." The Greek word here is "philantropia," where we get our English word "philanthropy." These natives show Paul and company unusual philanthropy, unusual generosity and kindness.

Specifically, how these natives express their unusual kindness is by building a fire for the shipwrecked strangers. I know the Mediterranean sounds nice, Malta—a secluded island in the middle of the majestic Mediterranean Sea—you want to vacation there, but this was no shipwreck in paradise. Verse 2 tells us that it is both cold and raining. These men are cold, wet, and miserable. So the natives build them a fire to warm them up. Now this isn't a cute little campfire for roasting marshmallows with your family. Remember, we're talking about 276 shivering people who need to stand around this fire and get feeling back in their cold toes. What takes place on this beach in Malta is the largest beach bonfire that you could imagine. And Paul, always the servant, does his part to build up the bonfire. Verse 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."**

Now everybody is watching this scene with the snake. And what the natives do is they immediately

interpret the event. Verse 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 has not allowed him to live.’”**

I want you to notice how these natives interpret life, how they interpret what happened to Paul. They interpret this whole event religiously. They immediately conclude that Paul must be a murderer, that though Paul escaped from the sea, “Justice” has not allowed him to live. This is justice with a capital “J” (ESV vs. NASB)—the natives are referring to the Greek goddess of Justice, a goddess who either rewarded you or punished you based on your performance and behavior, your good deeds or your bad deeds.

This verse that we have here, verse 4, is huge. It’s just a little verse but it’s a huge window into the spirituality of these islanders. These natives have a religion by which they interpret life. In a nutshell, their religion is this: “bad things happen to bad people.” If you do something bad, if you’re a bad person, you will be punished—something will come back and bite you. That’s what the Greek goddess of Justice taught. Beneath the “unusual kindness” of these people lies this deep-rooted religion.

Look at what happens next. Verses 5 and 6, **“He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. 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.”** Paul shakes the snake into the fire, but the natives know what’s coming. They know how it works on the island when someone is bitten by one of these poisonous vipers. The natives stand there, watching, waiting, waiting for Paul’s body to swell and then for him to drop dead. I can just picture them placing bets. But nothing happens to Paul. When nothing happens to Paul, what do the natives do? They change their minds. In a matter of minutes Paul goes from being a “murderer” to being a “god.” In a matter of minutes they change their minds from one extreme to another—they’re like politicians. But notice, it’s the same religion at work.

These people worship the goddess of Justice. They believe that bad things happen to bad people, and of course they also believe the other side of the coin, that good things happen to good people. They see that the snakebite, which normally results in certain death, doesn’t even phase Paul. They’ve never seen anything like this before! This is such an incredible, good occurrence that they conclude Paul must be an incredible man, a very good man...he must be a god of some sort to have received such good fortune. For the people of Malta, life is interpreted as a series of punishments or rewards that come your way based on how you live your life, on how perfectly or imperfectly you perform.

You and I live a long way from Malta. Geographically, Malta is thousands of miles away. But

friends, spiritually, we still live in Malta. Call it whatever you want. Call it “religion,” “karma,” “justice,” “what goes around comes around,” whatever. Your neighbors and your newspapers, your co-workers and your cable channels tend to process life the same way the natives on Malta processed what happened around that bonfire: punishment or reward comes your way in life based on your works, your bad or good behavior.

Like the people of Malta, we’re all born with a sense of justice—bad people must be punished, that’s basic. Everybody’s got that category. On Malta and on the Peninsula we all get the categories of justice, works, punishment, reward. What was foreign to the people of Malta in their worship of the goddess of Justice and what’s foreign to many people here is a category called grace.

Throughout the book of Acts the apostle Paul has been traveling from city to city announcing a very different way of interpreting life, a very different message: the gospel. Contrary to the religion of the Malta natives, that bad things happen to bad people, Paul has been shouting the news that good things happen to bad people—Jesus happens to bad people. And this is very good news because, let’s remind ourselves, we’re all bad people. Let’s remind ourselves of the truth of the sinful nature that we all have. Before the holy God of the Universe and his standard of justice, we all deserve to be bitten by a poisonous snake and drop dead, we all deserve to be punished, because of how we have turned our backs on God and tried to run our own lives.

