



45 | ACTS 28:1-16

MINISTRY ON CASTAWAY ISLAND

Trust the Lord in your most painful moments. God knows what he's doing. He's allowing you to experience his deepest healing so that you can minister that same healing to others.

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WELCOME: We are glad you are here! Be sure to grab a Welcome Packet if you are visiting with us.

Introduction

Trauma and difficulty can be paralyzing. In our story, Paul is shipwrecked and snake-bitten, but instead of becoming paralyzed, he receives the healing and the presence of the Lord and turns his shipwrecks and snakebites into ministry.

In 1967, seventeen-year-old **Joni Eareckson Tada** took a dive that would change her life. One afternoon, she headed out for a dip in the Chesapeake Bay with her sister. Spying a wooden raft anchored nearby, Joni took a headlong dive from the raft into very shallow water. That moment changed the rest of her life. She became a quadriplegic, destined to spend the **remainder of her days in a wheelchair**, without any feeling in her hands or legs. It was an emotional blow that nearly drove her to suicide. But Joni couldn't hold a razor or push pills, so she thought of ways to end her life mentally, emotionally, spiritually.

Even in that dark season of Joni's life, a glimmer of hope still shone. She knew Jesus Christ as her personal Savior, and the promises of his word spoke to her suffering heart. She remembered 1 Thessalonians 5:18, which says, "**In everything give thanks**," and she resolved to be thankful. At first, she could only think of little things. But over time her perspective widened, and she identified bigger blessings. As her faith grew, her life was transformed, and she began to embrace it.

Armed with moral support and a daily dependence on God, Joni began the complicated and physically exhausting process of learning how to function in a wheelchair without the use of her hands or feet.

Joni didn't just learn how to function—she learned how to thrive. During her two years in rehabilitation, she spent long hours learning how to paint with a brush between her teeth. More than that, Joni learned that God can turn a **mess into a ministry**. She's learned to share her story internationally and inspire others. God turned her **paralysis into a praise!** God can turn your **trauma into a triumph**. That's what we are going to learn today.

Paul and the crew of criminals, businessmen and maybe even a few tourists are put into a very dangerous situation. They are sailing the Mediterranean when the winds and waves are dangerous. The Fall-Winter season has arrived, and the captain is insistent on sailing when Paul voiced that it was not a good idea at all. The results: they lose their entire cargo of merchandise and goods, they lose the ship, and they almost lose their lives. They crash by the Island of Malta. They are now castaways on an unfamiliar island. Does anyone even live on this island?

Paul has his own "Castaway Island" that he's on. His ship has been torn to pieces, so he and the other passengers find themselves ashore on the Island of Malta.

After a long ordeal in Caesarea and this two-week crisis at sea, Paul undoubtedly enjoyed this **three-month rest on the Island of Malta** before pushing on to Rome. But more than his personal rest and health would be affected in Malta—God would bear witness through the apostle by **healing many on the island**. Times of trauma in our lives can also bring times of great healing: physical, mental, and emotional healing. Trauma and difficulty can form us for the better and open us to the pain others are going through as well.¹

¹ Swindoll, *Acts*, 506.

We all have invented ways to cover our trauma and put a band aid on it. God doesn't just want you to ignore your pain or cover it. He wants to heal you, Remember the words of wise Solomon.

Ecclesiastes 3:1, 3 | There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven... a time to heal.

I find it strange that in our modern, "enlightened" era, when medicine has advanced light-years beyond the knowledge of Luke and Hippocrates, we have so little room in our theology for rest or the biblical **concept of "time to heal."** We want people to "get over it." If you have spent much time trying to recover from an ailment that cannot be explained by an X-ray, if you have been trapped in the dregs of depression, if you have grieved deeply the loss of a loved one and you can't seem to recover, you've undoubtedly heard from someone "Snap out of it!" or "Get with it!" Instead, we need to say: run to the Lord. Give the Lord time to heal you. It's going to take time, but God can and will do it.²

When that healing comes, it blossoms into ministry. Paul's shipwreck turns into a time of deep and powerful ministry.

