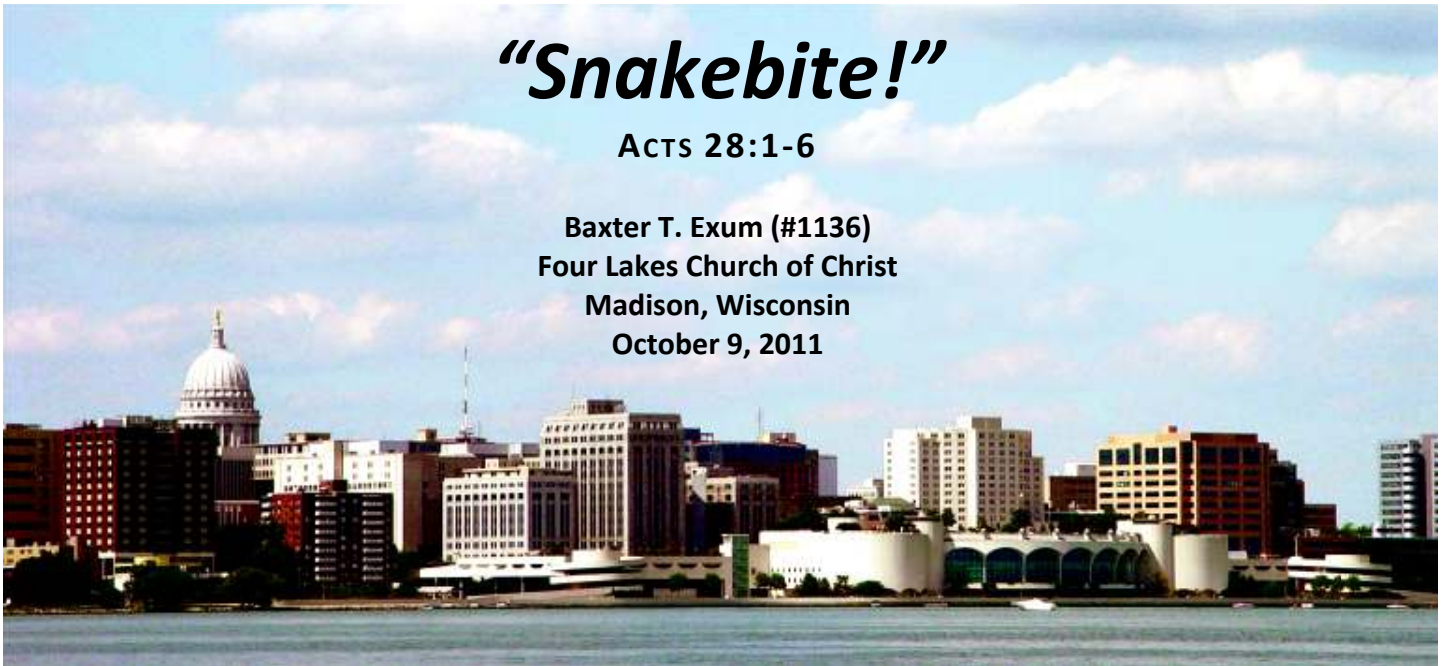


“Snakebite!”

ACTS 28:1-6

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Did you know that various forms of the word **“snake”** are found more than 50 times in the Bible? I did not know that, but then when I started looking into it, it appears that just about every reference is in some way negative. Now, for those who love snakes, I hate to cut on those little critters, but I am sorry: The Bible does not speak very well of snakes. Think, for example, about the first reference to a serpent, way back in the Garden of Eden. Almost from the very beginning of the Bible, Satan himself is described as a **“serpent.”** We move along in the Scriptures, and we come to the book of Numbers, where we find that the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people as a punishment for sin, and we find that many died as a result. And then at the end of the Bible, Satan is once again pictured as a serpent being thrown into the lake of fire.

This morning, though, I would like for us to consider another reference to a snake in the Bible; this time as a poisonous snake jumps out of a bundle of firewood and latches on to the apostle Paul. The passage is found in Acts 28, the very last chapter of the book of Acts. As Christians, we believe that there is no such thing as an insignificant part of the Bible. So, with that in mind, we will take some time this morning to look together at a rather unusual passage and try to learn something that will hopefully change the way we live, and I am not talking about the way we pick up firewood!

