

I. Introduction

Good morning! This map is a reminder of where we are in the story of Paul's journey to Rome. Paul was falsely accused and arrested in Jerusalem, and then moved to Caesarea to protect him from zealots who were plotting to kill him. After this, although he was innocent, he was kept in prison for two years. Finally, Paul appealed to Caesar and was sent to Rome under guard. However, after unwisely sailing from Crete late in the season, the ship Paul was on got caught in a winter storm and they were driven before the wind for two weeks before being shipwrecked on the island of Malta.



As the Lord had promised Paul, by the grace of God, they all made it ashore safely at a place that is now called Saint Paul's Bay. In today's Bible passage, we will see how they are received on the island. Let's read Acts 28:1-16 and see what happens next.



II. Scripture Reading (Acts 28:1-16, NIV 1984)

1 Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. 2 The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. 3 Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. 4 When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." 5 But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. 6 The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead, but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god.

7 There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably. 8 His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. 9 When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. 10 They honored us in many ways and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed.

11 After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island. It was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. 12 We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days. 13 From there we set sail and arrived at Rhegium. The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. 14 There we found some brothers who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome. 15 The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged. 16 When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.

III. Teaching

Some Bible translations include in verse 16 the phrase, "the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard." That is probably what happened, but most Bible scholars agree that this phrase is not part of the original text. Paul was allowed to live in a rented house instead of being put in prison. This is another indication that the Romans knew that he was innocent. But he could not be released because he had appealed to Caesar, and it seems there was a long wait before his hearing came up.

After spending the winter on Malta, the travelers set sail again and arrived in Rome within a couple of weeks. They stopped for three days in Syracuse, on the



east coast of Sicily, and then one night in Rhegium, on the toe-tip of boot-shaped Italy. They left the ship at Puteoli, where they spent a week with some brothers.

Rome was still about 170 miles away, but from there they travelled overland on the Appian Way. While they were at Puteoli, someone must have carried the news of their coming to Rome, since some brothers from Rome met them on the road at the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns. In this way, the voyage from Malta to Rome was completed without further incident, and with much encouragement from Christians who were eager to see Paul.



Earlier, the Emperor Claudius had expelled all of the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2), but by this time that edict was no longer in effect. Many of the Jews that had been expelled had returned and so some of those who came to meet Paul may have been brothers and sisters that Paul had met in other places.

Now that we have seen Paul safely to Rome, let's go back and take a closer look at what happened on Malta after they were shipwrecked. **Acts 28:1-2, "Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold."** The people of Malta were kind to the ship-wrecked travelers. However, they probably did not have any place to offer the group of 276 people shelter indoors, so they seem to have built a fire near the beach so that people could at least get warm. By this time it was probably November and the shipwrecked group had just come out of the water, cold and hungry.

In **Acts 28:3**, we see the servant heart of Paul as he helps to find wood for the fire. **"Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand."** There is no direct indication that this snake represents Satan, but the possible symbolic interpretation of the snake representing Satan attacking Paul is interesting. It is also worth noting that although God did protect Paul from serious harm, Paul was not protected from the painful and frightening trial of being bitten.

Acts 28:4, "When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, 'This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.'" The islanders were kind, but they were also superstitious. The mention of justice is a reference to the Roman goddess of justice and, although there was no evidence that Paul was a bad man, the islanders jumped to the conclusion that the snake bite was divine retribution.



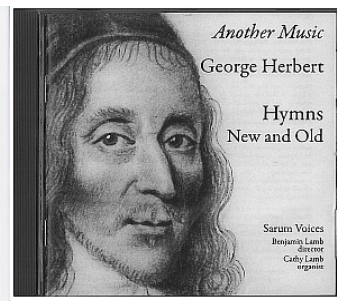
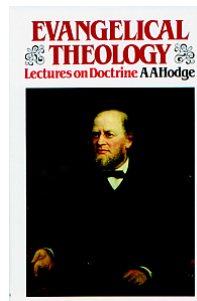
Acts 28:5, "But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects." If the snake is intended to represent Satan, then Satan is defeated and cast into the fire. Revelation 20:10 does say that Satan will be thrown into fire at the end of the days, but Paul will not be the one to do this.

Acts 28:6, "The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead, but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god." The opinion of the islanders goes from one extreme to the other. First, they thought Paul was a murderer, now they think he is a god. There is no evidence for either opinion. This kind of reaction is typical of superstitious thinking.

Critics of faith often argue that all religion is superstition. But Biblical faith is a very different thing than superstition. Superstitious beliefs are not supported by evidence. In contrast, Biblical faith and sound Christian doctrine are supported by abundant evidence.

A. A. Hodge was a missionary in India for three years before returning to the USA to pastor churches and eventually to become the principal of Princeton Seminary from 1878 to 1886. He wrote on this topic, *"Faith must have adequate evidence, else it is mere superstition."* The God of the Bible does not ask us to believe without evidence. It is the devil who promotes superstition.