In this passage we discover **the secret to satisfying ministry for God.** Paul gets stranded on an island, gets bit by a viper, and after he is healed by the Lord, he begins a healing ministry himself. Have you ever thought that the most painful part of your life might turn into your greatest ministry to others?

Key Thought: Trust the Lord in your most painful moments. God knows what he's doing. He's allowing you to experience his deepest healing so that you can minister that same healing to others.

1. THE MESS OF MINISTRY (28:1-6)

Trials can be very difficult, but we must realize God is doing something in the mess. God's goal is **not** for you to **have a perfect marriage or an uninterrupted life.** His plan for you is to be **conformed to Jesus Christ** in humility, like a humble child. But in being conformed to Jesus, it may surprise you that the Lord wants you to **minister to others** out of the things you have learned from your trials and suffering. We see the pattern in 2 Corinthians 1.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 | Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

How did Paul's healing ministry begin? It began with the kind gestures of the islanders.

THE KINDNESS

The People's Kindness. The **people of Malta** at this time were **regarded as barbarians**, but that's likely because of the unknown. Sometimes we inflate our fears of the unknown, and this was an unknown people group. But Paul and the rest of the passengers were glad to find out that **people of Malta are quite friendly.**

² Swindoll, *Acts*, 506.

Acts 28:1-2 | After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. ²The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold.

I love the observation of the islanders: they showed “unusual kindness” to Paul, the sailors, and washed-up passengers. God had brought them to the Isle of Malta (which means “refuge”), where the **native people welcomed all 276 shivering passengers** and did their best to make them comfortable.³ They **kindled a nice fire** was an incredible blessing since it was so rainy and cold. **Winter had arrived**, and though the island didn’t have all the amenities of the mainland, Paul was able to roam freely, no longer confined to a soldier or a jail cell.

Paul’s Kindness. **Paul** showed kindness to his hosts and **gathered sticks for the fire**. Wood needed to be added continually to the bonfire to keep it from going out. It is a measure of Paul’s character that he humbly stooped to perform such a menial task. **Humility is essential** to true leadership.⁴

MOODY THE CABBY: It reminds me of the story of a very special coach driver at Moody Bible Institute in Northfield, Massachusetts. One rainy day, a man accompanied by two women arrived at Northfield, hoping to **enroll his daughter in D.L. Moody’s Bible Institute**. The three needed help in getting their luggage from the railway depot to the hotel, so the visitor **“drafted” a rather common-looking man with a horse and wagon, assuming he was a local cabby**. The “cabby” said he was waiting for students, but the **visitor ordered him** to take them to the hotel. The visitor was shocked when the **“cabby” did not charge him** and was even more shocked to discover that **the “cabby” was D.L. Moody himself!** Moody was a leader because he knew how to be a servant.⁵

Paul as a servant leader wants to be the first to be aware of people’s needs and to make himself available. But something terrible happens. We sometimes jokingly say “no good deed goes unpunished.” It seems like Paul experiences this when he grabs a stick that is not a stick at all.

THE CREATURE

Suddenly the narrative changes. In bundling sticks for the fire, **Paul is attacked by a viper**. His good efforts are rewarded with a viper bite. As he was gathering the bundles of sticks, one of the sticks was alive and attacked him! It **looks like the end of the story**, but it’s **really just the beginning**.

Acts 28:3-5 | When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. ⁴When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, “No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has

³ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1, 510.

⁴ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol. 2, 361.

⁵ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1, 510.

escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.”⁵ He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.

The **people** at that time were **very superstitious**. They assumed that if something bad happened to a person, it was the reward for bad behavior. They conclude in **their superstition that Paul was a murderer**. As believers, we should never be assuming or superstitious. **Often horrible things can happen to God’s people**. God’s plan is **not our comfort but our conformity to Jesus Christ**. It can often be confusing because we are serving the Lord, and we know God promises to protect us. But God will often allow his saints to be tested so they can grow in their faith. Think of Job and Joseph.