The passage at the beginning of Acts 28 is actually a rather small part of a much larger story that starts several chapters earlier as Paul is being harassed by the Jewish authorities. In an effort to avoid an unfair trial in Jerusalem, Paul appeals to Caesar and then gets bounced around a few years until he finally leaves for Rome. On that trip to Rome, the ship gets overwhelmed by a huge storm. They throw stuff overboard, they go for days without food, they go for days without even seeing any stars, and then right as they were about to lose heart, Paul tells the crew that he has received a message from God that they will run aground on an island, the ship will be destroyed, but that no lives will be lost. Of course, Paul is right, and the next morning the front of the ship gets slammed into an island, they get stuck, and the waves batter the rear of the ship until it disintegrates. The passengers and crew all grab onto various pieces of debris, they make it to shore, the soldiers are getting ready to kill the prisoners so that no one escapes; however, the centurion wants to save Paul (after all, Paul is the one who saved the ship), so he orders that the prisoners be spared.

As we are about to find out (and as Paul is about to find out), the island is known as Malta. Some of you have probably seen pictures of Malta. I don't know if all of you remember this, but do you remember the “Malta

Summit” between the first President Bush and President Gorbachev from the Soviet Union? Back in 1989, these two world leaders were looking for some kind of neutral place where they could get together to talk, and they decided on the island of Malta in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. However, when they got there (imagine this) a storm came up, and the seas were so rough that some of the summit had to be rescheduled. They had to move it from the USS Belknap (one of our own guided missile cruisers) to the Russian cruise ship Maxim Gorkiy, a ship that was more stable in the waves. I actually remember some of the news footage. I would have been a senior in high school, but I remember seeing one of our aircraft carriers just bobbing in those huge waves out there in the Mediterranean. The seas were so rough, in fact, that it came to be known as the “Seasick Summit.” It would have been quite an experience, then, to be in a wooden boat and to have the ship literally fall apart in a storm. I don’t know whether we always appreciate how terrifying it must have been to approach this rocky coastline and then to have the ship turned into toothpicks while people were on it.

By the way, in the closing verses of Acts 27, we find that there were a grand total of 276 passengers on the ship. Well, earlier this week I tried to put this in perspective, so I Googled “276 passengers,” just wondering what might pop up. Well, the first reference goes back to September 1987 when a DC-10 was diverted away from San Francisco due to a bomb threat. The second reference goes back to December 1999 as 276 passengers were trapped on a Boeing 747 for more than 6 hours after the flight was canceled due to repairs. And the third reference comes from just last month on September 12 as a Boeing 777 hit some severe turbulence outside of New York City. The article explains that several of the 276 passengers were injured. I don’t know if that helps you put this incident into perspective, but it certainly helped me to understand the seriousness of what Paul and his fellow passengers must have endured as the boat with 276 people on board was violently ripped to pieces by the waves.

This morning, then, let us please look together at what happens next, as the passengers and crew make their way to shore. On the wall, by the way, you are looking at some beautiful artwork by my daughter. About a year ago, we were studying this passage with one of our members, our daughter sat in on that study, and when we were done for the night, she gave me this drawing. Let us look, then, at Acts 28:1-6,

¹ When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta. ² The natives showed us extraordinary kindness; for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all. 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 itself on his hand. ⁴ When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they began saying to one another, “Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.” ⁵ However he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm. ⁶ But they were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.



Again, as we look back over this rather unusual little paragraph, knowing that there must be a reason why God decided to preserve this for us, I hope you will allow me to make several observations as we try to apply this passage to our lives today.

