

# **GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL ACCORDING TO HIS PROMISE Acts 28:1-16**

## **INTRODUCTION**

I've been thinking about last Sunday's sermon all week. My imagination has been captivated by the imagery of the 276 hopeless people crowded aboard that little wooden ship driven along at the mercy of the mighty storm heading for a shipwreck. Then Paul standing in the midst of them and announcing God's word to them that while they were going to lose everything and while they were going to be in the dark and dreadful storm for more days, yet they should be of good cheer because God had graciously granted their lives to Paul. While all appeared hopeless at the moment and while the ship was going to indeed be destroyed, yet God had promised that for Paul's sake he was going to make sure that not a hair from any of their heads was harmed.

Our situation is indeed hopeless. We are on the ship of this world in the midst of a fierce storm. This ship is heading for a shipwreck. We are going to lose everything. We are beset by sin and all the miseries from God's curse upon this world because of sin. We have no more ability to escape our sins and God's punishment against us for our sins than could those 276 hopeless and hungry people escape the storm. However, if we belong to Christ, if Jesus has made intercession for us, if we have taken refuge in him and his death on the cross through faith, then we can be of good cheer because we are going to live forever. We do not need to fear but can be full of joyful hope while in the midst of this storm tossed world because of the promise we have been given in Christ that he will not lose any of those who the Father has given to him, that is, all those who trust in him.

I have in particular been thinking about those among us who have, due to the circumstances of their lives, a greater sense of the hopeless condition in which we live. One of those I've been thinking about is the Fisher family: Fred, Charity, little Fred, Larry, Love and Trinity who have a deeper sense of the hopelessness of our condition and especially this week. This Friday is dear little Patience Fisher's fifth birthday. It has been 16 months since she died and her birthday is an occasion of renewed sorrow for our dear friends. This week I would ask that we remember them before our Lord in prayer that they might hear and believe the promise of Christ who has said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." Pray that their hearts would be full of joyful hope while they grieve the loss of Patience because they know that by the living and dying and rising again of Jesus they and Patience are going to survive the shipwreck of this life and gain eternal life with God in the new heavens and the new earth. Let's pray together for them and for all who right now are especially feeling the hopelessness of life in this sin-cursed world.

Lord, how we thank and praise you for Jesus. We are so grateful for his obedience to your perfect law and his willingly taking upon himself your just anger against us for our disobedience to that same law by his suffering and death. We praise you for his mighty resurrection which guarantees the resurrection of every believer. We thank you that he has prayed for us and for our salvation and that you have granted to him our lives. We pray Lord for Fred and Charity and Fred and Larry and Love and Trinity, that you would comfort them with the assurance of your love in Christ. That you would fill their hearts with joy and peace as they trust in you so that they would overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Lord, you know the heart of every person in this room. There are many others among us who are burdened with loss and the threat of loss. O Lord, have mercy on each one. Awaken each of our dear suffering brothers and sisters to the greatness and the goodness of Jesus and his promise of eternal life. Fill hearts with joy as they are full of sorrow over the trials of this life. Lord help us all to be a source of courage to one another, especially for those who are beset by trouble. Keep us from saying and doing things that make their suffering worse. Give us hearts of compassion that yield deeds of love and prayers of faith so that all your people might be of good cheer through the promise of Jesus in the midst of this troubled world. Amen.

As we turn our attention to God's word and consider the arrival of these 276 soaked and shivering people coming ashore on the island of Malta we are going to be shown how it is that Jesus keeps all of his promises. This is not simply a little adventure story. God by the hand of Luke as he records these historical events aims

for us to see the faithfulness of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus promised Paul while they were in the midst of the storm, the ship has been destroyed but every one of the passengers has been saved by the direct intervention of God for the sake of Paul. As we observe this final stage, these final months of Paul's journey to Rome we are going to witness how Jesus keeps his promises.

## MAIN POINT

**Jesus keeps all of his promises to...**

### **I. Save superstitious barbarians and murderers from the curse of sin (vv.1-6)**

One after the other the 276 shipwrecked passengers struggle through the surf and gather in small groups shivering together under the sullen skies while pelted with rain driven by the cold, north wind. But the same God who enabled each and every one of them to arrive safely on the shore has provided them with a warm welcome. As the inhabitants of the small island of Malta who lived next to this bay with its sandy beach awoke that morning they watched as the ship came racing towards the shore only to run aground hundreds of yards from the beach. They had seen the people jumping overboard and making their way in the wind and rain and waves to their beach. They hurriedly called together the men to start fires and to assist in pulling the people from the waves. They brought food and warm drink and blankets and put up temporary shelters so that the ship's passengers might be able to dry off and stave off hypothermia.

