

## Scripture Reading:

Acts 28:1 “Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta. 2 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. 3 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. 4 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." 5 But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 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. 7 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. 8 And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever & dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him. 9 So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed. 10 They also honored us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary.”

# Paul Witnesses on Malta

- One of the important lessons from Acts is that God is in control...
- The Holy Spirit knows where history is going, and He will make sure it goes as God planned.

In our morning text we see one final example of the Spirit’s miraculous work in the Book of Acts: So I thought it would be good to focus on miracles!

- Miracles are not something that we should be ashamed of or afraid of if we understand them Biblically!

As I pointed out last week, there are many skeptics who try to erase the miraculous from the pages of Scripture. President Jefferson wrote a New Testament where he took out all of the miraculous events... I have not read it, but I suspect it is pretty short!

- He and others want us to simply look at the “wise teachings” of Jesus and in many cases they think the Apostle Paul just came along later and confused things.

This is certainly NOT what Luke sets out in his orderly account and we must accept what the Spirit has given. Jesus did miracles, Jesus said His disciples would do miracles and we see miracles continuing on in the Book of Acts as we read this morning.

Paul is shown great hospitality by a prominent man on the Island of Malta by the name of Publius. In the course of his three day visit he cures this man’s father of a very serious ailment!

- Word soon spreads to all of the island. Many more are brought and healed.

This miraculous activity, along with Paul’s being protected from the venomous snake near the fire, allow Paul and Luke and Aristarchus to share the Good News that Jesus had come as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Luke tells us that the people were thankful, sending Paul and his companions off with all they needed *[remember we have 276 shipwrecked folks with nothing but what they wore]*

- Luke gives us no details about what Paul preached nor the reaction to the Gospel.

However, history tells us that they left their mark and the Spirit used them in a mighty way. Publius would go on to be the first Bishop of this Island who was according to Church traditions martyred in 125 AD.

- Over the next six hundred years, the Church on this tiny island grew strong enough to survive a Muslim occupation that lasted for almost three hundred years.

After the Muslims were expelled, Malta was ruled by a series of Knights, conquered by the French under Napoleon, spent many years under British rule and finally became an independent country in 1964. As I pointed out last week, today this Island nation is the 8<sup>th</sup> most densely populated country on the planet with over 400,000 people, of which an astonishing 98% are Roman Catholics. Before we become too judgmental as good reformers, I would point out that no-fault divorce only came to the Island in 2011 and abortion is still illegal under all circumstances. I suspect that even within the errors and constraints of Rome, more people hear the Gospel in Malta on a regular basis, then do folks here in the Sacramento valley! The important point is that Paul's shipwreck on this Island, directed by the Holy Spirit, and the miracles provided by the Spirit which drew attention to the Gospel have had a major impact on this tiny Island.

- A small picture of how the Kingdom of Jesus is going to fill the earth!

We will talk more about how the Spirit works within the Church to spread the Kingdom in the coming weeks, but for this morning I do want to focus on the issue of miracles because there is so much confusion in this area today, especially in American churches.

We have seen a lot of miracles in the Book of Acts and that is exactly what Jesus had foretold would happen: After Jesus sent seventy of His disciples out by twos they return rejoicing:

We read in Luke 10, "17 Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." 18 And He said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. 19 Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. 20 Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven."

Of course we see a strong hint here from Jesus about the balance we are to have regarding miraculous events... The Holy Spirit uses those who comprise the Church to spread the Kingdom, but we are to find our real joy not in the miracle we see here on earth but the miracle that lasts for all eternity: Our salvation! We see a similar promise from Jesus at the end of Mark's Gospel in the midst of His rebuking the disciples for unbelief and giving them the Great Commission:

"15 And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. 16 He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. 17 And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; 18 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." 19 So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. 20 And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen."

- We see Jesus telling them that miracles would happen and that they would assist them in spreading the Good News, in being His witnesses.

We have seen all of these things, speaking in foreign languages, casting out demons, healing the sick and even surviving snake bites here in the Book of Acts.

- The big question we must face is whether such miracles can or must continue today.

As we often see, there is a clear Biblical road that we should follow and a couple of very dangerous ditches on either side. The proper Biblical road is traveled when we understand and remember the purpose & source of such miracles.

- They are demonstrations of the power of the Holy Spirit as He carries out His mission to fill the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus!

They are completely under His control and He can do them whenever and wherever He chooses.

- To deny this is to deny the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit!

**So what are the two ditches we must avoid?**

- **The first ditch is seen in the pride of Simon who sought to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit so he could impress people.**

**This sin comes when people decide that they can control when and where the Spirit of God will perform.**

- **We see this today with miracle workers who claim to have special access to God's power.**

**There is a full range here, from outright charlatans who know that what they do is fraudulent, to sincere folks who think we must have miraculous signs to see the power of the Kingdom advance or to know that people are really saved.**

- **This is certainly the error in many charismatic circles where one must speak in tongues to demonstrate that they have really been filled with the Holy Spirit.**

**This is wrong in two ways when we consider it Biblically: First the tongues of Acts were speaking in a foreign language that the speaker did not know, but that someone else did, not the prayer language that Paul discusses in First Corinthians.**

- **We see these tongues manifested as the Gospel goes first to the Jews in Jerusalem, then in Samaria and finally with the Gentiles.**

