

SNAKES IN THE RAIN

ACTS 28:1-10 APRIL 14, 2021

If you've booked yourself air travel, you've probably had to make some decisions about layovers. Too short and you risk missing your connecting flight. Too long and you're wasting time in a monotonous airport terminal with strange smelling carpet.

Our first trip to Colombia was out of LAX on the day of the 2013 shooting there. All our flights got screwed up, so we ended up having something like a 13-hour layover in Bogota. We were a little nervous about *being* in Colombia for the first time, so we decided to wait it out at the gate. With no internet and no shops in that part of the terminal, it was a *long* wait.

On the other hand, sometimes a layover can be a good opportunity. One site I consulted promises that if you have at least an 8-hour layover in Beijing, you have enough time to go and see the great wall of China.¹ Even then, the best-laid plans will sometimes fail. My wife can tell you the story of when she was studying abroad and planned to stop for less than a day in Venice, but (through a series of events) she and her group ended up scared, confused, and never seeing a single canal.

Speaking of LAX, it's listed as one of the *worst* airports to spend a layover.² While *Time Magazine* picks Atlanta's International Airport as one of the best worldwide, along with the Munich Airport, the Hong Kong International airport, and the Hamad International Airport in Qatar.³

Paul's destination is Rome. He has a Divine appointment there to preach the Gospel to Caesar Nero. What could be more important? Well, it turns out God had some important work for Paul and his friends to accomplish on the tiny island of Malta. And so, the Lord gives them a layover there. During their stay, we see a wide range of experiences. They start off cold and wet on a beach. Later they're being entertained in the lap of luxury. At first Paul is seen as a murderer and he's attacked by a snake, later he's being honored with gifts and thanks for his ministry. It's quite a stop. Especially when we remember that none of the people on the ship had *wanted* to stop here. Paul had suggested they stay in Fair Havens. The sailors wanted to go to Phoenix and winter there. All along, God had His own plan, full of opportunities for His people to glorify Him.

We are each en route to a final destination in this life. As we go we will find ourselves at various layovers, some planned, others unexpected. Our experiences won't always be pleasant, but Paul, Luke and Aristarchus show us how we can always be content, how we can avoid some common pitfalls and how there is always opportunity to do the Lord's work as we faithfully follow Him.

Acts 28:1 - Once safely ashore, we then learned that the island was called Malta.

There had been 276 passengers on the ship. They had spent *weeks* in a terrible storm before wrecking. But, already we see Luke's optimism: *Safely* ashore. Had some of the non-believers been looking over his shoulder as he wrote, they may have said, "safely" is a relative term. After all, they had no ship, no supplies, no shelter and (at first) no idea where they were.

¹ <https://www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/things-you-must-know-about-beijing-layovers.htm>

² <https://www.mapquest.com/travel/the-15-worst-airports-for-a-layover/>

³ <https://time.com/5510618/best-airports-layovers/>

We'll see the Christians calm and at peace throughout the passage. They weren't fretting or fussing, but were confident in the Lord's provision for them. He *still* had not left them or abandoned them.

Malta is an island just 17 miles long and 9 miles wide that sits beneath Sicily. The fact that they made it to this spot is a testament to God's precise providence. When God wants something done, nothing can stop Him. Not wind or waves or odds or obstacles. He *will* have His way. And though we do not know every pitstop or waylay that lies ahead of us, of this we can be sure: Our God will bring us safely to shore.

Acts 28:2 - ²The local people showed us extraordinary kindness. They lit a fire and took us all in, since it was raining and cold.

The islanders showed unusual compassion to these weary castaways. Rather than coming down to loot the wreck, they came to assist any survivors they might find.⁴ In fact, throughout this story we'll find that the people of Malta were kind and generous and had a sense of morality. But they still needed the Gospel. It's good to remind ourselves that even "good" people need to be saved. This is one of the hazards of the social gospel. Ultimately it suggests the end goal is temporal "goodness," verified by behavior that is considered virtuous by the popular culture. But the problem is that we all, like sheep, have gone astray. It doesn't matter if your wool is cleaner than some other sheep. It's a question of whether you're in the fold of God and following the Shepherd.

At the same time, it's easy for Christians to always think the worst of unbelievers when, in reality, there are some "good" people out there. Their need is still urgent and intense, but compare these islanders to the unbelieving Romans. The soldiers had planned to slaughter all the prisoners on the ship rather than chance that they escaped the wreck. In contrast the natives were ready to help sailors and soldiers and criminals alike. God loves compassion like this. Small acts of kindness are important to Him. And He brings us into contact with particular people at particular times so that we can not only preach but also show the love of God to them through tangible acts of grace.

