

Text: Acts 28.1-10

Today we come to Acts 28, the last chapter. I'm not sure how many messages we will have in the chapter, but before the year is out, we will finish our study.

Today we will look at Paul's visit to Malta. We are given just a few details of the arrival and the subsequent interaction with the natives of Malta.

We aren't given any spiritual details (other than Paul healing the sick), but tradition tells us that the church in Malta goes back to this visit.

The population of Malta today is just over 500,000 people, living on a few small islands totaling 122 square miles, for a population density of 4,270 per sq mi according to Wikipedia.

There were some people living on the island in "pre-history," but the first identifiable group to colonize the islands were the Phoenicians, who used it as a stopping place between their homeland in present Lebanon and Cornwall, England, where they had tin mines.

When Alexander the Great destroyed Tyre in 332 BC, Malta came under the control of Carthage, in North Africa, another Phoenician colony. The people of Malta would have spoken Punic, the language of the Phoenicians.

In the Punic Wars, between Carthage and Rome, Malta fell into Roman hands, going back and forth between Carthage and Rome between about 250 BC until finally Carthage was destroyed in about 146 BC.

When Paul arrived in Malta, the islands were in Roman hands. There were many *natives* there (see v. 2), called *barbarians* by Luke.

Barbarian to the Greeks simply meant a non-Greek speaker. "The βάρβαρος was one who did not speak Greek and whose words therefore sounded (to a Greek) like a meaningless ba-ba-ba."¹

There were also Roman officials on the island, although the "chief man," who we will meet, may have been a "Romanized" native chieftain.

In those days, the population would have been entirely pagan. They would have local deities/religion as well as a mixing in of Roman fatalism and general paganism.

¹ C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 1220.

We will see manifestations of this as the inhabitants observe the apostle Paul and jump to conclusions about him, several times.

One last introductory thing: Today the island nation is 90% Christian (83% Roman Catholic). As I said, Christianity on Malta has its roots in the verses we will look at today.

How does a 100% pagan culture move to an almost 100% Christian culture? (Granted, much of modern Christianity is very weak, but Malta became and remained unmistakably Christian pretty well from this point onwards.)

I've called our message today:

The Difficulty of Gentile Belief

Read Acts 28.1-10

Proposition: The unbelieving mind must overcome long-held *cultural* prejudices to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

I. The civilized conduct of unbelievers

A. Escaping the wreck

1. They all (276 people) safely make it ashore
2. They emerge from the water in the ebbing of a nor'easter
 - a. Normally the fall temperature in Malta is mild (14-20 C, 57-68 F)
 - b. Yet a cold northerly wind would continue to blow
 - c. And they are just out of the water

B. They find a welcoming fire on the beach (or fires, for so many of them)

1. The natives are not wreckers
2. They conduct themselves civilly, Luke says, "extraordinary kindness"
 - a. Not *philadelphia* (warm brotherly love)
 - b. But *philanthropia* (warm human love)
3. The word "natives" isn't negative in English (like "barbarians") but does imply "more primitive"
 - a. In v. 7, we meet "the leading man" of the Island
 - b. The term is a title known to archaeology as in use on Malta

- c. It implies the presence of Roman civilization, which was of course true
- d. As noted, a Roman possession for almost 200 yrs by this point
- e. Some evidence of Roman villas on the island at this time
- f. Hence, the inhabitants are as civilized as anywhere in the Empire

C. Civilization inoculates humanity against conversion

- 1. Civilization produces a moral code for public conduct
 - a. Here, the shipwrecked are rescued
 - b. In our culture, we will rescue those stranded or broken down
 - c. There is a code of decency about how we treat one another
 - There are always exceptions, but in general, people know how to take care of one another.
- 2. Civilization can produce some culture that pleases and blesses all: believers and unbelievers
 - a. Certain aspects of unbelieving culture are unacceptable to believers (varying degrees)
 - 1) Ancient Rome: the Coliseum and the games and the theater
 - 2) Similar violence and licentiousness in modern culture
 - b. Yet there are some things that all can enjoy
- 3. Yet the decent pagan has no sense of need for salvation
 - We read Acts and see many conversions, but the converts were the minority.

