

Acts 28: 1-10; “The Warming of Grace”, Sermon # 91 in the Series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on January 29th, 2023, in the Morning Worship Service.

From this passage I would like to speak to you about the warming of grace. It is pictured for us very well, 1st of all – In the fire that was kindled by the natives for Paul and the others with him. (verses 1 and 2) 2nd – It is pictured well in Paul’s experience with the viper that came out of the fire, and the native’s reaction to it. (verses 3-6) And 3rd – It is pictured well by the treatment that Paul and those with him experienced from Publius, a leading citizen of the island. (verses 7-10) In all of these points I will also show you the great indications of saving grace in the apostle Paul and those Christian people who were with him.

1st of all – The warming of grace is seen by the natives kindling a fire for Paul and those with him. (verses 1 and 2)

Verse 1 – “Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta.” “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 natives sympathized with their plight; that they had been shipwrecked, and they thought about how they could help them. The word for “natives” here is barbaros in the Greek. It can be translated barbarians. Being a barbarian in that day, in the broadest sense, meant simply – A foreigner, one who did not understand the language of a particular people.

This was the case here. These people were not uncouth or rude people, but they were people who truly cared about the welfare of others around them. We should understand from this that kindness is a grace in any person, whether it is found in a believer or an unbeliever. And all grace comes from God Himself who created all men. In His creating them, he places within them the disposition of personality and temperament which will fulfill His purposes. It is true that every man is born into the world with a sinful disposition which is set against God and against the truth of God’s word because of Adam’s sin in the beginning. This has affected us all.

But total depravity does not mean that every man is by nature as wicked as he could possibly be. Total depravity means that Adam’s sin passed down to us, affects every faculty of our being. But it does not mean that fallen persons cannot learn to treat other people with kindness, even though they do not know the Lord. This accounts for how a person can be a very moral person and yet they do not know the Lord. At least yet. There can be much common grace that is in such a person. We find Paul mentioning this in Romans chapter 2, verses 14-16.

“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.” This is common grace, when Gentiles who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, such as loving their neighbor as themselves.

The work of the law is written on their hearts, not in the way of New Covenant grace, until they hear the word concerning Christ and believe it. But it is there, in their mind and heart, in the remnants of Adam’s fallen nature. And so it is true that all men have a witness in their own conscience that there is a God and that there is a right and a wrong. What is good and right in terms of how we treat each other can be cultivated successfully by parents communicating to their children what is right and wrong, from a very early age. If they are taught that they are responsible

to do what is right, and they see in their parents and others a good example of this, they can become kind people themselves.

The Bible teaches us that God has given to every man a conscience which will help direct him in a natural sense towards doing what is right. That is, if his conscience is working in a right way within him, and if he then responds to do what is right, good works can be done, and even cultivated in that person's life. And so, since the persons whom we are considering here were responding rightly to what they were seeing, in the plight of these shipwrecked men, it was because their hearts were warmed with common grace that they showed this kindness. It says that they showed unusual or extraordinary kindness. They kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold.

Once again, common grace is not simply God's restraining men from doing bad things, or from keeping them from becoming worse and worse in their sin. It is also His having given them a conscience which is law unto themselves; that is, from their own human perspective to have the ability to see what is right in a human sense and in their own way, to do it. There is a warmth to common grace which is pictured here by these natives kindling a fire and making Paul and the others welcome. It is the grace of human sympathy that leads to acts of mercy and acts of kindness. It is the warmth of common grace at work when one human being shows compassion to another, to help them when they are in hurt or in need.

It is the warmth of common grace which allows people to be hospitable to those who are recovering from a disaster. The apostle James tells us that sometimes even Christians fail to show this human kindness to people in need. James 2: 14 – "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone say he has faith but does not have works?" "Can that faith save him?" "If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?" "Thus faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

The lesson that we should learn from this is that if native barbarian people can show kindness to the apostle Paul and those with him, cannot we who know the Lord show kindness to people who need to be warmed physically, and who need to be warmed spiritually by gospel of Christ being shared with them? Showing kindness is commended to us by Christ Himself in Luke chapter 6, verses 35 and 36 – "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will sons of the Most High." "For He is kind to the unthankful and evil." It is for all of us who know God, to teach others what God is like. He is Kind. And His greatest Kindness was shown in the giving of His Son to be the Savior of the World.

Titus chapter 3, verse 4 – "But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us..." And in verse 8 of that same chapter Paul says – "This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed God should be careful to maintain good works." "These things are good and profitable to men." When these natives kindled a fire, all those who were wet and cold drew close to it to feel its heat. They were warmed and they were encouraged that their life would go on. And these acts of these natives prepared the way for their hearing about the special grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2nd – The warming of grace is well pictured in Paul's experience with the viper that came out of the fire, and the native's reaction to it. (verses 3-6)

Verse 3 says – "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." "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.” “But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.” “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.”

