

Words and Deeds: Hope Washes Ashore
By Jason Huff
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Nehemiah 9:9-11; Mark 16:9-20; Acts 28:1-16

Our final Scripture reading comes from Acts 28:1-16. May God bless the reading of this portion of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. 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, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead, but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god. There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. They honored us in many ways and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed. After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island. It was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days. From there we set sail and arrived at Rhegium. The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. There we found some brothers who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome. The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged. When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.”

Hope has been going down lately...at least as a baby name. Turns out the name “Hope” was really popular in 1999, where it hit a peak of 144th most popular girl’s name in the United States. It now ranks 249th. But “Hope” wasn’t a popular name at all until the mid-‘60s, when people had hope in the future, and it started sinking in the mid-‘70s, when everyone desperately needed hope.

Hope is something more than a wish, isn’t it? Hope is a true desire for something to happen; you don’t expect it, but you’d sure be glad it happened. I hoped my cheap fix for one of our cars would get the “check engine” light to turn off, and guess what? It did! Problem solved. If you know what a bad mechanic I am, you know how big a hope that was. We have hopes for a better future, hopes for a good meal after church, hopes for all sorts of things. They aren’t guaranteed, but man, it would be great if those hopes were fulfilled.

The Bible is a book of hope. Page after page tells us the story of people turning to God, hoping for rescue, for deliverance, hoping for relief, hoping that God might smile on them and give them a bright future. And the good news is, hope in God is always warranted. He always comes through – not always the way we want, but in the best way for those who trust in Him.

In today's passage, hope washes ashore in the form of Paul and Luke. The lives of the islanders on Malta are dramatically changed by the course of events. Today, we're going to talk a little bit about the spread of the hope of Christ, and about how we can be vessels of hope to others by being willing to be the hands and feet of Jesus to them.

You might remember that last week's story was a doozy. Paul was finally headed to Rome to have his case decided by Caesar, to stand before the ruler of the entire Roman Empire and explain why his faith in Jesus Christ did not need to be punished and why the Jewish leaders needed to settle down. The centurion in charge of Paul's travel was kind to him, but he ultimately decided (against Paul's advice) to take his party of soldiers and prisoners on the high seas in the middle of storm season. They wound up in the middle of a typhoon, went nearly 500 miles off course, lost the ship, lost the cargo, but God spared the lives of everyone on board. As we start today, they're just making their way from the wreckage onto dry land.

The first thing that I want to mention is the unusual kindness of the islanders and how they were perceived by the survivors of the shipwreck. There are at least four different times and ways that the islanders showed hospitality to everyone from the boat – they light the fire and help them try to get dry and warm; the chief official of the island welcomes and entertains at least Paul and Luke, and maybe the rest; the villagers honor them in ways that aren't even mentioned; and when it's time to leave, they supply them with what they need for their voyage.

Now a few cultures in the world are kind by necessity. I think of Japan, which is an amazingly polite society, but it has to be, because when you have 127 million people in a space smaller than California, you've got to learn to suffer through. But very few actually are so consistently. Now take into account that the people from the ship speak a foreign language and so it's very difficult to communicate. Also remember that shipwrecks throughout the ancient near East were taken a sign of a god's disfavor. For them to be so friendly, something's been going on in Malta, I think. The Holy Spirit has been preparing them for something big.

This is where I'm going, this is the point I'd like us to think about – *the Holy Spirit builds hope in us long before we hear the gospel, and then brings that hope to fruition.* In so many of the stories we've heard from Acts, people were itching to hear about Jesus. Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch who is desperate to understand the prophecies of the Old Testament. Lydia, a godfearing businesswoman, hears Paul preach and believes, and her linens become a way the ministry is funded. In many places, the Jewish people who hear Paul in the synagogue convert to Christianity almost instantaneously. The Holy Spirit had been maneuvering in Paul's life even when he was having Christians put to death so that, when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he was prepared to preach the good news and willing to risk life and limb for his Savior.

How was the Holy Spirit working in your life before you really came to believe and trust in Him? Maybe you haven't thought about that much. Even if you were born into a family of committed, solid Christians, the Holy Spirit was working in your life to pick it up from your family members, your church friends, your pastor. Maybe you were far away and the Spirit used certain circumstances to bring you back. Maybe He brought a friend or mentor or leader into your path so that you would believe in Jesus and have a relationship with Him. Even if we know the facts of Christianity, the Holy Spirit must be working in order to give us the hope it's true.