Acts 28:3 - ³As Paul gathered a bundle of brushwood and put it on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand.

There are hundreds of people around, but Paul still sees himself as a servant. Drenched to the bone, now on his *fourth* shipwreck, and though he was the reason they were all alive, yet he put his shoulder to the work. What a great example to us.

But then he's attacked by a venomous snake. Why would God allow this to happen while Paul was *serving* Him? Bad things happen to God's people all the time. While our Lord promised to never leave us, He never said we would be without trouble or suffering. In fact, the *opposite* is true.

We can become frustrated when we try to honor God or serve Him and encounter some kind of difficulty or trial. It feels unfair. But, the truth is, serving God sometimes *flushes out* attacks. We've seen that many times in the book of Acts. Or think of most of the Old Testament prophets. Think of Jesus Himself. He's just trying to save people from their sins, heal them of their disease, bring people back from the dead, and the response is the leaders of the nation conspire to kill Him! And that doesn't even count the times when our Enemy is trying to sabotage the work of God.

⁴ Alexander MacLaren *Expositions of Holy Scripture*

Skeptics will say that Malta has no venomous vipers and so the Bible must not be true. Our answer is that there *is* historical account of snakes like this⁵ and the reason we don't find vipers in Malta today is the same reason we don't find buffalo on the Great Plains, wolves in Sicily, or tigers in Tasmania.⁶ The Sicilian wolf and the Tasmanian tiger went extinct in the last century. Certainly 2,000 years is enough time for a tiny island, packed with people, to eradicate a snake population.

Acts 28:4 - ⁴When the local people saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "This man, no doubt, is a murderer. Even though he has escaped the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live."

So, the islanders assumed that Paul must've been bad because something bad happened to him. We don't want to let that kind of thinking grow in our minds. We also don't want bitterness or resentment toward God to take root when something bad happens to us.

There were a lot of people around. Multiple witnesses saw what was happening to Paul. I wonder if he had some fun with it. We'll be told in a moment that he suffered "no harm" whatsoever, so I wonder if, maybe, he took a walk over to Luke and said, "What do you think, Doc?" Maybe he was trying to remember the old rhyme that tells you which snakes are poisonous and which aren't. We were up in the mountains last week and the boys came across a little red, black and yellow snake. So we were trying to recall how the saying went: "Red on yellow kill a fellow, red on black venom lack." Or was it *yellow* on black...

We see here that these natives, pagan though they were, had a moral law written on their hearts. They didn't know Jesus, but they had an internal sense of right and wrong. And they had an inkling that God was a God of justice - that God will repay evildoers for what they've done. They were still wrong about Paul and wrong about God. But in some ways they were a lot closer than our own culture is when it comes to right and wrong, to morality and justice.

We live in a time where even basic, historic understanding of right and wrong are being specifically dismantled. In Isaiah 5, God said, "woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light." As God's people we need to pray for our society and hold the line on God's truth.

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

A 2013 report found there are about 125 snake handling churches in the Appalachian states.⁷ Should we be taking up snakes and proving our reliance on the Lord? Snake handlers use this example as well as what Jesus said in Mark 16:17-18 as a basis for their practices. Doesn't the text say believers "will pick up snakes...[and they] will not harm them?"

The response is simple: Jesus' words in Mark were not a blanket promise. They were a prophecy which is partly fulfilled in this text. In addition, the Bible *specifically* commands us to not test the Lord our God and that it is *evil* to demand miraculous signs.⁸ While the issue of snake handling is easily answered, it does confront us with a bigger question of why *certain* promises found in the Bible aren't *always* our experience. For example, didn't Jesus say in Luke 12 that God would feed us and clothe us and provide everything we need? Doesn't Proverbs promise that we'll have long life if

⁵ Robertson's Word Pictures In The New Testament

⁶ <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/18-animals-that-went-extinct-in-the-last-century/>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snake_handling_in_religion

⁸ Matthew 4:7, Matthew 12:39

we fear the Lord? Why then was Paul so often hungry and Stephen cut down in the prime of life (not to mention our own struggles)?

God's promises never fail, but we have to be careful when it comes to which have been made to us. In any given promise, there is a specific audience, a specific context and a specific timing in the mind of God. Sometimes as Christians we play fast and loose with Biblical promises that weren't actually made to us. They were made to Israel or to the Apostles or other individuals. Perhaps those promises reveal *principles* about God's dealings that can apply to our lives, but context is key and timing is key. We simply can't know exactly how God will fulfill His promises to us. What we *can* be sure of is that He is always true and He can not fail. We can fail and derail God's work in our lives for a time like the Israelites in the wilderness or God's people during the time of the Judges or the Jews when Jesus came. We can misunderstand the Lord's promises, like the disciples so often did. After all, we see now as through a glass dimly. But we can rest in our Lord knowing that He is doing a good work for us. He will complete what He began. In the mean time, we're not to do something stupid like grab a snake on purpose to show that we're Christians. You're not bulletproof. At the same time, sometimes the guns miraculously don't work.⁹

What did Paul do? Did he go looking for a snake to handle? Did he hand the viper to Luke to have him hold it? No. He shook it off *into the fire* so it wouldn't bite anyone else! He was very casual and practical about it. And, I'm sure, he said some prayers for his hand!