It’s important to recognize both aspects of suffering. On a personal level, God promises to bring chastening to us if our lives are out of order. But often suffering is not a result of chastening, but God wants to keep us humble and moldable. Remember Paul who had asked for the thorn in his flesh to be removed, all the while the messenger of Satan who was pummeling him. Remember what Jesus said?

2 Corinthians 12:9 | My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Paul’s response was, “Now that I know his power is perfected when I am weak, I will glory in all my weaknesses, in insults, in persecutions and tribulations.”

What is that which makes you weak in your life? Paul had a snake that could have hurt him badly. Do you see how God takes all circumstances in our lives and **makes them beautiful** in his time (Ecc 3:11)? What is it that is humbling you right now? **Can you trust the Lord to use your weakness for his kingdom?**

THE CONFUSION

The **viper’s venom had no effect on Paul**, and this was quite a **surprise to the islanders** of Malta. At first, they thought he was a murderer, but now that he seems immune from death, their view of Paul became **hyperbolic**.

Acts 28:6 | They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

The **apostle’s calmness was conspicuous**; most people bitten by poisonous snake’s panic. But Paul had absolute faith in God’s repeated promises that he would see Rome (Acts 23:11; 27:24). Therefore, he knew he would not die on Malta. As always in Acts, **God used this miracle to authenticate his message and his messenger**.⁶

The people seeing the apostle is immune from a poisonous snake bite **wrongly conclude that Paul is a god**. Readers of Acts should have no doubt that Paul denies personal divine power or identity.⁷ By now the apostle had seen a lot and had **been worshiped as a god** before (14:11). Luke doesn’t conclude the story to show Paul’s response. By now his readers could guess. Instead, he transitions to another incident the apostle used for evangelism.⁸

⁶ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol. 2, 362.

⁷ Hamilton, *John–Acts*, 576.

⁸ Swindoll, *Acts*, 507.

Without God, you can see the fickleness of the people. **Suffering does not mean we are the scum of the earth**, abandoned by God. Neither does a lack of suffering or **even a miracle** mean that we are good or that **we are gods**. **Suffering and blessing are merely tools God uses to conform us to Christ**.

One more application is vital. In our service to Jesus, we may be **hated at one moment and heralded** at another moment. We must never, never get our identity from people's opinion of us. There are **haters and flatterers**, but the only opinion that matters is the opinion of the Lord. God alone knows who we are in our heart. We as sincere believers constantly **walk in the face of God** with prayers like David in Psalm 139.

Psalm 139:23-24 | Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! ²⁴ And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

God has not promised us a life without snakebites and shipwrecks. He's called us to live out our covenant love to him in the midst of trials. We need a focus like Paul who **wasn't distracted by shipwrecks** and **snakebites**. He wanted to show the mercy of God to these dear people of Malta.

2. THE MIRACLES OF MINISTRY (28:7-10)

With Paul's new fame, he was introduced to the leading people of the island. He turns the **mess of shipwrecks and snakebites into a new ministry of miracles!** It begins with the wonderful hospitality of the islanders.

THE HOSPITALITY

Whatever the people's reaction, Paul didn't waste his opportunity. Their honoring of Paul shows God's work in their hearts. They have a divine openness to the gospel and seem to accept the good news of Jesus' love.

Acts 28:7 | Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days.

Publius, the Roman governor of the island, spoke with the apostle for three days, and **we can imagine what they talked about**. Paul surely explained how we all have been created by the one living God of heaven and earth, and how **God sent his Son to die for our sins**. Publius showed Paul sweet hospitality, giving him **food and drink and a soft place to rest his head**. Publius had his family with him as governor of the island, and we find out that this also **included his own father**, perhaps quite elderly.

THE HEALING

It wasn't long that the sweet hospitality they were enjoying turned sad, and they had **a shadow cast upon them**. **Publius' father became terribly ill**.