Paul the “murderer” (remember...?), knew he deserved punishment because of his sin. But Paul also knew that he didn’t get what he deserved. He believed the good news that on the cross Jesus took the punishment that he, that we, deserve. Paul knew that the greatest expression of justice/punishment in the history of the world was simultaneously the greatest expression of love, of grace, in the history of the world: the cross of Christ. At the cross, God the Father simultaneously expressed his perfect justice *and* his perfect love by punishing and pardoning—he poured out his wrath *and* his grace by punishing his sinless Son in our place. Jesus took our punishment so that we could take grace.

Now, we know this here. We love the gospel here. We believe the gospel here. But do we apply the gospel to our daily life as we ought to? As we go about our week, is the good news our interpretive framework for making sense out of our successes and our failures, for processing our progress or lack of progress in our walk with the Lord? The natives on Malta didn’t simply believe their religion; they applied it to daily life, they made sense of the scene around the fire by applying their religious beliefs.

CPC, let’s not just believe the gospel, let’s apply it. Here’s what I mean. I want you to think about

an area of your life right now where your performance is less than perfect, an area where you feel guilt, where you feel shame—an area where you have recently failed, or perhaps it's an area where you seem to continually fail and there seems to be no progress in your walk with Jesus. Maybe your area is a relationship. You act in selfishness rather than in love. Maybe it's lust or greed or not pursuing the Lord the way you know you should. Do you have your area?

In that area of your life, are you more aware of your failure, your shame, your guilt, and all the work you have left to do than you are of God's love for you, of God's grace for you, and of all the work that God's already accomplished on your behalf? Do you know that God wants you to be more aware of what he's done for you than of what you've failed to do for him? If you're always thinking about your work and performance, that's just Malta religion, that's just trying to set your accounts in order so that the gods won't be angry with you. That's not gospel. Perhaps the most important way we can apply the gospel to our ongoing Christian life is by cultivating habits that will help us to be more aware of Christ's work than we are of our work.

As I've been seeking to grow in this area, trying to apply the gospel in my daily life to areas of personal failure, weakness, and immaturity, there's an image that's been particularly helpful for me. I'll share this with you because I think it will help some of you. It's the 57 to 1 Ratio. There are 58 verses in chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians. Let me read the last verse. **"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."**

This week, as you think about the work God has called you to as a Christian and you become aware of your present shortcomings and any shame that might go with that, spend one minute thinking about that—repenting and figuring it out, then spend 57 minutes soaking in the gospel, telling your mind to be aware not of your work, but of Christ's finished work on your behalf. The way to become more steadfast and immovable in your walk with Christ is to get more in touch with what Christ has already done for you.

Scene #2: The Healings (vv. 7-11a).

Back to our story. Scene #1: The Fire. Now, Scene #2, The Healings. Verse 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."** The CEO of this island is a man named Publius. Publius continues the trend of island hospitality by entertaining for three days, probably not all, but an assortment of, the 276 shipwrecked men. I would imagine that word quickly spread about Paul—the man from the sea who was un-phased by the deadly snake bite, and that this news motivated Publius to invite Paul to his home because, look at what goes on here, verse 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."

The father of Publius is very sick with fever and dysentery. Most scholars think this is a case of "Malta Fever." As late as 1887 people were still getting sick on the island of Malta from Malta Fever. It is believed to come from the milk of the Maltese goat. Paul doesn't know any of this. He just knows that grandfather Publius is very sick and so he takes four steps in dealing with this sick man (actually, these are great steps for us to follow when dealing with those who are sick and in need). Verse 8 tells us, first, that Paul visits the sick man. Paul carves out time to be with this man. Second, Paul prays for him. Third, Paul puts his hands on the sick man—he touches him. And fourth, by a miraculous work of God, Paul heals the man (we're never in control of this fourth step).

The healing doesn't stop with this one man. Verse 9, **"And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured."** News spreads about the healing of grandfather Publius and now all the rest of the people on the island who have diseases flock to Paul and they too are healed.

What does this remind you of? The ministry of Jesus. This is how ministry often worked for Jesus. He'd come into a town, visit and heal a single sick person, and then the news spread and minutes later all the jacked up sick people in town would flock to Jesus and they too would receive healing. And what did Jesus *also* do with the people during those episodes of healing? He taught the people. He preached. But this seems to be missing from Paul's time on the island. Look at verses 10 and 11, **"They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed. After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered on the island..."**

Three months on the island, lots of healings, but no mention of Paul teaching and preaching? Well, could you imagine Paul stationed for three months on an island full of pagans, where the gospel has never been preached before? Could you imagine him being silent for three months, not opening his mouth to speak about Jesus? From everything that Luke has been telling us about Paul throughout the book of Acts, we're meant to understand here that Paul was not only healing the people; it's just assumed that he was also evangelizing them, preaching the gospel to them.

