

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
November 18, 2012

Paul Ministers in Malta

Read Acts 28:1-10

Key verse: “Paul went to see [Publius’ father] and prayed. He placed his hand on him and healed him” (Acts 28:8).

Life is not easy. Following Jesus can be costly. But God is faithful!

All of these truths can be seen in Acts 28. Paul had been sent as a prisoner to Rome. On the way, his ship was destroyed in a storm. Paul, Luke, and the other passengers barely made it to land. But make it they did, just as God had promised (Acts 27:21-26).

When they struggled ashore on the island of Malta, none of them could have anticipated the welcome that they received. The Bible tells us that when Paul and his shipmates reached the island, its residents were remarkably hospitable: “After reaching the land safely, we learned that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us extraordinary kindness. Because it was rainy and cold, they built a fire and welcomed all of us” (Acts 28:1-2). God is faithful!

This section of Acts also provides insight into the Christian character of Paul the apostle: “Paul gathered a bunch of dry sticks and put them on the fire” (Act 28:3a). Surely Paul was as cold, wet, and tired as the others. But Paul’s servant heart wouldn’t let him rest while there was an opportunity to serve.

Gathering sticks for a fire may seem like a little thing, but it reveals the heart of Paul. Paul’s heart beat with the heartbeat of his Master, who said: “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28).

“Character,” it has been said, “is who you are when no one is watching.” Paul served others not because others expected it or applauded it, but because that is who Paul was—by the grace of God.

When Paul placed the sticks on the fire, a snake, “driven out by the heat,” struck and fastened itself to Paul’s hand. “When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, ‘This man must be a

murderer! He was rescued from the sea, but the goddess Justice hasn't let him live!" (Acts 28:4). But Paul shook his arm, and the snake fell into the fire. The islanders watched Paul, expecting him to become gravely ill or die. But when Paul was unharmed, they decided Paul was a god (Acts 28:5-6).

Paul was neither a murderer nor a god. He was a servant of Jesus Christ, through whom the Holy Spirit worked in powerful ways.

Verse 7 introduces "Publius, the island's most prominent person." Publius, as had the islanders upon Paul's and Luke's arrival, demonstrated the grace of *hospitality*: "Publius...owned a large estate in that area. He welcomed us warmly into his home as his guests for three days."

Neither Publius nor the islanders who showed such kindness were Christians yet. But they modeled a virtue that every Christian ought to excel in—hospitality. The Bible teaches this in many places, including the following:

Romans 12:13 says that Christians are to "share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." 1 Peter 4:9 teaches that Christians should "offer hospitality to one another without grumbling." Titus 1:8 and 1 Timothy 3:1-2 teach that hospitality is one of the requirements of Christian leaders.

God did not forget Publius' hospitality. God worked through the Apostle Paul to heal Publius' father and others on the island who were sick (Acts 28:8-9). Then, when Paul and the others were getting ready to leave the island, the people showed their gratitude: "They honored us in many ways. When we were getting ready to sail again, they supplied us what we needed" (Acts 28:10).

Hospitality given becomes hospitality returned. Love given becomes love reciprocated. Christian ministry works best when hospitality, kindness, service, and love lead the way!

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