The fires need tending and so Paul goes along the beach and gathers up a bundle of sticks. As he places them on the fire, the heat from the fire awakens one of the "sticks" he has gathered. A poisonous snake sinks its fangs into him and dangles from his hand. Some of the Maltese people who are helping the stranded passengers see the viper strike and hold on to Paul. They then talk among themselves. They say that there can be no doubt but that Paul must be a murderer who is being pursued by the Roman goddess, Justice. He was somehow able to escape her clutches as she attempted to kill him in the sea but she has pursued him on land and is now going to kill him by the snake bite. Paul, for his part, nonchalantly shakes the snake from his hand into the fire and goes about his business. No panic, no fear does he exhibit. The Maltese people watch him because they are sure that he is going to swell up from the venom of the snake and then drop dead. However, after observing him for a long time and seeing nothing happen to him they changed their minds and determined that as the venom of the snake had no effect upon him then rather than being a human pursued by a god, he must be a god himself.

What is God, through Luke, seeking to communicate to us through this story? Luke knows he is writing Scripture, that he is making a record through which God aims to communicate the truth about everything but especially about how he is saving sinners through the person and work of Jesus. He knows that his story about Paul is meant to instruct us about the saving work of Jesus, just as the stories in the OT are a revelation about the person and work of Jesus. What Luke is doing in the way he tells this story is connecting this story with theological themes found in the rest of the Bible.

First, in the ways in which he describes the people of Malta we are given in a picture, things that are true of all human beings. Twice Luke uses the term from which we get our English word "barbarians" to describe the people. The ESV translates the word "native people." In the Greek/Roman world this is a technical term to refer to the uncultured people of the world who do not speak Greek and who do not live according to Greek and Roman ways. In Romans 1:15 Paul refers to the "barbarians" as one of the groups to whom he is obligated to preach the gospel. However, on the two occasions it is used in the Greek translation of the OT it refers to those who are the enemies of God and his people. Thus, by this term, Luke implies that these hospitable people are enemies of God.

As they observe Paul being bitten by the viper they conclude that he must be a murderer and thus subject to the condemnation of the gods. Thus Luke shows us something which Paul states in propositional form in the letter to the Romans when he says that Gentiles know that there is right and wrong and that those who do wrong should be punished (Romans 2:14-15). The whole human race has what is called "judicial sentiment." That is,

everyone knows that those who do wrong, those who violate the standard deserve to be punished. Humans disagree about what the standard is but all agree that whoever breaks the standard must be punished. It is this judicial sentiment which is on display in every movie theatre where an action drama is being played. When the bad guys are killed at the end of the movie, everyone in the theatre is happy because we know it is right for the wicked to be punished. Thus, the barbarians of Malta because they are made in the image of the living God show, by their condemnation of Paul, they know that those who do wrong should be punished.

However, they also reveal their perverse nature in this same judgment. They manifest the universal self-righteousness of human beings. People who have bad things happen to them must be bad and as I'm not experiencing anything bad, I must be good. While they are happy to condemn Paul with certainty, notice the "No doubt" in v. 4, they do not exercise the same kind of censure in relation to themselves. The goddess justice is not pursuing them but she is pursuing this man they know nothing about. One of the most obvious evidences of our depraved nature is our gleeful condemnation of strangers whom we have only witnessed in the briefest of circumstances, while we at the same time congratulate ourselves for our goodness. Then their complete hostility towards the God who made the heavens and the earth is revealed when they conclude that Paul himself must be a god because the viper's bite does him no harm. They do exactly what Paul says every human does and is the ground for God's just condemnation of the whole human race, they exchange the glory of the living God for the glory of created things.

In Romans 1:20-25 Paul writes, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised." These people who know through creation that there is an invisible, glorious God to whom they owe everything exchange the glory of that eternal God for the glory of Paul. They have no excuse for believing that Paul is a god and thus deserve to be killed for their willful disregard for God's glory. Thus as we witness Paul's healing ministry in the next paragraph we can see how God is graciously dealing with these superstitious barbarians who are without excuse and deserve only his wrath and anger.