The Holy Spirit is always active and engaged in some way with someone before they become a believer. The Holy Spirit actively implants a living and saving faith into our hearts before we ever truly believe. It's true for me; it's true for you. So keep a watchful eye on what the Holy Spirit is doing in your friends. Sometimes, it will be in changing their hearts so that they are ready for the Gospel; they're ready to hear the good news that Jesus came for them. Sometimes, the Holy Spirit brings people to the end of the rope so they stop relying on themselves and can hear that God is ready to pull them back from the edge. He works in many ways but with one specific purpose: to prepare people to hear and believe and obey the Word of the Lord. I would suggest that's what had happened with the villagers of Malta, especially when you compare them with the reception Paul gets from the Jews in Rome in next week's passage.

The other thing I want to note right here is that *God's choices are not our own*. As God told Samuel when he was sent to anoint the new king of Israel after Saul had failed, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." The word "villagers" our translation uses isn't completely wrong since it tries to give the sense of what Luke was saying.

But the word Luke actually uses here for the natives is "barbarians." The word comes from the Greek *barbaroi*. It was onomatopoeia; the Greek world thought that those who didn't speak Greek sounded like they said the word *bar* over and over again, like they were babbling. All of us know what this is like when we hear a foreign language for the first time. And yet these "barbarians" show extraordinary kindness and hospitality to this group of shipwrecked strangers. These people that Luke and the others might have considered savages were far kinder to them than their own native people!

Don't judge the outward appearance; judge the heart. There have been times I've met somebody, really seemed friendly and engaging on a surface level, but when it's gone past that into something meaningful, you discover, "Wow, what a jerk!" They knew how to fake it, but they weren't the real deal. And others who you'd never notice, quiet, maybe seem distant or aloof, you get to know them and they love deeply and care greatly and so want Jesus to mean everything in their lives. And these people might look funny or have a dozen tattoos or speak with an accent. Who knows? And yet the Holy Spirit is working. Go deeper with Him to see what He is doing.

Now let's take look at the cringe-y part of the passage – this viper. Paul's helping get this fire ready, keeping everyone warm, and chomp! This nasty little bugger just hangs on Paul's hand. Now some modern scholars have questioned whether or not they landed on the modern island of Malta because there are no poisonous snakes there. I'm like – of course there are no poisonous snakes on Malta! Paul threw the last one into the fire where he belongs!

What we do know is that the natives thoroughly believed Paul was going to keel over and die. There were multiple stories in multiple cultures in the ancient world where someone escaped the wrath of a god or gods only to get their justice at the end of a snake bite. Surely, Paul was really bad to have survived all that only to be taken down afterwards. So when he doesn't die, they think he must be a god – because he's survived everything that the world can throw at him! And while that's not true, his simple dealing with the snake put him in position to heal people throughout the island and to tell them the good news of Jesus' salvation.

Think about it this way: *how you deal with the difficult things thrown at you can inspire hope in others.* The great preacher Chuck Swindoll put it this way: “I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it...we are all faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as impossible situations.” Normally, getting bitten by a poisonous snake would put most of us into a panic. And yet Paul is just like, “Hey, a snake – more kindling for the fire!” “Snake – it’s what’s for dinner!”

I had forgotten until recently that when I lived in Russia, I was bitten by a big dog. We were in Moscow; Catha and my mom had just arrived in the country after I’d been gone about six months, and when we were there to pick them up, some random dog on the street came up and bit me. I thought I’d been stung by something, but bees generally don’t like -40 degrees. And we just looked afterwards and saw this dog just walking away. And of course, in a foreign country, your first thought is rabies, wild dog, though that would be weird for the streets of Moscow. But you also know explaining a dog bite in a foreign country with very limited English and not great hospitals...anyway, we bandaged it up, we prayed about it, and here I am today, not rabid as far as I know. So sometimes you do have a literal way to look at a biblical story.

That’s not the case normally. Normally the things that make us fearful or anxious or worried are not snake bites but bad news at the doctor or at work or on the home front. As we learned last week, God will see us through every storm. We can live in hope that God will bring us safely to His shore, not with a promise of earthly peace and health and security but a promise of eternal rest and love in Him. We can be assured that God is not surprised by the calamities in our life and is in fact allowing us to go through them for reasons only He fully understands.

