

Acts Series Part 67

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Date: 26 February 2012

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[0 : 00] in Acts chapter 28. Are you afraid of what tomorrow may bring? Do you ever feel vulnerable and unprotected? What about death? Are you afraid of death? Does the prospect of a death appearing as an uninvited and unwelcome intruder concern you? Moving on to matters less dramatic, are you worried about how you will provide for your own and for your family's material needs?

What about your job? Is it secure? What about the financial resources that you need, perhaps for your own education or for the education of your children? As the value of pension funds seems to shrink, it seems to be a big black hole, not that I know much about these things. I wonder, is that something that worries you as you look forward to when you will need resources to live?

In your retirement? What about your sense of usefulness in God's service? Are you useful? Do you feel useful? Is there a sense of fulfillment that you enjoy in the service of God? Are you clear on what God would have you do? And are you doing what God would have you do if you are clear about what it is?

I would imagine that it would be difficult for anybody here for whom at least one of these questions is not relevant or strikes a chord, maybe more than one. And I want to touch on these questions not by trying to answer them or not by trying to answer each of them, but by considering Paul as he finally reaches his longed-for destination, the great city of Rome. And as we do consider Paul's final leg of the journey, and as we consider how what we find and discover about it does bear on the questions that we have been posing, I want us to first of all notice two verses that in a sense serve as bookends for this whole voyage of Paul to Rome. If you notice first of all, in Acts 23 and verse 11. And then, having noticed what we read there, we'll immediately go to a verse that we've read in chapter 28. And as I say, there is a sense in which these two verses could be seen as bookends for the voyage. First of all then, in chapter 23 in verse 11, we read, the following night, the Lord stood near Paul and said, take courage, as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome. So, this is the Lord speaking directly to Paul and assuring him that He will make it to Rome. He must, for He has a task to perform. You must also testify in Rome. And then in chapter 28 and in verse 14, and just the second half of the verse, especially the words that Luke records for us there, the second half of verse 14, we read, and so we came to Rome. The second verse, or that part of the second verse, is a simple statement of fact, though no doubt expressed with a huge sense of gratitude and relief. Finally, we've arrived after so many adventures, so many obstacles, but we're here. We've arrived in Rome.

I would imagine that arrival at Rome must have appeared at many points along the way as a very unlikely outcome. So many obstacles that Paul and his companions had to overcome. But I wonder, was Rome as unreachable as it appeared on those occasions when huge obstacles stood in the way of Paul? Well, the verse that we've read in chapter 23 provides us with a very clear answer. Nothing was more certain for Paul than his inevitable arrival in Rome, for these were the words that God had directed to him.

[5 : 08] This was the promise that had been made. You must testify also in Rome. So we have the promise, and then we have the fulfillment. And so we came to Rome. But of course, between the promise and the fulfillment, there's an awful lot of stuff in between. And over the past a few weeks, we have considered the account provided by Luke of all that did happen in between the promise and the fulfillment. And this evening, we're going to do the same, but limiting ourselves to the very final leg of the journey, as Rome appears even more tantalizingly on the horizon.

What I want to do is notice three truths concerning how God deals with or relates with Paul, and do so where we could take Paul as representing for us a disciple who is sensitive and obedient to God's direction. As we've noticed, God had sent him to Rome, had indicated that to Rome he must

