

# Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

## **R2L: Ever Progressing in Ministry**

Acts 28:1-16

**1** When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta. **2** The 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. **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. **4** When 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." **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. **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. **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. **9** After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured. **10** They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed. **11** At the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead. **12** After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. **13** From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. **14** There we found some brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome. **15** And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. **16** When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

Many of us may remember having our parents or grandparents standing us up against the wall, making marks so as to reveal not only how tall we were becoming, but also to show us that we were in fact growing. Children love to see, with their own eyes, just how they have grown. You know, it should not be all that different for churches. Churches are living organisms and they are supposed to grow. We ought to love to see how we have grown. Now, the rate of growth in any given church depends on a lot of different factors. Sometimes a ministry will take off like a well-planted garden in springtime. At other times, the growth of a church moves into the slow, maturation phase, like corn in the month of August, not as obvious to the naked eye, but growth continues to take place. The truth is, at times God's work advances exponentially; clear for all to see. But there will also be times when God chooses to work at a seemingly imperceptible and painstakingly slow pace.

Ever since Acts 21, the explosive ministry growth experienced by Paul had now come to a screeching halt. After his arrest, there was not much apparent progress; at least from the human perspective. He could not report on new churches being started for he had spent the last two years in prison for a crime he did not commit. And his legal battles were not over. Faced with injustice locally, Paul had appealed his case to Caesar, in Rome. Then, seemingly adding insult to injury, Paul nearly lost his life in a great storm at sea, ending up shipwrecked on an island. Not much apparent ministry progress - - - and all of this was by God's design. It was God who

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told Paul he would go to Rome. It was God who allowed the storm that nearly killed him and the others. God was in control.

And all of this reminds us of something we need to get clear in our lives if we would be true victors rather than trumped victims; if we would live fervently for God rather than fearful of Him. We must remember that our God is sovereign – He is in control. He is sovereign over our salvation; and sovereign over our lives. He is sovereign in our families and He is sovereign in our ministries. It is Jesus who said, **“I will build My church...”** in Matthew 16:18. Sometimes Jesus builds up a church at a rate and in ways that shock us; sometimes the building is slow. Do you remember the promise God gave to Paul in Acts 23:11; **“Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.”** God told Paul, “You are going to Rome!” I wonder what Paul’s initial response to this news was? Perhaps he was excited, for he had desired to minister in Rome for some years, and now God told him he was on his way. I doubt, however, that Paul could have anticipated how hard the road to Rome about be or how long it would take.

The Lord has given us promises, as well. We know we are headed to heaven and that God promises to meet all our needs along the way. We know Jesus has promised that along the way, we would be His witnesses. And I believe that is what He meant; we would tell others about Him. These are His promises; and sometimes He fulfills such promises in ways that do not seem to make much sense to us. He allows hardships in our lives to provide the backdrop on the canvas of His redemptive work. He allows us to face setbacks and difficulties and opposition. We will often find times in our lives were it seems as though we are simply *inching ahead*, if that – for sometimes it can feel as though our growth occurs in millimeters rather than inches much less in feet or yards.

Maybe this is where you find yourself, just inching along, wondering if you can have another growth spurt. If so, then Acts 28 is for you. For Acts 28 reminds us that what God promises God fulfills and that He will fulfill it in His time and in His way. In Acts 28, Paul finally makes it to Rome. Looking at the big picture, Acts 28 reveals that that the mission of the church was happening just as Jesus had stated. In Acts 1:8 the Jesus told His disciples, **“but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”**

What the Lord says He will do, the Lord does. In Acts 1-7 He guided His people to reach Jerusalem. In Acts 8-12 they reached Judea and Samaria. And then, from Acts 13 all the way to Acts 28, God scattered His people to reach the rest of the world, with the capital of that first century world being Rome itself. Today we are going to take a look at just how the Lord works out His promises. Pretty cool, right? As followers of Jesus Christ, we will frustrated and discouraged lives until we take to heart this message revealed in Acts 28:1-16; resolved to live making progress in ministry, in our service to God; even if that progress takes one of two paths according to God’s person and plan. This morning we will look at the first path God can take in our ministries, the path of the spectacular. Next week we will look at the second path God can take in our ministries; the one He more often uses, the path of the ordinary.