So Paul was not a man to remain idle while others were helping him and providing for his needs. He gathered a great bundle of sticks for the fire. A great “plethos” of sticks it says in the Greek. A large number of them it means. Paul would help if he could. He laid this big pile of sticks on the fire, and as he did, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand. It plunged its fangs into Paul’s hand. When the natives saw this they immediately concluded that he must be a murderer whom justice was not going to allow to live. This also is a real evidence of common grace; when a person believes in the concept of justice.

These people superstitiously believed that there were gods who governed the world. They believed that things do not happen by chance. And they also believed that the person who does evil will be punished for the crimes that they commit, in due time. They believed that murder was a crime that would not go unpunished. There would be retribution in some great way. This was no doubt true, but see how it is, that those with only common grace misunderstand God’s providential ordering of things. They need to be corrected by the truth of the Bible, and have a readiness not to draw fast conclusions, but to think rightly about such providences.

Paul was not a murderer, but they immediately drew the wrong conclusion that he was, because of this viper latching on to him. They did not know that this man was the apostle Paul, a man who had been shown great special grace in being saved by our Lord Jesus Christ, and made one of His apostles; a messenger of the gospel of the grace of God. They did not know that the Lord Jesus had said of his apostles, according to Mark 16: 17 and 18 – “And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; 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.”

Let us understand that people who only have common grace will not understand what special grace is until Christ’s power is demonstrated to them. They will also often draw wrong conclusions about God’s providence, and why He permits and ordains certain things to happen. I want you to see, once again, how calm Paul was in all of this. He was just as calm here as he was in the midst of the storm when he was on the ship the day before. When this viper latched himself on to Paul’s hand, he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm.

Paul knew what he once was. He knew full well remembered that before Christ saved him he was a persecutor and a murderer of God’s people in what he tried to do to them. No doubt he deserved to die for his past crimes. But Christ had saved him on the road to Damascus. He had forgiven him all these sins. And now he knew that Christ was helping him to fulfill his ministry. He was showing to him and through him, His great power to preserve and deliver him in every situation.

Paul knew that by the grace of God that he was who he was, and God’s grace toward him was not in vain. He would continue to labor for Christ all the way to Rome. God would not let this snake or his venom bring him down to death. All the efforts of Satan and all the forces natural and spiritual that opposed him, could not stop him from bearing witness to the greatness of the grace of Christ at Rome. This is also how we ought to think about our lives being lived for Christ. Nothing will prevent us from doing what God would have us to do if it is His purpose that we do it. I am saying that the hearts of God’s dear people are strangely warmed by the promises of God and the greatness of Christ’s grace in the most difficult of situations. As it says in Psalm 112, verses

6 and 7 – “Surely he will never be shaken; the righteous will be in everlasting remembrance.” “He will not be afraid of evil tidings; His is steadfast, trusting in the Lord.” “His heart is established; he will not be afraid....”

Well, these natives thought that Paul would surely die, but as they watched him closely for a long time, he did not swell up, and he did not fall down dead. And so they once again concluded rashly concerning him. They now thought that he was a god. Although we are not told, I am sure that this gave Paul the opportunity to speak of Christ to them, and how it was He who had given him the power to overcome the venom of this viper.

And so too it will be when by God’s providence we are delivered from some deadly situation. We can give all the glory to God, and bear witness to Christ protective care. This is something that only a person who knows God’s special saving grace in Christ knows the reality of. The Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. This is the warmth of saving grace. It brings comfort to God’s people.

3rd – The warming of grace is pictured well by the treatment that Paul and those with him experienced from Publius, a leading citizen of the island.

Verses 7-10 say – “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.” “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.” “So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed.” “They also honored us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary.”

Here we see more common grace at work; this time in the actions of this man named Publius who was a leading citizen of the island. He had heard about Paul and thought that it would be good if he could receive Paul and those with him, and entertain them at his estate. It says that he did so courteously for three days. They lodged them with him there for those days. And no doubt they heard about Paul’s being an apostle of the Lord, and why he was going to Rome, and his desire to preach the gospel to as many as he could, as he went, as well as when he would arrive.

Once again, as God’s providence would have it, the power of Christ to heal men would be demonstrated to this man Publius, and this would open the door for the gospel to be preached to him and to others on this island. It happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery, and so Paul went in to him and prayed and laid his hands on him and healed him. Paul had been warmed by the fire of common grace when he first came to this island. Now he had been warmed through the hospitality and care that he had received from Publius. He would warm Publius heart with the grace and power of Jesus Christ in the healing of his father.

This act of healing in the name of Jesus excited the attention of the whole island, and so the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to Paul and getting cured. The explanation to them was always the same. The power to heal was not inherently in Paul. But he had this power from Christ so that those healed would believe in the power of Christ to save them from their sins, to deliver them from the power of Satan, and to bring to them the blessings and riches of Christ’s grace, when they would receive Him and believe on Him.

Although it is not said, it is probable that many believed. And they also honored Paul and those with him, with many marks of respect. And when they set sail, they supplied them with all they needed, it says. Certainly for some among them, common grace was transformed to something far, far greater, something of eternal value. They came to know Christ and the special grace which brought them salvation. He always brings this to all who trust in Him, to all those who come to know of His power to save them. Therefore, let us who know His power, speak of it.