Acts 28:8 | It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him.

Dysentery is the leading cause of death in the developing world especially among the very young and very old. Publius' father gets quite ill. What was the sickness? It is often thought to have been a local affliction caused by **contamination of goat's milk** (known widely as 'Malta fever'). It's a horrible disease—the symptoms include dysentery, profuse sweating and joint and muscle pain, and there is no cure. It **almost always lasts for a lifetime**.

God now affirms Paul's message and office as an apostle through the healing of Publius' father. **Healing came about through prayer** and the laying on of hands.

THE HAND OF GOD

What happens next? The prominence of the person healed led to **much publicity**, and God moved mightily. We may assume that Paul and the other Christians in the group preached the good news.⁹

Acts 28:9 | And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.

Luke seems to describe Paul's stay in Malta as **a time of extraordinary blessing** and a welcome change from the two years of incarceration that he had previously known, not to mention what lay ahead of him upon arrival in Rome. It was **a time of revival** that must have reminded the apostle to some degree of previous days of missionary labor. God drew near and **blessed his ministry** during a **deeply difficult time**. Despite the shipwreck and the fact that Paul was still a prisoner, God refreshed Paul's spirit, preparing him for what lay ahead in Rome. The three months in Malta were a welcome hiatus in what had otherwise been a time of enormous frustration.

THE HONOR

It is almost an incidental point, but we are told that such was the honor in which Paul and his companions (Luke and Aristarchus) were held that when it came time to leave the island, the weather more favorable for journeying west, **the islanders loaded the ship with whatever was needed**.¹⁰

Acts 28:10 | They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.

Once more, the Lord provided for all that was needed to ensure that Paul was brought safely to Rome. By the grace of God, a shipwreck turns into a three-month time of fruitful ministry on the island of Malta.

God will provide for you in your time of difficulty. You are not abandoned! I wonder what do you expect when life goes wrong? Do you trust God wants to bless you through humbling times?

3. THE MEANING OF MINISTRY (28:11-16)

⁹ Gempf, "Acts," in *New Bible Commentary*, 1106.

¹⁰ Thomas, *Acts*, 724.

If God wanted Paul in Rome to preach the gospel, why did he have to wait and wander? **Why the imprisonment, the snakebite, the shipwreck?** What about you? What is the meaning of your trials, your hurts, your suffering, and your tribulation?

WAITING MATURES US

Paul had waited **two years in a Caesarean prison**. God had told him **he would preach in Rome**, but instead what he experienced was **waiting, waiting, and more waiting**. When he finally makes his way to Rome there is a shipwreck!

Acts 28:11 | After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead.

Paul finally set sail to Rome! Whether all 276 people boarded the Alexandrian ship, or just Julius and his guard and prisoners, we do not know. Luke notes that the ship that takes them from Malta sports on its “figurehead” the twin gods Castor and Pollux, Greek gods believed to protect sailing ships, provide good winds, and help shipwrecked sailors.¹¹

The truth is, Paul didn’t need some mystical superstition. Christians ought never to need a rabbit’s foot or be afraid to stay on the 13th floor. **We have the presence of the Lord**. Why would we lower ourselves to serve an image or need a trinket? **God is transcendent, and he is with us wherever we go**.

Nonetheless, the transcendent God had Paul wait before he was finally on his way to Rome. **Why the waiting?** I think I’ve often had the wrong idea of waiting. I’ve had great ambitions for the kingdom of the Lord, but I’ve found that **God does a lot of his greatest work during the waiting times**. Some of the most important times of growing occur during the times we are suffering, hurting, or waiting for that one thing we’ve been working toward.

MOSES: I think of **Moses** who fled from Egypt after slaying an Egyptian and found himself tending sheep from age 40 to 80. It wasn’t until he was 80 years old that he heard the voice of the Lord from the burning bush. As an octogenarian, he got his first placement in ministry! It was the waiting time that prepared him. It was during the times of confusion and uncertainty that he must have humbled himself and learned how to depend on the Lord.