## I. God can work in spectacular ways (28:1-10)

Speaking all things visible and invisible into existence by divine fiat. Bringing about a world-wide flood that killed everyone and everything save those who were in an ark built by Noah. Parting the Red Sea for His people to walk through on dry ground. Our God does wondrous, miraculous, mind-blowing, spectacular things. There are times when God does such

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extraordinary things that you would have to be blind to miss it. We serve the God who does the impossible, the most *spectacular* of things. And this is exactly what we find happening in the first ten verses of Acts 28, God working in spectacular ways in the life of Paul. This is the first way in which God could allow you or me, or our church to make progress. Let us note two such spectacular events by which Paul’s ministry progressed.

### A. The Lord used the bite of a viper (1-6)

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

Starting in verse one, notice that Luke uses “we” – which includes all 276 people who survived the storm and shipwreck of chapter 27. Now Malta is a small island in the Mediterranean Sea, just some 17 miles long and 9 miles wide and about 500 miles south of Rome.

In verse 2 Luke says, ***“The natives showed us extraordinary kindness...”*** The KJV calls them *“the barbarous people”* based on the Greek term *barbaroi*. For the Greeks, anyone who spoke some unintelligible foreign tongue, what the Greeks called *bar bar* - what we might call gibberish, rather than the beautiful Greek tongue were called the *barbaroi*... I think the NASB does a better job of translating Luke’s intent however, not considering these people as barbarians, but rather simply the natives of the island; as it appears they must have spoken Greek.

The middle of verse 2 shows how these natives demonstrated their kindness, ***“for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all.”*** Remember, it is still in the winter season and all Paul, Luke, and the other 274 sea travelers had with them were the wet clothing on their backs.

Verse 3 begins, ***“But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire...”*** Please do not miss something significant here that is easily overlooked. Who is Paul? Paul, the brilliant preacher? Paul the great theologian? Paul, the author of half of the New Testament books? And what was he doing? He was *gathering sticks* for the fire. Beloved, n/o task is too small for the true servant of God. How about for you? Are you willing to do anything to help God’s people or to advance the cause of Christ?

A century ago a man traveled with two women, hoping to enroll his daughter in D. L. Moody’s school for young women. “The three needed help in getting their luggage from the railway depot to the hotel, so the man ‘drafted’ a rather common-looking man with a horse and wagon, assuming he was a local cabby. The cabby’ said he was waiting for students, but the man ordered him to take them to the hotel. The man was shocked when the ‘cabby’ did not charge him, and was even more shocked to discover that the ‘cabby’ was D. L. Moody himself!” If you want to be God’s kind of leader you must learn how to serve and then you must be willing to serve.

So we have Paul, feeding the fire with sticks when something most unexpected happened. Paul picked up one stick and it just happened to be “alive.” Look at verse 3 again — ***“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.”*** As Paul is putting these sticks on the fire, a snake came up out of the bundle, having been warmed by the fire and sank its fangs into Paul’s hand. What must have raced through Paul’s mind? What is really interesting, at least to Luke, is what the natives thought.

In verse 4 we have the response of the natives... ***“When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they began saying to one another, “Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and***

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**though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.”** One of the most common beliefs held by humanity throughout the world is this; do good and God (or the gods) will reward you; do bad and God (or the gods) will get you. The idea of “karma” that good people get will be rewarded while bad people will get what they deserve.

This, of course, undermines a basic premise of the Christian worldview that says, “There is no one who does good; not even one...” (Romans 3:10). The idea of grace, of getting something a person does not deserve, is a foreign idea to a works-oriented world. For the non-Christian worldview, the idea that God would bless undeserving people with His favor makes no sense at all. It makes no sense that God could send “good” people; those who sincerely did their best; to hell. According to the Bible, God never accepts people based upon their own merits, but solely upon His grace, through faith in the work of His Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross.

No doubt the natives’ worldview was rocked when we note what next took place in verses 5-6; **“5 However he [Paul] 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.”** The natives must of thought Paul to be immortal. Of course, he was not. But he did belong to a God who is immortal, a God who has a plan for His people, and a God who will not stop until His plan is completed!