**Once this reach of the Gospel has been confirmed that sign fades away and the Gospel is presented in their native language as continues today with the many translations of the Bible into foreign languages.**

- **Could the Holy Spirit still give someone such a gift today?**

**Yes, He could if there was such a need, but it would be an exceptional case rather than the norm that charismatics demand. We see a similar situation with the other miracles that Jesus promised:**

- **They do follow these early disciples to confirm the power of the Gospel and their authority.**

**This was especially important for those who would be the authors used by the Spirit to finish the Canon of Scripture giving us the New Testament. Now that the Scriptures are complete, they are the authority that we turn to to authenticate our work for the Kingdom.**

**We see this clearly in Peter's final letter that we read together often. Peter's desire is to leave the Saints with confidence after he has died and in the first chapter he reminds them that the disciples were eye-witnesses using the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain as his example [can anyone come up with a better "experience"?] Peter does not tell us to go and try to have such experiences...**

**NO, he rather points us to the Scriptures saying, "19 And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; 20 knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21 for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."**

**Yes, there were a great many miracles performed and witnessed by those who gave us the Scriptures, but the greatest work of the Spirit was giving us God's revelation just as He intended it.**

**Theron and I do not need to perform miracles to confirm that we have been called as Elders in Christ's Church. We have authority because of God's Word and we are to use that authority to preach the Gospel through the Word and Sacrament!**

**Sadly there are many today that still hold to this use of miracles, demanding that there be miracles to confirm that God is at work in a person's life.**

**Both of these errors, along with a long history of abuses in the Roman and Orthodox Churches that I would not have time to present in detail, have driven many into the ditch on the other side of our Biblical road.**

- **Many today, especially in Reformed circles, hold to the view that ALL miraculous activity on the part of the Holy Spirit has ceased.**
- **Sadly, they hold such a view without a single verse of Scripture to back them up!**

**Again, I think many are sincere in their desire to avoid the errors of the other ditch, but either ditch finds one in error when you consider what the Bible teaches.**

**We can avoid BOTH ditches if we remember who is in control of such miracles and why He uses them.**

- **Jesus promised that the comforter would be sent and the Book of Acts is the story of how He will fill the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus.**
- **As part of His work He uses tongues to confirm the advance of the Gospel and miracles to confirm the authority of the early church leaders and to draw attention to the preaching of the Gospel.**

**Today, Jesus is still on the Throne and the Holy Spirit is still filling the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus.**

- **Today, the 400,000 plus citizens of Malta do not need a few miracles to introduce them to Christianity!**

**They have almost two thousand years of history to draw from and the freedom to read the Bible in their own language and attend Church on any Lord's Day.**

- **If one of them rejects the Gospel they are truly without excuse.**

**Much of this requires an understanding of maturity:**

- **Maturity of individuals and maturity of the Church as a whole.**

**There is often real excitement in the heart and mind of a new convert and they might even experience God in some special ways... [tell story of David] As we mature, God not only refines us through His discipline, which we don't like as much as the miracles... But He also expects us to grow in our understanding and trust. If we try to return to the excitement of the early days, that is not a step in the right direction! *[think of the four or five year old reaching for a baby bottle]***

**We see examples of this in the Scriptures where the people of God were miraculously fed with manna in the wilderness but were expected to grow their own food when they entered the promised land:**

- **What would we have thought of a young Israelite who prayed for and went out looking for manna as proof that 'God was real in his life.'**

**We can see this here on the Island of Malta in our text: The Holy Spirit gives Paul special power for a time... But Paul is also traveling with Luke, the beloved physician. Were all the people who came with various illnesses healed by Paul or might Luke have assisted a few with his God-given skill.**

**We are not given those details but after almost two-thousand years of Christian civilization there are now competent physicians within easy reach of every citizen on the Island of Malta. This is a glorious picture of the advance of Christendom, even with all the ups & downs of this island's history.**

**In conclusion I want to return to what Peter stressed with a look at a very similar thought with which James ends his New Testament Epistle.**

- **Peter began his final letter with that reminder that the Scriptures are the source of our real authority, not the experiences that we may or may not have had.**

At the end of his Epistle, James clearly teaches that we can and should have miracles in the church using the example of illness... At verse 14 he asks, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."

James is talking about real Biblical faith here and before we can make too many excuses or rationalize this verse away when it come to our lives, James gives an example of such faith:

17 "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years & six months. 18 And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit."

- So does James want us to hold special healing services and pray for changes in the weather?

Such things are possible, but please notice the focus of where James is leading us in his conclusion:

19 "Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, 20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins."

Salvation is the real miracle that we see over and over and over again as the Holy Spirit fills the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus: Soul after soul after soul responding to the preaching of the Gospel, being turned from darkness to light.

This was the focus that Jesus was reminding His Disciples to have when He told them to remember that their names were written in heaven!

- These are the miracles that we should pray for!
- These are the miracles that the Great Commission calls upon all of us to participate in.
- And James reminds us that we need the faith of Elijah to believe that God can make such changes in people's hearts!
- May we be those to whom God grants such faith!

**Communion Meditation: John 21:4-13**

"But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Then Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any food?" They answered Him, "No." 6 And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and eat breakfast." Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, "Who are You?"--knowing that it was the Lord. 13 Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. "