go, and that is precisely where he is going. He is heading where God has sent him. For such obedient disciples, for Paul is living and traveling in obedience, there are heartwarming and encouraging promises that touch on the questions that we raised a few moments ago, about whether we fear death, about worries that we have about tomorrow, and about the provision for our daily needs. Now, for those of you who may be unconcerned or careless with regard to God's leading in your life, then the promises and encouragement that we will find, they are not for you. That said, I trust that this might serve as a prod or a challenge to get in line, to discover and walk in the direction that God has for you. Just one further word of clarification. Some might say, you might respond to what I've said thus far. Well, I want to go in the direction that God leads, but I don't know what that is. I don't know what it is God would have me do. I don't know where I should go. If I knew, then I would go, but I don't know. So, what should I do? You might also say, well, I don't have the advantage that Paul had of God appearing to me and speaking to me directly and saying, you must go to Rome. If that happened, then it would be so easy. Then I would know where I should go, because God would have told me like he told Paul. Maybe you think, I wish he would. [8 : 04] I wish he would speak to me in that way. Then life would be so much easier. Well, I'm not sure if it would be that much easier, but you might imagine that it would be. Now, that's a fair comment or a fair concern if you wish to raise. How I would respond to it is that I would say this, that though maybe you don't know where you are to go, or indeed you may not know with clarity what you are to do in God's service, God does know. That is very clear. God knows. And I would also say this, that as long as you are honestly open to His direction and are walking in the measure of light that you have been given, and you have been given a great measure of light, for you have the Word of God that does provide direction to us as Christians. If you're walking in the measure of light that you have been given, then the promises implicit in God's dealings with Paul that we're going to go on to look at now do also apply to you. Three truths concerning how God deals with Paul, as we find them illustrated in this final leg of his journey to Rome. First of all, God protects, and secondly, God provides, and then finally, God expects. These are the three things we want to notice, and to keep you on your toes, and to recognize our difficulty sometimes in maintaining concentration right through, we will consider the first aspect, God protects, then we will join in singing a psalm, and then we'll continue thinking about the subsequent elements. So, first of all, God protects. Now, God's protection of Paul is very simply but very beautifully summed up in the verse that we've already drawn attention to, there in verse 14 of chapter 28, and so we came to Rome. I think I've said on a previous occasion, and I make no apology for saying it again, God's people, the disciples of Jesus, are immortal until they finish the work God has prepared for them. This was certainly true of Paul. God had said to him, you must testify in Rome, and until he reached Rome, until he testified in Rome, he was immortal.

No storm, no viper, no danger of any kind could have snatched his life from him because there was this promise that God had made. There was still work for him to do, and these words, very simple words, and so we came to Rome, speak of God's protection. But we can also highlight other specific instances or evidence of God's protection of Paul, even on this final leg of the journey to Rome. First of all, I want to speak of God's physical protection that is provided for Paul, and to notice two examples in the passage that we've read. First of all, in verse 1 of chapter 28, where really we have a summary statement concerning their deliverance from the storm and the shipwreck. Now, in the passage that we've read in the New International Version, we read there, once safely on shore, we found out, and it goes on.

But let me read that first phrase as it is translated in the English Standard Version that is a more literal translation. And that first phrase in chapter 28 is as follows, after we were brought safely through.

And that really captures more precisely what it is that Luke is saying. Luke is saying, after we were brought safely through. And I think Luke is, in a very explicit way, by expressing himself in this way, recognizing that they had been brought through this storm, they had been brought through this shipwreck by the hand of God. God had protected them. God had brought them safely through, and so now they find themselves on a beach in Malta. I wonder if any of the islanders, when they saw this ship clearly in distress approaching the coastline there of Malta, and in the early morning when they finally make it to the shore as that was happening, as they could see what was going on. And I think it's reasonable to presume that there would have been islanders observing what was happening. Certainly we're told that almost immediately on their arrival on the island, they're

attending to those who had been shipwrecked. But just imagine them as they see this ship clearly in distress, making its way to the coastline.

I wonder if they talked among themselves and asked themselves, well, I wonder how many will be drowned. I wonder how many of the ones in the ship will not survive. And maybe most of the passengers will die, but maybe some will make it to the shore. But if anybody had said, well, I think all of them will survive, I imagine those who were with them would have said, well, that's just impossible. There's no way everybody could survive such a shipwreck. And when they did discover, as no doubt they did, when the travelers made their way or eventually were able to land or make their way through the water onto the shore there in Malta, when they discovered that all 276 passengers had survived, I could imagine there would have been gasps of amazement that that was so. What are the chances that every single traveler on that ship could have survived such a storm and such a shipwreck?

[14 : 36] But as Luke makes clear, perhaps in very understated language, but explicit nonetheless, they had been brought safely through. God was protecting Paul and his fellow travelers, as he had promised during the storm. The promise for Paul was one that had been made a long time previously, but the promise for the passengers or the other travelers had been made more recently, as we were noticing just last week. Well, there's one example we have in the passage of God affording physical protection to Paul and those who accompany him. But then, of course, we have them arriving on Malta itself, and maybe the most dramatic example that we have in these verses in chapter 28 of the viper.