Beloved, do you ever find yourself fearful about the future? Here is a remedy for such a fear. If you are a Christian, your life is in God’s hands. All you must do is trust in His wisdom and watch him work out His plan in your life. Our God can do spectacular things, and sometimes He does! Now, let us consider this miracle more closely and seek to answer a question; what kind of effect do miracles have on unbelievers? I see at least three:

## 1. An unbeliever simply cannot ignore the miraculous.

These natives of Malta saw the viper; the bite, the hand of Paul; they saw it all. They also saw Paul shake the snake off it into the fire. They all watch intently, waiting for him to drop dead. This was their experience when any man was bitten by such a snake. But this time was different. What they saw this time defied all explanation. What they saw was a miracle.

It is interesting to note that some “bible” scholars believe Luke made this whole incident up because there are no poisonous snakes of any kind found on the island Malta today. This is one of those supposed errors or fabrications of Scripture. But, let me point something out, Luke never said that there would be vipers found on Malta in 2014. Luke reported on there around 60 AD and it bit Paul! It is not unreasonable, or unprecedented for snake populations can change over the years. Some of you know that Ireland, for example, which has been free from snakes hundreds of years, was once plentiful with snakes until, according to pagan tradition, they were banished by Finn MacCumhail, or according to Christian tradition, were banished by St. Patrick. This was truly a miracle that could not be ignored. But miracles tend to lead to another effect upon unbelievers...

## 2. An unbeliever will misunderstand the miraculous.

This is what often drives believers crazy. Here, the islanders saw the miracle with their own eyes and yet they quickly misunderstood or misinterpreted its meaning. Recall that their first response was to say that Paul was a murderer who was caught by justice, by one of their own goddesses, and then in the very next breath they declare Paul to be a god!

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I have had so many unbeliever say to me over the years, “If the Lord would just let me see a miracle, then I would believe in Him.” Have you heard that one before? DO you know that generally speaking it is not true. The truth is, if an unbeliever sees a miracle, he will come to the wrong conclusions because his thinking is darkened, not moved by the Holy Spirit. For the truth is, the evidence of a miraculous God is evident all around him; for he sees it every time he looks at the stars or at a newborn baby; and yet refuses to submit to the Lord. Why? Because a sinner needs more than evidence; he needs something else as well before he will understand the evidence. In 1 Corinthians 2:14 we read, **“But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God [including miracles], for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”** What else does the unbeliever need?

### 3. An unbeliever needs a new mind to make sense of the miraculous.

Romans 8:6-8 explains why, **“5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”** If an unbeliever is ever going to see and understand a miracle, he needs a new mind. Only the Spirit of God can give the unbeliever a new mind, and this is exactly what the Holy Spirit does the moment He brings about the new birth in the sinner’s heart.

Let me put it this way; beloved, if you are trying to make sense of God on your own, you will fail. You need a new mind. You need the Holy Spirit. You need to be born again. Talk about the spectacular! There is not greater miracle being performed today; nothing more spectacular than the new birth taking place in the heart and mind of the sinner! So, God used the spectacular event of a viper in verses 1-6; the next spectacular event God used is found in verses 7-10.

### B. The Lord used the healing of the sick (7-10).

Verse 7 says, **“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.”** There is nothing in the text to suggest that the “us” here refers to any less than all 276 survivors of the shipwreck. This would mean that Publius must have had a large home and lots of food. What we do know for sure is that his father was sick as we read in verse 8, **“And it happened that the father of Publius was lying in bed afflicted with recurrent fever and dysentery...”** Malta has long had a peculiar and unpleasant gastric fever of its own, called “Malta fever,” caused by a microbe in goat’s milk.

Let me remind you that God often turns difficulties in this case a sickness, into ministry opportunities. This is just what we have in verses 8-9, **“...and Paul went in to see him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him. 9 After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured.”** Please notice that it was Paul who initiated this first healing, not Publius nor his dad. The text says that Paul went to see the bedridden man, prayed for him, laid hands on him, and healed him. I find it interesting that as an apostle, Paul had the ability to heal others, and at times he did so, but he himself lived with a thorn in the flesh. This is something to keep in mind when we consider the biblical purpose of miracles. Let me give you two:

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## 1. God uses miracles to validate His message.