Acts 28:6 - ⁶They expected that he would begin to swell up or suddenly drop dead. After they waited a long time and saw nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god.

So, is he a murderer or a deity? They went from being entirely wrong to being entirely wrong in a *new* way. Humans aren't very good at reasoning sometimes. We need truth to be *revealed* to us - a truth that is *fixed* to an unchangeable standard.

It says they *expected* him to drop dead. It seems they were following Paul around, watching with anticipation. Philippians 3:20 tells us that *we* are to go through life eagerly watching for our Savior.

Acts 28:7 - ⁷Now in the area around that place was an estate belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us hospitably for three days.

The Christian life is certainly unpredictable. It's always good to see how content and peaceable the Christians are in these stories. They allowed the Lord to transform them into people who weren't fussy or hypersensitive. They weren't ill-tempered, but were able to adapt to their situation, whether good or bad, and remain satisfied in the Lord.

Acts 28:8 - ⁸Publius's father was in bed suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went to him, and praying and laying his hands on him, he healed him.

Dr. Luke no doubt gave a diagnosis. The affliction wouldn't have, necessarily, been fatal, though dysentery can and does still kill some people. But it's a comfort to remember that God cares about *all* our suffering, not just the fatal ones. He has compassion for the person with cancer *and* the

⁹ Dan Finrock *Intensive Faith*

person with the common cold. We need not be shy to cast our cares upon Him, even if they're relatively small.

Something else we might take from this verse is that you never know what people might be facing at home. Publius is doing a big job, helping these people, administering the island. Meanwhile, his dad is in the house with a serious and, frankly, disgusting illness. The KJV calls it a "bloody flux." That's tough when you've got no indoor plumbing. We want to be people who are compassionate and understanding and ready to represent Christ whether in a shanty on the beach or in the statehouse with the leading man and acting *graciously* since we don't know everything people are dealing with.

Acts 28:9 - ⁹After this, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed.

Scholars point out that Luke, who is very precise with his word choice, used a different word for "healed" here. Rather than the one usually used for instantaneous healing, he used one that more often means "received medical attention." As a physician, *he* was probably able to assist and render that service.¹⁰ And here we see that God uses not only the supernatural gifts that He gives, but also our *natural* abilities that have been offered to Him. It's true that God doesn't need our intellect or ability or talent, but that doesn't mean He doesn't make use of those things when we give them to Him. He absolutely does! Are you a doctor? Be a *Christian* doctor. Are you a poet? Be a *Christian* poet. Are you a builder? Be a *Christian* builder. What does that mean? I can only write rhyming lines about Jesus or build church buildings? No. It means you place all of yourself at your King's disposal and you recognize that, whatever you do can be done *unto* the Lord and profit His Kingdom.

Acts 28:10 - ¹⁰So they heaped many honors on us, and when we sailed, they gave us what we needed.

What an amazing time on this little island. God invaded, in a sense, casting His servants onto the shore and, before long, you have people being healed, God's love defining relationships, unity and honor among all sorts of people, both free and slave, powerful and incarcerated, rich and poor, barbarian and civilized. We cannot doubt that many were saved as a result of Paul and Luke and Aristarchus.

Looking back using heaven's calculator, was the difficulty and delay and hardship endured by Paul worth it for what was gained in Malta? Of course, we think it was. On the other hand, it's not the kind of layover we'd pick for ourselves. But look at what the Lord wanted to do. And look at what He *can* do, even when so much is stacked against His people. They landed on Malta with no supplies, no immediate plan, a language barrier with the natives, snakes coming out of the woodwork! But, because the Christians were in the will of God and were ready to do His work we see that impossibly wonderful things can happen. This was the most ministry Paul had done in *years*! That's inspiring. And, along the way, we see these Christians avoiding pitfalls of frustration, resentment, anger, bitterness, fussiness, jealousy and instead, through humility and contentment are able to bring honor and glory to God in the most far-fetched place as they trust God, speak the truth, show compassion and follow their Shepherd as they make their way home.

¹⁰ See Guzik, Swindoll, Barnhouse, Stedman