I. **One of the first and most basic things we see here is that PAUL DID HIS PART.**

I mean, here they are in the middle of nowhere. Luke (the author of this account) tells us that the people on the island are “*natives.*” Some translations have Luke referring to them as “*barbarians.*” The word “barbarian” is what we refer to as onomatopoeia [ah-no-ma-to-pee-ah], one of those words that sounds like the sound that it describes, like “buzz” or “hum” or “croak.” Sometimes we might assume that barbarians are club-wielding caveman savages, but to someone living in the Roman Empire of the First Century, a barbarian was anyone who did not speak Greek. Greek was the closest thing to a universal language back then. So, if someone did not speak Greek, their language sounded like “bar-bar-bar-bar-bar,” a “barbarian.” So, Paul and his fellow passengers land on this island with a bunch of people who do not speak their language, their boat has just disintegrated in the Mediterranean Sea, they have gone for weeks without food, they are tired, and cold, and wet, I think we can assume that the storm is still raging, and when they start swimming, and climbing, and clawing their way up on the beach, the survivors discover that the barbarians have started a fire. But what I want us to notice here is what Paul does. As weak, and tired, and hungry, and as cold as he must have been, Luke tells us that Paul went out there and started collecting firewood.

As we step away from this a little bit, I think maybe we start to have some idea of why God might have put this in the Bible. There are many situations where we do not have the luxury of just sitting back and waiting for somebody else to do something! Sometimes a job needs to be done right now. It may not be very pleasant, we might not feel like it, it might not be something that we just love doing, but sometimes something just needs to be done. As most of us know, a fire does not feed itself. Some of you know that we have heated our home with wood for the past couple of years, and I would say it has been an interesting experiment. It has been an interesting challenge. But I can tell you from personal experience: If you don’t put wood on the fire, the fire will go out, and if the fire goes out, it can get very cold in our house. It can get very cold very quickly. It can get cold enough to wake you up at 4:30 or 5 o’clock in the morning! And unless someone gets up to put another log on the fire, it will keep on getting colder and colder. If we could apply that in a spiritual sense, we realize that some things just need to be done. Paul, then, saw a need, jumped in, and filled that need. He did not have the luxury of waiting around to see whether someone else might see the need first, but he jumped in and he did what needed to be done.

Out of all of those 276 people on that ship (if you think about it), Paul was the one who could have demanded some kind of exemption. After all, it was Paul who delivered a message from God in the closing verses of the previous chapter. It was Paul, therefore, who was responsible for saving the lives of those 276 passengers. Of all of the people on board, therefore, Paul could have claimed some kind of special privilege, but he did not. Paul, then, serves as an example of what kind of people we need to be—humble, hard-working, and willing to do whatever needs to be done, no matter how insignificant our contribution might seem at the time. I have read that there are three ways to get something done: 1.) Do it yourself, 2.) Hire someone to do it, or 3.) Forbid your kids to do it. But as it happened in this account, Paul was a man who was willing to do it himself. He was willing to put the needs of others ahead of his own comfort. In a sense, we might say that Paul was never “off-duty” in his Christian life. He never took a break from doing what was right. He never rationalized that he had already been through so much, but he did what needed to be done.

Have we thought about the fact that everything we do matters to God? God saw Paul collecting firewood. God saw it and made sure that we saw it by putting it in the Bible. Paul was a bond-servant of Jesus and he served Jesus by serving others, and this is the first observation that I wanted us to consider here—no act of service is too low for us to perform.

- II. **Not only did Paul do his part, but we notice something else kind of interesting in this passage as we notice that PAUL HAD A RATHER FICKLE AUDIENCE ON THIS OCCASION. In other words, they were very quick to jump to conclusions and just as quick to change those conclusions.**

When that snake latched on to Paul's hand, they immediately recognized it as a poisonous snake. They had seen this happen perhaps many times before, and they knew the end result. So, they sat there waiting for Paul to swell up and die. And as they watched and waited, they started talking among themselves. Notice, as often happens today, they did not talk to Paul. They did not try to sort things out, they showed no sympathy, "Hey, sorry about the poisonous snakebite. Sorry you're about to die and all," not even an attempt to communicate, but rather, they immediately reached a conclusion based on what they thought the evidence suggested. I think we might say that some people are very quick to jump to a conclusion when they see a deadly snake hanging off your hand! So, they went from helping Paul and the other survivors to concluding that Paul must have done something wrong and that he deserved to die. The gods were angry. It's the old idea that if you are suffering, then you must have done something wrong to deserve it, ***"Justice has not allowed this man to live."***