So what’s our attitude going to be? Because if we worry about every little thing or complain about every problem, not approaching them with an attitude of prayer but an attitude of hopelessness and desperation, nobody’s going to take our faith seriously. But if we take the vipers of this world as Paul did, shaking them off into the fire, people can find hope in the faith they see in us. Our attitude does not just affect us. It can strip others of hope or give them hope in the God who matters, who is living and true and there for us and gave us Christ so that we might have hope of life with Him beyond life.

We need hope, and we can give it to others. Recently, I’ve heard more than one person say, “I’m ready to go be with Jesus.” They weren’t suicidal; they weren’t desperate. But the idea was like, “This world is so hard and the next will be so easy.” And Paul understood this. He was torn between two worlds too. In Philippians 1, he says, “To live is Christ and to die is gain.” He says, “I am torn between the two, because I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, yet it is more necessary that I remain in the body for your sake.”

But Paul was never looking for an escape. He wasn’t looking for a way out of suffering. He knew that it was necessary in order to complete the work God had for him to do. And so in the midst of trials, he celebrated. Paul in Romans and Colossians, Peter in his first letter, they talk about rejoicing in suffering because it produces perseverance, character, and hope. We do not need to escape this world so much as we need to see this world as the place where God is forming our character for the life to come. And I’m losing weight and exercising because I need a long life to build all the character I need to grow!

Seriously, though, I invite us to be challenged and to think together – how does my attitude about the issues in my life affect me and affect others? One of my favorite comedians is a guy named Derrick Tennant. He was a promising athlete who fell into a coma for three days and had to have brain surgery to deal with bleeding the doctors didn't understand. He woke up paralyzed, and even after years of therapy he still doesn't have use of his left side. But now he says he "looks on the right side of life." He sold his home, does clean standup and inspirational speaking around the country, and spends a good chunk of the year at camps and gatherings for disabled youth and folks like his sister who has Down's Syndrome. Derrick's ministry is so much bigger than it ever would have been if he hadn't fallen into that coma.

Whether or not you realize it, people look up to you. Those who know you are a Christian are watching. They want to see if Christians are these slimy, nasty, heartless people the news says we are, or if Christians are actually kind and caring and loving like they've heard Jesus was. They want to see if your faith is constantly on edge when you are in trouble, or if you've actually given your burdens to Jesus and are carrying a lighter load. They know that sometimes you'll struggle and cry out, and they want to see who you cry out to – the government, your Facebook friends, your church, your Savior – and they want to see who responds. May we be both encouraged and convicted by that. Be encouraged that your life does shine for Jesus. Be convicted when our attitudes start dimming the light!

One last thought for us: *real faith and real hope build real trust with others.* What amazes me about the final part of this journey is not how detailed Luke's notes about the trip are, but about how Paul is able to spend a week with fellow believers who came to see him in Puteoli – and then how, when they get to Rome, Paul can live by himself with just a guard. Remember that it meant death for any soldier who let a prisoner escape. But by this point, Paul's faith is so strong, the hope he gives is so encouraging, that the centurion and the soldiers are literally entrusting their lives to him when they let him live so freely. We don't know how many of them became believers, but we can't help but think about it – because his guards heard the gospel all the time!

Do people trust you to do what's right, even when nobody's looking? Do they count on you? It's another sign that Christ's light is shining through you if they trust you completely. Could be with their kids. Could be with their secrets or their problems. Trust is hard to come by in an era where people live in fear naturally. Again, this is a place for encouragement and conviction. When people trust you because of your lived-out faith, that's a good sign. But also be convicted...we are called as Christians to be trustworthy in all things. Are you? The way to trust is not through saying, "You can trust me." It starts with displaying real faith, real hope, and the love of Christ in ways that people see are genuine over time.

We've made it to Rome with Paul. But the journey isn't quite over yet. We'll check in over the next couple of weeks with Paul's testimony in that great city and the final testimony to his life that we find in Scripture. But this week, I encourage you – find your hope in Jesus. Turn to Him in everything. Live surrendered to Him and His ways. And when you do, you'll find that hope spreads through you.