There is another way in which Luke reveals how Jesus keeps his promise to save sinners. Luke intends for us to see the irony in their condemnation of Paul. It is indeed true that Paul is a murderer. He has murdered God's people, Christians, prior to his conversion. It is indeed true that, according to the eternal God's justice, he should die from the serpent's bite. Luke is reflecting a major theme in the OT that the snake or the serpent represents the devil and the curse that has come upon us because of our sins. In particular if you will remember Numbers 21, Israel while traveling in the wilderness rebelled against the Lord yet again by complaining about God's provision. In judgment upon them the Lord sent snakes into their midst and thousands of them died from snake bite. They came to their senses and went to Moses asking that he ask the Lord to take away the snakes. God did not take away the snakes but instructed Moses to make a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole in the middle of the camp and thus everyone who was bitten by a snake, which was God's judgment upon their sin, had only to look at the bronze snake on the pole and he or she would be healed. Jesus takes this story and says to Nicodemus in John 3, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." So Luke shows that the murderer Paul is kept safe from the serpent's bite because he has looked to, believed in the Son of Man lifted up on that cross. God shows us by this story that just as Jesus saved the murderer Paul from the curse of sin, from the serpent's bite, so he will save the superstitious barbarians if they will look to that same cross. In this same way he will save every sinner from God's curse who will look to, that is, put their faith in this Jesus who bore God's anger against believers when he died upon that cross.

## **II. Bring the nations into the church (vv.7-10)**

The leading man of the island, named Publius, who most likely is a wealthy local man appointed by the Roman government to be the leader of this 18 mile by 8 mile speck in the Mediterranean Sea, brings the shipwrecked

people to his estate where he cares for them for three days while other housing and arrangements are made for them to live during the three winter months they will have to remain on the island. While enjoying this man's hospitality Paul discovers that his father suffers from a fever caused by dysentery. He goes to the elderly man, lays his hands upon him while asking the Lord to heal him and God heals him of his disease. The news of the healing of such a prominent citizen of the island quickly spreads and all the sick people come to see Paul and God through Paul heals them all. As a result of Paul's and his Christian companions' ministry among them the Maltese people honored them greatly. The words that are translated "honored us greatly" are most often used in reference to monetary and material support (1 Timothy 5:17-18). This is made clear at the end of v. 10.

Luke does not tell us that Paul said a word while in Malta and he does not tell us that anyone became a Christian. However, it is difficult to believe that Paul never spoke and that no one became a Christian. The honor, both material and respect wise that the people gave to Paul and his apostolic company points to the fact that a church has been established on the island during the three winter months Paul has been there. Luke connects what is happening here to the numerous promises in the OT prophets of God's saving people on distant shores, islands and coastlands. God's salvation goes out to all his scattered children living even upon the islands of the earth, like Malta. Listen again to one of those places in Isaiah 60: "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.... Surely the islands look to me; in the lead are the ships of Tarshish, bringing your sons from afar, with their silver and gold, to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor." The glory of God in the person and work of Jesus shines upon the church and through the church and so the Lord gathers the nations to the church, including the distant islands and when the nations come they bring their wealth to the church as the sign of their loyalty to the Lord and his people.

The thing that gives me confidence that this is what God intends for us to see is that, as we have noted on several occasions this story about Paul closely parallels the life of Jesus as recorded in the gospels. In Luke 4 Jesus is in Capernaum and he enters into Peter's house where his mother-in-law is sick in bed with a fever, just like Publius' father. Immediately after Jesus heals the fevered mother-in-law Luke writes, "When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them." Again, notice the similarity of language that Luke uses in both places. In other words, Luke wants us to see that Paul is ministering on a distant island among barbarian people in exactly the same way that Jesus ministered to the Jewish people of Capernaum. Jesus is the one who fulfills all God's promises to save his people, he is the light which has dawned upon the people sitting in darkness. Just as he did it in the flesh during those years in Israel, so he continues to do it through Paul on Malta and in our day through his church scattered throughout the world. All over the world God is causing the light of Jesus to shine upon and through the church and by this means bringing the nations into the church. All we who believe in Christ are part of the nations upon whom the light of Christ has dawned and who have been brought by God into his church as his scattered children.