Then in verses 2 and 3, we read, The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us, all because it was raining and cold. And then we read, Paul gathered a pile of brushwood, and as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, and then it continues, how they thought that this was justice, the goddess justice, not allowing this man who had escaped the shipwreck, but clearly he must be guilty, and so now he's going to die as a result of a snake bite. Well, we're not going to go into the ideas that the islanders had, though that is an interesting subject, but we are not going to touch on it this evening.

The point is that this incident with the viper was a moment of great drama, of tension, of dire danger, but we know that all is well. God was protecting Paul from this viper, from every danger that presented itself. So we have God affording physical protection, but I think we also find, not only in the chapter that we are concentrating on, chapter 28, but as we just cast our mind back a little to the previous chapter and the storm and the shipwreck, we can also speak of the manner in which God affords Paul what we might call emotional protection, though I'm not sure if that's just the best way of describing it. But what is clear as we read through this incident, what is clear is that we find a man in Paul who is protected from fear and from worry. Paul, in the face of different dangers, evidences, a calmness of spirit and a serenity that can only be God-given. In the previous chapter, not only is he calm and spared fear or terror in the face of the storm, he's able to encourage others and to help others face their own fears and terrors. Keep up your courage, he says to the sailors, do not be afraid, even at the practical level of urging them to take some food. No appetite in the midst of this great danger as their lives seems to be coming to an end. And here we have Paul, a picture of calmness and serenity in the face of such danger. Even the incident with the viper, though we wouldn't want to read too much into the manner in which he shakes off the viper and casts it into the fire, there does seem to be a sense in which he does so almost nonchalantly. Well, yes, there's a viper fastened to my hand. Well, so be it. And he just shakes it off and it lands in the fire. It would seem, though there would be, we certainly wouldn't criticize Paul had he been afraid, there certainly seems to be no evidence of him having been fearful even in the face of this snake fastening itself to his hand.

Why is he so calm? Why do we find this man so in control? Why the absence of fear in the midst of the storm and when the viper fastens itself on his hand? Well, I think Paul gives us the answer in the previous chapter, when in the midst of the storm he is able to testify to his fellow travelers there in verse 25. So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. I have faith in God, says Paul. Why should I be consumed by worry and fear and terror? I have faith in God. God is with me. God is looking after me. God is protecting me. And so I am able to be who I am and to behave in the manner in which I behave. So we find Paul protected by God. Notice also as we would maybe see how that applies to us, that this protection, especially what we've

called emotional protection, it does involve Paul exercising his faith. There's a sense in which the physical protection that God affords is one that will be afforded almost regardless of whether Paul is fearful or not. God has decided that Paul has to make it to Rome and he will make it to Rome. But in terms of Paul's lack of fear in the face of danger, the evidence that he isn't consumed by worry and stress at what's going on. While that is, at one level we could say God-given, but it does also involve Paul. You know, Paul is exercising his faith in God. Because he is trusting in God, he enjoys this calmness and this absence of certainly destructive fear. And as we think of ourselves, you know, we might be in a situation where God is very clear about the manner in which he's going to protect us, but that doesn't necessarily mean that we will be without fear ourselves or perhaps concerning Paul's or God's provision for us. We may be sure or it may be very clear that God will provide for us, but we may still worry terribly about it. And the reason for that is no fault on God's part, but on our part we are failing to exercise the faith in God that we ought to, and we're not trusting in him as we ought. Paul does. He's trusting in God. He believes that God will protect and God will provide. Hence, we find him behaving in the way that he does. So, God protects. Now, we want to notice two other things, how God provides and also

[21 : 40] God expects of Paul. But let's, before we do that, let's sing again from the psalm that we have been singing, Psalm 34, and we'll sing the verses 15 to 22. Psalm 34, verses 15 to 22.

Psalm 34, verses 15 to 22. We'll sing to the tune of Martyrdom. Let's stand to sing.

The Lord's eyes upon the just, he listens to them we. The wicked he rejects.

The righteous cry, the Lord responds, and frees them when distress.

The Lord drops near the broken heart, and rescues the distress. The broken heart, and rescues the distress. The broken heart, and rescues the distress.