Wouldn't it be accurate to say that Job had some friends like that? Back in the Old Testament book of Job, we find that Job lost all of his flocks and herds, he lost his children, he got incredibly sick, he was miserable. And then his friends showed up, and then it got worse! You might remember how his friends were encouraging him to basically repent of whatever it was he must have done. After all, when so many bad things happen to a man, the man must be guilty of something. And yet when we read the book, we find that the exact opposite is true. Satan was allowed to test Job because he was such a righteous man. The exact opposite was true! We could also think about the man born blind in John 9. The disciples wanted to know who sinned. What kind of terrible sin must have led to this man being born blind? And yet you might remember that the Lord pointed out that no one sinned; but rather, the man was born blind so that the Lord's power could be demonstrated. We remember how the Lord Himself was often accused. He would cast out demons, and the crowds accused Him of being a coworker with Satan. He claimed to be God, and the people accused Him of blasphemy. He ate with sinners, and the people accused Him of being a glutton and a drunkard. Like Job's friends and like the disciples and like some of those crowds who followed Jesus, therefore, the barbarians on Malta were fickle, they were quick to jump in and help, and then they were just as quick to assume the worst. Remember, though, how Jesus responded to His critics. In 1 Peter 2:23, Peter said, ***"...and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously."***

And going back to Acts 28, what I notice is that the natives said ***"No doubt..."*** or ***"Undoubtedly..."*** In other words, in their minds, there was no arguing with this conclusion. There is no doubt that this man must be a murderer, and that the gods are not allowing him to live. It is interesting that we have an epitaph for a shipwrecked sailor from the ancient world, a man who died under very similar circumstances. The man's grave says, "O, he escaped the storm and the raging of the murderous sea. But as he lay stranded in the Libyan sand, not far from the beach and heavy with sleep, at last, naked and destitute, weary as he was from the terrible shipwreck, the viper struck him dead. Why did he struggle against the waves? He did not escape the lot which was destined for him on land." Very interesting! And so perhaps with a similar way of thinking the residents of Malta sat there waiting and watching for Paul to die, knowing that justice was being served.

But then we get to the middle of verse 6! In verse 6, the Bible says that after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to Paul, ***"...they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god."*** That right there is quite a change of mind! One minute they're helping Paul, the next minute they think he deserves to die, and the next minute they start to say that he is a god!

Maybe we start to see the danger of jumping to conclusions. I am reminded of the old story about the town gossip who kept sticking her nose in other people's business. Everybody was scared of the woman because they didn't want to get on her bad side, so they didn't dare challenge anything she said. However, one day she accused one of the local men of being an alcoholic after she saw his pickup truck parked outside the town's only bar one afternoon. Well, this particular man was not an alcoholic. So, when the story got back to him, he just stared at the woman for a moment, and then he just walked away without saying a word. Later that evening, he parked his truck right in front of her house, and he left it there all night long. Apparently, the woman's gossiping ceased! From that point on, she was a little more careful before jumping to conclusions.

Paul, therefore, went from a criminal deserving the death penalty to basically the status of a god in the eyes of these people within a matter of just a few minutes. And now, Paul is unique. Now, Paul stands out from all 276 passengers as "the guy who survived the snakebite." And, if you want to go on and read the next few verses on your own, you will find that Paul used his newly discovered fame for the progress of the gospel. Most likely as the result of surviving the snakebite, Paul is invited into the home of the governor where he heals the governor's father. And from that point on, Paul healed people left and right for the three months that they stayed on the island of Malta. How interesting how people have a way of changing. I have told you before about the man who threatened to kill my dad many years ago. As I remember it, I was maybe 8 or 9 years old, my parents had been studying God's word with this woman, she made the decision to obey the gospel, so they got us out of bed to go to the church building. My dad was standing in the baptistery with this woman when her husband comes barging through the back doors of the church building. I was sitting there in the pews with my mom and sister. We were the only ones there. And this man cries out to his wife, "Don't do it! Don't do it! If you love me you won't do this!" And then he turns to my dad and says, "If you baptize her, I will kill you." At that point, my dad dunked her under the water, and the man stormed out of the church building. As I remember it, within just a few months that man was also buried in Christ for the forgiveness of his sins—in the same baptistery where his wife had been baptized, and by the same man that he had previously threatened to kill. This morning, then, let us not get discouraged when we face opposition, but let us learn from this passage of Scripture that people do, in fact, change over time, sometimes in a very brief amount of time.