II. The pagan barriers to saving faith

A. The incident of the viper: superstition displayed

- 1. On the presence of the viper, some critics dismiss
 - a. No vipers on Malta today!
 - b. Answer:
 - 1) Irrelevant, certain locations have a history of eradicating poisonous snakes (Ireland, for example)

- 2) Population density today much higher, little room for vipers to survive

“It is objected that there is little wood in the island today and no vipers, though Lewin as late as 1853 believes that he saw a viper near St. Paul’s Bay. But the island now has 1,200 people to the square mile and snakes of any kind have a poor chance.”²

- a) Robertson wrote in 1933
- b) As mentioned, density now 4,270 per sq mi according to Wikipedia

2. In the chill, the snake would be stiff, and might resemble a stick, if lying amongst a pile of sticks
 - a. As Paul brings it to the fire, the snake stirs, and strikes
 - b. The natives clearly saw this as a poisonous creature, they expect consequences (4, 6)
 - c. Their first superstitious reaction: the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live (4)
 - d. Paul merely shakes the snake off into the fire (5)
 - e. Their second superstitious reaction: not a criminal, but a god (6)

And when Paul begins healing people, will there not be some who think Paul is divine?

- B. For such people to convert to Christianity, they have centuries of pagan philosophy, values, beliefs to overcome
 1. In our culture, people are steeped in the values and beliefs of nihilistic Darwinism
 - a. Everything happens by chance
 - b. No moral absolutes (other than collective agreement, “decency”)
 - c. Value irrational and contradictory truths (we call it “wokism” today)

For someone to come to Christ, the belief systems will experience a radical overhaul

² Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Ac 28.3.

2. Our culture also indulges its passions in fleshly amusements
 - a. Drugs and alcohol
 - b. Satisfying physical lusts in various ways
 - c. Indulging lusts vicariously

Ancient Rome: many who went to the Coliseum would never kill a man, but thrill to see one killed

Today: again, most will never kill a man, but thrill to see it depicted on the screen

3. To become a Christian means “desensitizing” fleshly tastes
 - a. Starve the old passions
 - b. Learn to delight in the law of the Lord

There is spiritual peace in following the Lord, but the old passions are still there. They must be overcome.

Sometimes they hold an unbeliever back, even though under conviction of the gospel.

III. The subsequent record of transformation

- A. The leading man of the island, Publius took “us” in (7)
 1. Likely the shipwrecked people on board the ship would be parceled out among various homes
 2. The centurion (and his particular charge, Paul with his company) would enjoy the hospitality of the “first man” of the Island
 - a. As mentioned, this title is known to be one used in Malta at this time
 - b. Publius, as he is named, welcomed them
 - 1) May in fact be a native, but a Romanized native
 - 2) Would occupy the role of governor in the Imperial system

3. They are with him for three days when they discover the illness of the governor's father (8)
 - a. The illness involves fever and dysentery (but we don't know more than that)
 - b. Paul prays for the man, and then heals him, laying on hands

Note: likely Paul & co. continue on in the governor's home, the three days has reference to the discovery of the sick man

4. The consequence (9-10)
 - a. The rest of the sick on the island made pilgrimages for healing when they heard
 - b. When they eventually depart (3 months, v. 11), the people "honour us with honours"
 - 1) Likely means gifts of money
 - 2) And "all we needed"

B. But we have no record of preaching here

1. Can you imagine Paul being anywhere for three months *without* preaching?
2. According to tradition, this Publius became first bishop of Malta

"Tradition holds that the church was founded by its patrons Saint Paul the Apostle and Saint Publius, who was its first bishop."³

- a. Tradition also holds that the island had an unbroken time of bishops from this time well into the times of Constantine (4th c.).
 - b. And today, the population is all at least nominally Christian
3. The emphasis of our text is simply on the impression Paul made on the people; we don't know for sure if Publius was a convert

³ "Christianity in Malta," in *Wikipedia*, May 18, 2022,

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Christianity_in_Malta&oldid=1088433534.

Yet we can't help but think that there is something to the tradition ... and that brings us to this point:

Conclusion:

Yes, there are barriers to the gospel in the beliefs, culture, background, values, and civilization of those we deal with every day.

And, yes,

Proposition: The unbelieving mind must overcome long-held *cultural* prejudices to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

But be sure that the unbelieving mind *can* overcome its long-held prejudices by the grace of God.