Many scholars think during Paul's three month stay on Malta he planted a church there. Along with his Christian companions Luke and Aristarchus who were with him on the island, Paul likely spent his days teaching and discipling these islanders as well as many of the men from the shipwreck who had heard Paul talk so confidently about his God during the storm and how God would deliver them safely to land.

Now, let's take a step back from this scene.

What does this scene, these healings and these conversions, teach us about God? This passage teaches us that as we experience shipwrecks in life, God has information available to him that is not available to us.

When the ship was going down, when Paul was in the midst of the storm, he didn't know about this group of people on an island in need of healing and in need of the gospel. The information that Paul had available was simply that his ship was going down and his plan to make it to Rome ASAP was dashed. That's all Paul knew. But in the midst of the storm, God knew more. God had information available to him that was not available to Paul. All along, God knew about this island. God knew about an island of refuge where Paul would encounter a warm fire, unusual kindness, and the opportunity to heal and minister to a group of people in great need of contact with a man like Paul. Can't you just imagine Paul walking on the beach during his last day on Malta, reflecting on all that had taken place during his three months on the island, realizing that his shipwreck brought salvation to others?

Are you in a storm right now and your future looks very uncertain? Have your plans been shipwrecked? Be reminded this morning that God is well aware of your situation. God has information about your situation and about your future that isn't available to you because he wants to teach you the joy and freedom of trusting him and his perfect plan for your life. Proverbs 3:5-6, **"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths."** What looks like a shipwreck in your life right now might turn out to look like salvation later. When the storm clears, you might just find yourself on an island of refuge, with a warm fire, surrounded by unusual kindness and unexpected opportunities to heal and help others. Maybe, maybe not. Who knows what things look like on the other side of the storm? God knows.

J.I. Packer, theologian and author, reflected on his 80 years of life, "As I review God's steering of my life, one thing that stands out is the element of surprise at all the crucial points. I was never expecting what came; I was always projecting something else."

I want us all to be reminded this morning that God has information available to him that is not available to us and I want us to be put in a position to better trust God as a result of this sermon. So, how do you do that? Do you walk out of here and just try hard to trust God more? How do you cultivate greater trust in God? Here's one way to help cultivate your trust in God. Review God's faithfulness to you. Doing this will accelerate your trust in God and remind you that God always operates in your life with a much larger pool of information than you have available to you.

Scene #3: The City (vv. 11-16).

We've looked at The Fire, we've looked at The Healings, now our third and final scene, The City. Verse 11, **"After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered on the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as its figurehead."** After spending the whole winter on Malta,

Paul and his companions set sail again. They board a ship that has as its figurehead, as its mascot, the "twin gods," which are Castor and Pollux, the twin sons of Zeus. These two gods are the gods of navigation, the saviors of the sea—the GPS of the 1st century. I believe Luke gives us this little detail as a slam against the gods. The True God led them to safety.

So, setting sail, Paul is back en route to Rome. Finally, he reaches his destination. Verses 12-16, **"Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. 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. There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. 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. And when we had come into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier that guarded him."**

Paul finally reaches Rome. This is where Paul and the book of Acts has been headed from the beginning. Years earlier, when he wrote a letter to some Christians living in Rome (the book of Romans), Paul expressed his strong desire to visit Rome and do ministry there. Multiple times throughout the book of Acts Paul has expressed his desire to visit Rome. Even the Lord has made this intention clear, Acts 23:11, **"...the Lord stood by him [Paul] and said, '...as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.'" Remember the opening scene in the book of Acts? Jesus is there with his disciples, ready to ascend to heaven. And his final words are in Acts 1:8, "...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."** Rome is the end of the earth...as far west as any witnesses have ever traveled.

Throughout the book of Acts the gospel has advanced through cities, city by city. The book of Acts is the story of ministry in cities. Acts mentions more cities than all other New Testament books combined. Christianity began as an urban movement. The early Christians took the gospel to cities because cities have many potential converts and because by influencing a city you could influence a whole region. We don't have a single account of Paul preaching the gospel in the countryside; he's always in the cities. And this is why it is so significant that as we come near to the end of the book of Acts, Paul finally arrives in the city of Rome.