### **III. Bring us safely to our destination in the company of the church (vv.11-16)**

Three years prior to this departure from Malta on the last leg of his journey to Rome, God by the HS had instructed Paul that he was going to preach the gospel in Rome (Acts 19:21). Twice more, since that time, once while in prison and once while on the storm-tossed ship, Jesus has assured him that he must go to Rome and preach the gospel before Caesar. Thus through these nine chapters recording these three years we have been watching how it is that God has been keeping his promise to Paul to bring him safely to Rome. This final 280 mile journey is reported in a straightforward manner. There is another ship from the Roman "wheat fleet" in the large harbor on the northwestern coast of Malta which has wintered on Malta and in mid-February of 60 A.D is ready to head for Rome. This Roman ship has on the bow of the boat the figures of the twin brothers, Castor and Pollux, who are Roman gods, the sons of Zeus and a human woman. We know them as the Gemini twins. So Julius the centurion boards the ship with Paul and Luke and his other traveling companions and sets sail.

They arrive without incident a couple of weeks later in the main harbor on the western coast of Italy called Puteoli. Upon arriving in this port Paul, Luke and their other Christian traveling companions discover a Christian church in existence and these Christians invite them to stay with them for a week. The church sends messengers north on the Appian Way to Rome to inform the church in Rome that Paul and his companions are in Italy. Thus as Paul travels by foot north to Rome he is met by groups of Christians from the churches around Rome. We are told that Paul, "...on seeing them, thanked God and took courage." When they arrive in Rome Paul is permitted by the Roman government to take rented quarters where he lives with a measure of freedom but always chained to a Roman soldier from the Imperial guard.

Thus Paul has traveled these thousands of miles over the course of three years arriving safely in Rome by God's will as the ambassador of Jesus having been protected and provided for in amazing ways. He arrives in Rome in the company of the church knowing that he will bear testimony to Christ to the Emperor but not knowing if this will be where he dies. As we reflect on God's plan and work in the case of Paul we are to see how God works to bring his people safely to the end of our lives through the troubles and trials of this life. I want to draw your attention to three things we have observed in Paul's experience of how God brings his people safely to our final destination. First, while it is true, as Jesus said that the world hates us because we love Jesus and as Paul says, "Everyone who desires to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted", yet it is also true that God often cares for us through the kindness of non-Christians. Not all Christians are persecuted by non-Christians all the time. All kinds of non-Christian people have kindly helped Paul beginning with the corrupt Roman governor Felix and his successor Festus to the centurion Julius to the barbarians of Malta to the chief man of Malta, Publius. God rules over all human hearts and he often sends us aid through the kindness and help of those who do not belong to Jesus.

Second, we live in a world that is full of superstition and error. Yet, this does not stop us from associating with and making use of the products and services of those who believe and practice these errors. Why does Luke tell us that the ship that Paul rides from Malta to Italy is marked by the images of Roman gods? He wants us to see how indifferent Paul is to them. Paul freely sails on a ship marked by pagan worship and whose crew believes that having these images protects them from harm. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:10 if a Christian decides he or she will only associate with or use the products of those who are Christians, that person will have to leave the world. Unlike the practitioners of other religions we do not believe that we are in any way contaminated by being with or using the products and services of those who believe error. We are free to associate with and make use of the products and services of this error filled world.

Third, Paul has exhibited constant courage and endurance and joyful hope throughout his journey and yet, when he sees the Christians from Rome who have come to travel with him the final miles he gives thanks to God for sending them and he experiences renewed courage for what lies before him. What a marvelous picture of Paul coming to the end of his journey, traveling in the company of the church by which God fills him with renewed confidence in God's presence. Those who profess to be Christians but refuse to associate with Christ's church will find themselves at the end of their lives or in times of trouble bereft of the primary means of comfort that God wants to provide to his people, the presence of other pilgrims who are walking in the way with you. As the author to the Hebrews says to those beleaguered Christians (Hebrews 10:25), "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching." In view of the fact that one day Jesus will return to this earth to save all those who have held fast to him to the end of their lives we are exhorted to walk with each other along this life's journey so that we can provide that kind of encouragement and help that we all need to not give up. We will only come safely to that final destination as we walk with our fellow pilgrims, those others who also are on the way to the Celestial City.