JOSEPH: In the same way we could talk about **Joseph** who was betrayed by his brothers and was trapped in a pit, and sold to Potiphar, then put in prison and finally after a lot of long and painful waiting, he was exalted to become Prime Minister of Egypt.

Don’t overburden yourself with the working out of your ambitions. Let the Lord direct your steps. The Lord told us not to be anxious, but to seek him first.

Matthew 6:33 | But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Dear saint, trust the Lord for what he has for you in your time of suffering. He’s got you. You are **predestined to be conformed** to the image of Jesus Christ. Through your humbling circumstances, God wants you to reach your highest potential: to be like Jesus! Be like Jesus and invest your life in others. That’s your highest potential.

¹¹ Hamilton, *John-Acts*, 577-578.

GOD USES WANDERING

Now we have the record of Paul's journey from port to port. It seems **arbitrary that a "south wind sprang up"** and brought them to a specific port where there was a group of believers. Even "wandering" is under the control of God.

Acts 28:12-15 | Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. ¹³ And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. ¹⁴ There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. ¹⁵ And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.

There were various ports in Rome, but this one was accessible to a **precious group of believers** that encouraged Paul. When it says "brothers," as in many languages, it often means "brothers and sisters" as in this context. This was Paul's forever family. Though Paul was there to evangelize, he took courage **the church already established at Rome.**

Proverbs 16:9 | Man plans his ways, but the Lord directs his steps.

What are the south winds in your life that you might be worried about? Perhaps you are suffering an accident or a tragedy. God's in control. Perhaps it's a new job, a new child, or a hard patch in your marriage. God knows and is guiding you. It feels like "wandering," but it's under God's control. He's leading you to greater humility, vulnerability and richer fellowship. For Paul, that wandering brought him to a time of **encouragement and fellowship** in his life that he wouldn't have had otherwise. The point is, there is no real "wandering" in the Christian life. Paul says, "**all things work after the counsel** of his own will" (Eph 1:11). King Solomon, many years before, said something similar.

GOD USES WITNESSING

Finally, Paul arrives in Rome! **Instead of cities full of Gentiles** seeking the Lord, the Lord has another plan for Paul. He wants him in Rome to speak to what Paul will refer to as "**Caesar's household.**"

Acts 28:16 | And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

Paul was under house arrest in Rome, and he shared his testimony of Jesus "**throughout the whole imperial guard**" (Phil 1:13). The imperial guard, known as the Praetorians, were the elite of the Roman army and were paid **double a normal soldier's wage** for their service. There were 10,000 specifically to guard the emperor of Rome. Paul's testimony spread throughout the Praetorian Guard, and even saints deep in "**Caesar's household,**" i.e., those in and about the emperor's palace and among his family (Phil 4:22).

Paul would be held under **house arrest for another two years** (28:30) with some of the imperial guard, very elite. Paul was a Roman citizen and received great treatment. Non-Roman citizens, even of high status, were often harshly treated. In contrast, house

arrest was typically more comfortable for the prisoner, who was usually **physically chained to a guard** but could still host visitors.

Paul is twice referred to as having been “bound in chains” (Acts 28:20; Eph 6:20). The *chains* referred to were a short length of chain by which the wrist of a prisoner was bound to the wrist of a soldier who was guarding him, so that escape was impossible, both for Paul, *and* the guard! So **who was the real prisoner?** This was amazing for Paul. It’s not like the soldier could shut the door in Paul’s face!

Conclusion

How we need to accept God’s sovereign plan for our lives. Difficult things happen. We are called on to suffer. We get seemingly sidetracked from our goals and hopes and dreams, waiting for what feels like forever. We need to realize that **our times of greatest difficulty and suffering will create the platform for our greatest blessing.**

Trials reveal what is inside a person. So it is with a tea bag. Only when the tea bag gets into hot water do we see what’s really inside. This is how God prepares us for our greatest ministry.