I want you to get a sense of what's happening in this text, of what Paul was approaching as his ship docked in the town of Puteoli and then walked north along the Appian Way, Rome's most traveled highway, into the city of Rome. As Paul approached Rome he approached the largest city in the Roman Empire—the New York City of the ancient world. Paul had never seen a city like this before. 450,000 people made their home in Rome, about half the population of

San Francisco. Paul approached a densely populated city—each acre of land in Rome held the homes of about 300 people. Our CPC campus is about 1.5 acres, so imagine if 450 people had their homes here. And remember that you couldn't build up, maybe a story or two, but 1st century cities didn't have tall structures—two or three stories at the most.

Rome was a filthy city. In 1st century Greco-Roman cities, the streets were lined with sewage, which is why incense was so popular. It masked the smells of the city. Disease was rampant in the cities, making for a high turnover in the population. People would catch disease and die, but new people were continually moving into the city and so the populations of cities like Rome stayed steady. As Paul walked north towards the densely populated, dirty, diseased, dangerous city of Rome he was approaching a city where there were, at best, 100 Christians—the people Paul had written to years earlier.

Only 100 Christians in a city of 450,000 people! There had been persecution of Christians in Rome in the past, but in the next few years, under Emperor Nero, is when things would get really bad, when Christians who lived in this city would be persecuted, tortured, and killed for their faith in Jesus. Paul would be one of them, and he knew this possibility as he approached the city.

For years now Paul has been aware of God's call on his life to go to Rome. For years Paul has been wrestling with his desire to obey that call to do ministry in the world's greatest and most dangerous city. Finally, Paul is almost there and he's excited and yet what fear he must have felt, not knowing what fate awaited him in Rome.

I've tried to get inside the head of Paul this week. What was going through his mind as he traveled north? I'll bet a great deal of fear. This is why verse 15 is so important, **"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."** Some of the Christians in Rome hear that Paul is coming their way and so they travel south, some walk 10 miles south to the Forum of Appius and some walk 33 miles south to Three Taverns, in order to welcome Paul on his way into the city.

Look at the kindness God shows Paul! God sends brothers to Paul! At just the right moment God sends Paul brothers, to remind him that he's not alone and to supply him with fresh courage as he journeys forward in obedience to God's call on his life. Paul is deeply affected at the sight of these brothers. Upon seeing them, Paul thanks God and takes courage for the road ahead.

Fresh courage begins to displace Paul's fears. He continues towards the city, arrives in Rome, is placed under house arrest, and there he begins a fruitful ministry. From Rome Paul went on to write much of our New Testament: Philemon, Colossians, Philippians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and probably also Ephesians. Today, every time we read our New Testament, we're still benefiting from Paul's obedience to travel to Rome. When Paul entered Rome, again, the best research suggests that there were, give or take, 100 Christians in this city. Two generations later, by the year 180, there were approximately 15,000 Christians in Rome. Paul didn't live to see that, but that movement from 100 to 15,000 Christians was surely in large part due to Paul's obedience to live, minister, and suffer in the city of Rome.

We're not to the end of the chapter yet. We have one more sermon in Acts next Sunday, but this is basically where the book of Acts ends—Paul has walked the road to Rome. He's moved on from the fire and the healings, and now he's in the city doing ministry. And I think the challenge we're left with here at the end of this book is that just as Paul was obedient to walk forward into Rome, we're called to walk forward into the ministry that God has for us.

Two thousand years later the gospel has advanced beyond Rome. The good news really has spread to the ends of the earth. It's come all the way West, all the way here to the Bay Area. Now our situation isn't quite as bad as that of Rome, having only 100 Christians in a city of 450,000. But there's a lot of ministry to do here. Nearly nine million people live here in the greater Bay Area and most of these nine million people have not been reached with the gospel. God wants us to follow in the footsteps of Paul and reach our Rome for Jesus.

The work before us is overwhelming. But let's not be afraid, let's take fresh courage this morning. God sent Paul a few brothers to show him that he wasn't alone and to help along the way. But look at what God has sent us: a whole family of brothers, sisters, moms, dads, sons, and daughters committed to the gospel, committed to each other, committed, by God's grace, to making and maturing more followers of Christ in the Bay Area.