This is exactly why Paul healed this man. This miracle substantiated the validity, the truthfulness, the importance of the gospel message shared by Paul for these lost people. This miracle clearly called these people to listen carefully to what Paul had to say. According to the text, it appears that they did in fact listen. Now, I would have you noticed that Luke uses two different words to report these healings. In verse 8 we read that Paul **“healed”** the father of Publius, an obvious miracle. Then, in verse 9, we read that other people with diseases came and **“were...getting cured.”** Why the two different words, “healed” [*iasato* – “to make well or make whole”] and “cured” [*therapeuo* “therapy” – “to wait on menially; patiently nurse to health”] The word for “cured” [therapy] speaks of *the giving or receiving of medical attention*. This might mean that both Paul and especially Luke, given his medical background, were providing medical attention to these people. If this be so, then what we have before us is the earliest recorded work of a *medical missionary*. The point is that there appears to be two kinds of healing in this text; the miraculous one by Paul; and the medical one by Luke. Both are used by God to validate the gospel message. But not only does God use miracles to validate His message...

## 2. God uses miracles to validate His messengers.

Look with me at verse 10— **“They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed.”** There is a simple truth convey here: people who are grateful to the Lord for His blessings will show it to the messengers the Lord uses to deliver those blessings. The most literal translation of verse 10 would be, “They also honored us with many honors...” The verb **“honored”** – means “to give that which is valued, precious, of worth” and the noun “honors” or **“marks of respect”** in our text, speaks of valuables, precious things, worthy things. These natives were so grateful to the Lord’s messengers, that they gave not only words of esteem, but also gave Paul and Luke physical and monetary gifts so that their needs would be met.

There are some Christians and congregation that find it difficult to pay a pastor for his labor and time. Yet that is exactly what we see happening here in Acts 28. Paul would use the very same word to express the very same principle in 1 Timothy 5:17 which says, **“The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.”** Now, at the risk of sounding self-serving, which I am not seeking to be; it is important that Christians be reminded of the biblical obligation to not just “provide” for the needs of those whose responsibilities include preaching and teaching, but to do so doubly. It is easy to think along the lines, “Well, because I give to the church my offerings, I am taking care of my pastor or pastors who preach and teach God’s Word.” But what of the “double” honor; a word that implies taking an extra step? Are you considering, thinking, contemplating how to honor those who minister to you with many marks, tangible expressions of respect and gratitude. These natives responded to what God had done for them by giving honor – that which is precious and valuable; as well as supplies to Paul and the others.

What all of this challenges us to do is to remember that if our relationship with the Lord is right, it will affect our attitude towards the things we possess. We tend to be hoarders rather than givers. We can easily forget the truth of Acts 20:35 in which Paul records Jesus as saying, **‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’** Whether it be honoring a pastor for his work of preaching, an elder for his ministry to the church; a deacon for his service; a

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friend for his or her godly friendship; a parent for his or her love; are you seeking to be a great giver?

Of course, our God demonstrated to us what a great giver looks like. In John 3:16 we read, **“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”** Here then is the gift of the gospel: “The gospel is the good news that God became man in Jesus Christ; that He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died in our place on the cross. Three days later He rose from the dead, just as He said, proving that He is the Son of God and offering the gift of salvation (eternal life) to all who, by faith, repent of their sins and receive Jesus as both Lord and Savior.

Do you want to see your ministry, your service, make progress and bring more glory and honor to God? It starts with knowing that you are a follower of Christ; it starts with knowing that you have been born again; the most spectacular miracle that takes place today; and then it is worked out by giving your time, your resources, your efforts increasingly to the work of Christ and His Church.

So then, we have seen this morning that God has, and does at times, work in spectacular ways. At Malta, He used the bite of a viper and the healing of the sick to validate His servant and subsequently, to bring unbelievers to faith in Christ. Tradition says that Publius became the first bishop of the church of Malta. Yes, our God can do the spectacular! Next week we will see what else He can do... Let us pray!

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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