

# The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

***“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it –  
but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”***

*Vance Havner*

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Text

Acts 28:1-15

Topic

Paul shakes-off a deadly Maltese viper  
that has fastened itself to his hand

Title

*“The Maltese Fasten”<sup>1</sup>*

**Acts 28:1** Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta.

**Acts 28:2** And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold.

**Acts 28:3** 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 on his hand.

**Acts 28:4** So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live."

**Acts 28:5** But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.

**Acts 28:6** However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

**Acts 28:7** In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days.

**Acts 28:8** And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) starring Humphrey Bogart; number 23 on AFI's list of the 100 greatest movies; detective Sam Spade.

**Acts 28:9** So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed.

**Acts 28:10** They also honored us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary.

**Acts 28:11** After three months we sailed in an Alexandrian ship whose figurehead was the Twin Brothers, which had wintered at the island.

**Acts 28:12** And landing at Syracuse, we stayed three days.

**Acts 28:13** From there we circled round and reached Rhegium. And after one day the south wind blew; and the next day we came to Puteoli,

**Acts 28:14** where we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them seven days. And so we went toward Rome.

**Acts 28:15** And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum and Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.

## Introduction

The headline read, *Drought Driving Deadly Snakes into Australian Cities*. The article, dated January 10 of this year, reads in part,

Australia's harsh drought is driving venomous snakes into urban areas in search of moisture, resulting in an increasing number of attacks on people...

If you are planning a trip to Australia it might be a good idea to know what to do if you are bitten by a venomous snake. Don't do what one man did:

A... man was having a few beers with his mate while driving home... Along the side of the road he spotted a King Brown and decided to catch it. As his right hand was being used to hold his beer, he grabbed it with his left and was subsequently bitten. He threw the snake in a plastic bag but for some reason, then decided to stick his hand into the bag and was duly bitten another eight times.

As the poison went to work, his mate applied first aid by pouring beer over his head and whacking him across the face. It wasn't an effective treatment as he ended up in a coma for six weeks. His left arm withered and died and had to be amputated. On the positive side, he still kept the use of his right arm for holding his beers in the future.<sup>2</sup>

The apostle Paul never made it to Australia but he was bitten by a poisonous snake on the island of Malta. His 'first aid' was to simply

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.convictcreations.com/animals/snakes.htm>

shake it off and go on gathering sticks for the fire. Obviously God miraculously healed him from the affects of the viper's venom. The entire episode on Malta proves Jesus' statement in the Gospel of Mark, **they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover** (16:18).

**If you are ever snake-bit while serving the Lord it would be a good idea to claim that promise!**

Truth is, you **are** in danger every day of being snake-bit while serving the Lord:

1. Your spiritual adversary, the devil, is described as a serpent (Revelation 20:2).
2. His followers were called by both Jesus and John the Baptist a brood of vipers (Matthew 3:7 & 23:33).

The world is thus a dangerous place where you are surrounded by vipers. If you serve you will get bit.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 When You Are Snake-bit Serving The Lord, Shake It Off, and #2 When You Are Snake-bit Serving The Lord, Shake Things Up.

- being changed to bring change -

#1 When You Are Snake-bit Serving The Lord  
Shake It Off  
(v1-6)

The storm put Paul's life at risk. Just as he was about to survive the storm, the soldiers wanted to kill him along with the other prisoners. Saved by the centurion, a deadly poisonous snake bit him. *Talk about having a bad day!*

After a snake bite you're supposed to be kept immobilized to halt the progress of the venom. Paul had no time to be immobilized! He was too busy serving God. He shook-off the snake and went on with his work – which was first to gather sticks and later to heal everyone on the island of Malta.

Our adversary the devil, that serpent of old, wants to stop us from sharing the Lord with others. He wants to stop us from touching others with the gifts and ministries we've been entrusted with. He designs dangers and discouragements in the midst of our serving. We can compare them to being bitten. He does it in order to immobilize us. Our first reaction is to quit! We must understand that the proper first-aid for a spiritual snake bite is to go on serving, *not* to become immobilized. In the spiritual realm, being immobilized allows the poison to work.

Let's learn from Paul that we can shake-off the enemy.

**Acts 28:1** Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta.

**Acts 28:2** And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold.

The KJV calls the island by its ancient name, Melita. It is known to us as **Malta** and is really a series of islands in the Mediterranean Sea about fifty-eight miles south of Sicily.

Also in the KJV the **natives** are referred to as **barbarous people** (barbarians). Anyone who did not speak Greek was called a barbarian. They readily came to the aid of the shipwreck survivors.