III. There is a third and final lesson I would like for us to consider from this short passage, and that is: GOD PROTECTED PAUL THROUGH ALL OF IT.

And just in case someone might think that God had nothing to do with this particular incident, it might help to remember that God had specifically promised protection from this kind of snakebite. In Mark 16, Jesus was preparing to leave His disciples for the very last time, and the Lord said, ***"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."*** The apostles, therefore, had a promise from God that they would not be injured by snakes that they might happen to pick up. Isn't that interesting! Paul was not an apostle at the time that statement was made; however, he is the only apostle who is recorded as having survived the deadly bite of a venomous snake.

You know, from Paul's point of view, he was right there in the middle of it, and I am sure that he must have been at least a little bit concerned, right? I mean, he has a venomous snake hanging off his hand! But when we step back and look at the last half of the book of Acts, we see God's invisible hand directing everything. Sure, Paul was on that island because of a storm, but then again, he was also there to heal. Sure, Paul was bitten by

a poisonous snake, but then again, surviving that experience allowed him to serve in a way that would not have been possible otherwise.

I know we did not read it earlier, but let us just look back briefly at Acts 27. We're about to do a little flashback here. The storm is bad, they are being driven along by the wind, they have already thrown the ship's tackle overboard to save weight, they were losing hope, and at that moment, please notice Acts 27:21-26,

²¹ When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, "Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and loss. ²² Yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, ²⁴ saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you. ²⁵ Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. ²⁶ But we must run aground on a certain island."

A few verses later, Paul encouraged them to eat their last meal. In verses 33-36, they take soundings, and they find that they are rapidly approaching land. How terrifying that must have been. However, God had promised Paul that he would stand before Caesar, and once that promise had been made, there was no storm, there was no snake, there was nothing with the power to keep Paul from making it safely to Rome. So yes, he might have had a detour here and there, the trip might have been interesting, but one way or another, Paul was going to make it safely to Rome. And so as we fast-forward back to our passage for this morning, the snake fastens itself on Paul's hand, and I can just see Paul thinking to himself, "Well, it will be interesting to see how God gets me out of this one!" And he shakes the snake off into the fire.

This did not hit me until late last night, but you know, we have been studying the book of Ephesians every Wednesday evening. Remember: Ephesians was written upon Paul's arrival in the city of Rome at the end of Acts 28. I imagine that Paul wrote the book of Ephesians with a hand that had some fang-marks on it! In fact, when he wrote the book of Galatians, Paul said in Galatians 6:17, ***"From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus."*** In other words, from looking at Paul, you could tell that he had been through a lot—I don't know: missing teeth and scars on his head from being stoned nearly to the point of death, certainly the marks left by the various other beatings he received, and now the scar from the fangs of a poisonous snake.

The lesson for us, then, is this: Do not fear the snake, but trust in God. Of course, I am speaking in figurative terms here! But the idea is: Stuff happens, but God has a plan for us. As Paul had written to the church in Rome several years earlier (in Romans 8:28), ***"...we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."*** God has a plan for our lives, and we can put our trust in what God has in store for us.

Conclusion:

I realize that this morning's lesson has been rather unusual. It is not every day we study the survivor of a shipwreck getting attacked by a poisonous snake, but the Bible is an unusual book. For some reason, God thought it was important that we know about what happened nearly 2000 years ago on an island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, and that is why we have studied it this morning. This passage is important.

But what is even more important is what sent Paul on this mission. Paul was preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news concerning the Lord's death, burial, and resurrection. The resurrection means everything. We respond to what the Lord has done by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be dipped in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you have any questions, please ask. If you have something we need to pray about, write it down and bring it to the front. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, let us know. We can fill up the baptistery downstairs, and you can be born into God's family within the hour. You can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com