[23 : 35] The broken heart, and rescues the distress. From all the troubles of the just, the Lord will set them free. The Lord protects his every world. The Lord protects his every word. The Lord protects his every word. The Lord is broken down. The broken heart, and broken down will be. The broken heart, and broken down will be. The God Hos ament down, and broken down will be. The wicked are gerade set become the Every hope And hope That none will be The wicked I contend Today All those to me The just

God saves His soul They're not condemned For in The Lord They trust Paul as a faithful disciple, somebody who is walking in the way of obedience. And we're noticing how God relates to and responds to one who is walking in that way and seeking to be obedient to him. We notice that God protects such. He protects Paul.

And so there is also for us that encouragement that he will protect us. But also he provides, God provides. First of all, notice that God provides for Paul's care and sustenance.

When we think of their arrival in Malta, the ship has been destroyed. Its contents have been lost along the journey. Much of it was being cast out. And certainly towards the end, we imagine that certainly the vast majority of the contents have gone, with the exception, of course, of every single passenger.

And so they have nothing. Paul and those who accompany him, they have nothing. I wonder what they thought their prospects were for being fed and being provided for, for warmth and shelter. Well, it didn't look very rosy, the picture. But what are we told? Well, then in verse 2, we're told the islanders, the islanders there in Malta showed us unusual kindness.

[26 : 23] Kindness. It's as if Paul himself is expressing, or in this case Luke is expressing, that they were very surprised at the manner in which the locals provided for the needs of these men who had been shipwrecked.

They showed us unusual kindness. And of course, credit where credit is due, we applaud and recognize the kindness of the locals there in Malta.

The manner in which they went out of their way. They went beyond the call of duty, as we say, to provide for these strangers who had appeared on their island.

And we do recognize and give credit to them for that. It does remind us of God's common grace, how God uses men and women who perhaps do not know Him, do not acknowledge Him, and yet they are able to show, as these Maltese did. They are able to show unusual kindness to men and women in need.

And so credit where credit is due, but of course we know that God is behind the actions of these islanders. God is the one who is using them. We applaud them, but we recognize that God is using them to provide for His faithful servant.

[27 : 39] And as we go through the chapter, the examples of God providing care and sustenance for Paul are many.

And we're not going to think about each of them, but just notice them. There in verse 7, we read of this fellow Publius. He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably. Then in verse 10, again, of the islanders, they honored us in many ways. And when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed. And then as the journey continues, when they arrive in Italy, just the toe of Italy, where they hit land before heading up to Rome, we read that in verse 14 of Provision.

There we found some brothers who invited us to spend a week with them, and so we came to Rome. So in many ways, God is providing for Paul and indeed for those who accompany him. And all of this, all these examples of provision explained by the final instance of provision, in this case of fellow travelers and friends, to accompany them on the very, very final leg of the journey, there in verse 15.

[29 : 00] The brothers there had heard that we were coming, that is the brothers in Rome. And as they hear that Paul is arriving, they make their way south from Rome to meet him on the road up to Rome.

And they traveled, as we read there, as far as the Forum of Appius and the Tree Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men, Paul thanked God and was encouraged.

The men who came to meet him were worthy of thanks. But of course, Paul realizes that ultimately his gratitude is directed to God, for God has been providing for him.

Through unusual means, the islanders on Malta, the Roman governor or official, chief official, as he's described there on the island.

And in so many ways, some unusual and unexpected ways, God provided for his faithful servant.

[29 : 59] And I think that is something that ought to be for us a source of encouragement. Why should we worry about our physical, our material needs, and the needs that we might have tomorrow or next week or next year, if we are living lives that we endeavor to be pleasing to God?

We can be sure that God will provide. God has always provided, and he will continue to provide. But God provides in another way.

He provides also to Paul opportunities to serve. In verse 8, there on Malta, we're told of this chief official, Publius, and of his father, who was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery.

Paul discovers that this is so. He goes in to see this, we presume, elderly man, and after prayer placed his hands on him and healed him.

So he has this very specific opportunity to exercise a gift that he had, this gift of healing. And of course, this, as you would imagine, opened the doors for many more opportunities to serve.

[31 : 15] Soon, those on the island heard about this remarkable recovery of health that had been enjoyed by this man. And so we're told that all the sick on the island, when this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island, came and were cured.