**Acts 28:3** 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 on his hand.

Kudos to Paul for helping gather **sticks!** He had just survived a shipwreck. You'd think no less of him if he huddled by the fire and let the natives tend the fire. **But you should think less of him.** Jesus once said He came to serve, not to be served. We should follow His example. Be looking for ways to serve – even when others are serving you.

When I lived in the foothills of Southern California I was always finding rattlesnakes lying dormant in wood piles during cold weather.

The viper fastened on [Paul's] hand. I'd have been really bummed! But it was to be expected. The more you serve, the more you will be in danger of being bitten.

If you want to avoid the serpent then never pick up any sticks. Never help kindle the fire. Just enjoy the warmth and let others take the risks.

**Acts 28:4** So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live."

The natives seem superstitious. I say 'seem' because really their thinking is not very different from ours even though we would not think of ourselves as superstitious. We, too, have a natural tendency to think that God blesses those He is pleased with and that He tries those He is displeased with. We know it isn't true – not in the Bible and not in our experience. But it is our initial analysis in many cases.

**Acts 28:5** But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.

Paul's reaction is so nonchalant. He didn't scream for help; he didn't try to id the snake to see if it was poisonous or not; he didn't seek out the advice of the natives. He didn't scream, "Why God? I can't take any more of this! Can't You see I'm serving You?" He didn't look at those sitting by the fire and say, "You lazy bums! If you would have gathered wood instead of me, this wouldn't have happened to me!"

He shook it off and went about the business of serving others.

**Acts 28:6** However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

It's all kind of comically morbid. When no harm befell Paul their opinion of him radically changed. Again we chuckle at their superstition. **We** never think someone is a god. But we do, as a culture, idolize the wrong people for the wrong reasons.

Let's apply these things devotionally. People's lives are eventually shipwrecked. They arrive washed-up on shore barely alive. They

need the warmth of the fire of God's love and grace and mercy. We have the awesome privilege of gathering bundles of sticks to stoke the fire. No matter what your particular ministry, it contributes to the overall blaze and subsequent warmth.

When you are gathering sticks you risk getting bit. It can come in many forms: misunderstanding, slander, accusations. Your own discouragement can fasten upon you and inject deadly poison. The list of potential serpents and their 'bites' is pretty long.

**Shake it off and keep serving!** There are too many people who need the fire kindled. There is no time for us to be immobilized.

## #2 When You Are Snake-bit Serving The Lord Shake Things Up (v7-15)

God's miraculous preservation of Paul opened a door for him to minister in a remarkable way.

**Acts 28:7** In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days.

**Acts 28:8** And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him.

Paul had used his hands to gather sticks. Now he was using them to heal the sick. His hands belonged to Jesus and the Lord used them to serve His purposes in both circumstances. On the beach the great need was for fire. In the **estate** of **Publius** the great need was for healing. Let's not elevate one over the other.

Offer yourself to God a living sacrifice. Give Him your hands and everything attached to them. Don't despise even the smallest service if it is done as unto the Lord.

If you are going to lay hands on someone and ask God to heal them make sure your hands are soiled from much mundane serving. Serving that no one sees or applauds. If the person you lay hands on

isn't healed then it was God's will that they be blessed by the love and grace and mercy of His touch through you.

Paul shook things up on Malta for the next three months:

**Acts 28:9** So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed.

The shipwreck; the soldiers; the snake. All of it could now be put into perspective. The devil meant it for evil but God overruled it for His good. All things worked together for good.

Our problem is we haven't gotten to the end of the story yet. We're called upon to believe by faith that all things really are being worked together by God for good.

It's not so hard to believe when you remember God is good and that He loves you and will complete the work He has begun in you. Shipwrecks and soldiers and snakebites tend to hold our attention more than they should. We need to have a little more nonchalance and to do a lot more serving.

The remaining verses wrap-up the stay on Malta and get Paul moving again on to Rome:

**Acts 28:10** They also honored us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary.

**Acts 28:11** After three months we sailed in an Alexandrian ship whose figurehead was the Twin Brothers, which had wintered at the island.

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Wintering on Malta was an unexpected blessing for Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus. If you feel you've been blown off-course by some storm then look for unexpected blessings.

The **Twin Brothers** are Castor and Pollux, the patron gods of mariners. It's a reminder that even the most remarkable spiritual events are quickly overlooked by the world. The sailors on this second **Alexandrian ship** would have heard of the miraculous journey of Paul. Yet they went about their normal business trusting in their own skills and superstitions. Serve as unto the Lord and leave the results to Him.

Would Paul have had the ministry of healing on Malta if he had never gotten snake-bit? We can't say one way or the other.

He was snake-bit while busy serving the Lord. He shook it off and went on to shake things up.

Gather a bundle of sticks. Kindle the fire. Provide the love and light people need. Your hands are God's hands and He wants to work through them.