The 17th century poet, hymn-writer, and Anglican Priest George Herbert, wrote that, *"The devil divides the world between atheism and superstition."* The devil hates evidence-



based belief and so the devil is happy to see you fall into either atheism or superstition. Atheism and superstition both lack evidence. People sometimes think that atheism is rational or scientific, but, in fact, there is no real evidence for atheism.

There is no positive evidence for atheism; atheists are only able to offer negative arguments against Christianity and other religions. Atheists attack the Christian doctrine that God is love by pointing out that there is suffering in the world. Atheists argue that God cannot be both just and merciful because that would make God inconsistent. Atheists with a better sense of humor ask whether or not God can make a rock so big that He cannot move it. But, none of these arguments give evidence for the atheist belief that there is no god. These arguments only show that it is difficult to understand how the attributes of God fit together.

Since most Christians readily agree that our understanding of God is imperfect and incomplete, these atheist arguments are only convincing to people who refuse to look at the positive evidence for the existence of God and the reliability of the Bible. Atheism believes a negative statement - the non-existence of God, without evidence. Concerning atheism, the Bible says (**Psalm 14:1a**), **“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”**

On the other hand, superstition believes in all kinds of things without evidence. There was no evidence that Paul was a murderer or a god, but both are equally easy for the superstitious mind to believe. The Bible cautions us against superstition in many places. One of the clearest warnings is in **1 Timothy 4:7**, **“Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.”**

In Christian faith, God does ask us to go beyond the things that we can see and understand. **2 Corinthians 5:7 (NKJV)** says, **“For we walk by faith, not by sight.”** And, in **Hebrews 11:1**, we read: **“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”** Verses like these teach us the importance of believing God’s promises for things we cannot see, including our salvation and our own resurrection.



These are beautiful and powerful statements about faith. However, by themselves, these verses might seem like superstition to the non-believer. But in the overall context of Scripture, we know that God urges us to use our minds to examine the evidence for the truth. So to get a balanced view, we also need to consider the things that the Bible says about reason and evidence.

In **Isaiah 1:18**, we read, **“‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.’”** If God wanted us to have a blind faith without evidence, He would not invite us to reason with Him.

After Jesus rose from the dead, in **Acts 1:3**, we are told, **“After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.”** Jesus did not ask the disciples to blindly believe in the resurrection; Jesus gave them many proofs, clear and compelling evidence.

1 Peter 3:15, says, **“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,”** Being prepared to give a reason for our hope requires us be ready to use evidence for our faith. Our personal testimony of meeting Jesus and walking with Him is an important part of that evidence. The revelation of God in nature is another part of that evidence. The record of the fulfillment of Bible prophecies is another part of that evidence. The eyewitness testimonies of miracles and of people meeting Jesus after His resurrection are also important evidence that is recorded in Scripture.

We don’t have time to go into detail about these evidences today, but for there are good resources on the internet and in books that explain the many evidences for faith. I shared this recently, but I think it is worth repeating. Three excellent books that can help you to consider the evidence for the Christian faith are: *“Evidence that Demands a Verdict,”* by Josh McDowell, *“The Case for Christ,”*



Christ,” by Lee Strobel, and *“Mere Christianity,”* by C.S. Lewis. These and more are either for sale from the book cart or available from the lending library. *“Mere Christianity,”* is also available in Japanese.

Let’s go back to **Acts 28:7**, **“There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably.”** While at Publius’ home, Paul laid hands on his sick father and he was healed, and then the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured of their ailments as well. According to church tradition, the evidence of these healings, along with the teaching and testimony about Jesus brought by Paul and the others, convinced Publius to become a Christian. Publius later became the first bishop of Malta. Many people in Malta also came to faith and Malta later became the first Western Christian nation.



The Chapel of Saint Paul, called San Pawl Milqi which literally means *Saint Paul Welcomed*, is said to stand on the spot where Publius first met and welcomed Saint Paul. This history is unproven, but the chapel does sit within a compound that might have been appropriate for Publius’ home and administrative offices, so the tradition has some credibility.



IV. Conclusion

Just as Paul proclaimed the gospel in his time, the church today boldly proclaims the Good News of Jesus to a lost world. We boldly proclaim forgiveness of sins for all who believe in Jesus and call on His Name. We boldly proclaim that the death of Jesus on the cross has been accepted by God as full payment for the sins of the world. God has poured out His grace at the cross and He offers salvation as a free gift to all who will receive it in faith. We believe in Jesus and His finished work on the cross; we receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life, made sure by the resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

The invitation to salvation is open to all and it is given by God Himself. God does not call us to a blind faith, but to accept the evidence for faith and to trust in Jesus and His finished work on the cross for our salvation. **Isaiah 1:18, “Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.’”**



Let’s pray.

V. Prayer