So multiple opportunities that God provided for Paul, as he is shipwrecked there on Malta, to serve others, to serve God in the service of others.

So, Paul is provided with opportunities to serve. Now, maybe some of us might say, well, yes, if I had a gift of healing, well, then I could serve God as well.

If I had that kind of power, well, I would take delight in serving God. You couldn't hold me back.

Anybody who was sick, I'd be there. Oh, yes, I'd be faithful in my service of God, but I can't do that.

Well, maybe if that's what you're thinking, notice that Paul was provided with another opportunity to serve on Malta. It's before this one, but I've left it till now to, in a sense, to highlight it.

[32 : 23] What do we read there in verse 3? They've landed on Malta, they're shipwrecked, a fire is being prepared, and there we read, Paul gathered a pile of brushwood. Didn't need some great gift to do that.

Didn't need to be some great apostle to do that. He was able to gather the firewood for the fire. He served in that way.

And so if anybody here is saying, well, yes, I'd like to serve God, but I don't have any gifts. I don't know what I could do. I couldn't do the kind of things that Paul did or others do. Well, here's Paul gathering some firewood for the fire.

Now, I'm sure there must be so many opportunities of that kind for all of us. Notice that it's Paul himself. It's not as if, well, Paul did the healing, and, well, some other Christian did the gathering of

the firewood.

No, Paul does both things. For those who really want to serve God, there are plenty opportunities to do so. God provides opportunities to serve.

[33 : 27] And then finally, and very briefly, we say of God as he relates to Paul, this obedient and faithful servant that God expects. I want to notice what he does and what he does not expect.

And rather perversely, we're going to begin by noticing what he does not expect. One of the very intriguing aspects of this account of Paul's three months on Malta is what is not reported.

He's there for three months, not insignificant amount of time, and yet there is no report given by Luke of any gospel fruit, of anybody being converted, of anybody coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

No reference whatsoever. Now, there is danger in coming to definitive conclusions on the basis of silence. It may be that Luke simply doesn't record that for us, but that seems unlikely.

It seems unlikely that a man who would record the healing of physical illness would leave unmentioned if there had been folk who had been brought to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

[34 : 42] Paul and Luke, this was what would have thrilled them most, that Publius, that his father, that the islanders, would have put their faith in Jesus, but no reference to this having happened.

Seemingly, the scene was ripe for the gospel. If you think of those who had been spared the storm, they'd heard how Paul had said, you're not going to die. I have faith in God. Surely these were men ripe for the gospel.

Surely these were men, when Paul would but explain to them who Jesus is and what they have to do, put their trust in Jesus, surely they would all become Christians. Or the islanders.

They're very kind. They're open. They're impressed by Paul. They're grateful to Paul as he heals.

They're sick. And yet, as far as we can tell, certainly in as much as what is recorded, nothing.

Did Paul fail? I wonder, was God disappointed with Paul for the lack of success on Malta? Well, of course, that is not so. God would not have been disappointed with Paul.

[35 : 48] Why? Because God did not expect of Paul that he would secure conversions. That wasn't Paul's job. It wasn't his job. It wasn't our job to convert anybody.

But there is also, and this is the point with which we do close, that which God does expect. What does God expect of Paul and of us?

Well, He expects of Paul that he would trust in Him, trust in His promise to protect Him, as evidently Paul did. And that trust in God's promise of protection is evidenced for us by this spiritual calmness, even and especially in tough times.

God also expected of Paul that he would trust in God and be grateful to God for His unailing provision. And we read of Paul thanking God for providing.

And we are sure that even when that isn't explicitly stated, on each occasion when God did provide, Paul would have expressed his gratitude to God for His provision.

[37 : 04] And God also expected of Paul, as He expects of us, a grasping of the opportunities to serve that He does invariably provide.

And so that is something that God expects of you and me, as He provides opportunities to serve, that we would identify them, that we would grasp them, and in so doing.

Also enjoy the protection and the provision that God afforded to Paul and continues to afford to His people as we would serve Him.

Well, we trust and pray that we would be faithful in so doing, in taking those opportunities, in trusting in God and rejoicing in His generous and loving protection and provision.

Let's pray.