**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-100. AFTER THE WRECK by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And when they were escaped, then they knew that the island was called Melita. 2. And the barbarous people showed us no little kindness: for they kindled a fire, and received us every one, because of the present rain, and because of the cold. 3. And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. 4. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. 5. And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. 6. Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god. 7. In the same quarters were possessions of the chief man of the island, whose name was Publius: who received us, and lodged us three days courteously. 8. And it came to pass, that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever, and of a bloody flux: to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him. 9. So when this was done, others also, which had diseases in the island, came, and were healed: 10. Who also honoured us with many honours: and when we departed, they laded us with such things as were necessary. 11. And after three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle, whose sign was Castor and Pollux. 12. And landing at Syracuse, we tarried there three days. 13. And from thence we fetched a compass, and came to Rhegium: and after one day the south wind blew, and we came the next day to Puteoli; 14. Where we found brethren, and were desired to tarry with them seven days: and so we went toward Rome. 15. And from thence, when the brethren heard of us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum, and The three taverns: whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage. 16. And when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard: but Paul was suffered to dwell by himself with a soldier that kept him.--."*

*Acts 28:1-16*

They all escaped safe to land, says Luke with emphasis, pointing to the verification of Paul's assurance that there should be no loss of life. That two hundred and seventy-six men on a wreck should all be saved was very improbable, but the angel had promised, and Paul had believed that it should be even so as it had been spoken unto him. Therefore the improbable came to pass, and every man of the ship's company stood safe on the shore. Faith which grasps God's promise laughs at impossibilities and brings them into the region of facts.

Wet, cold, weary, and anxious, the rescued men huddled together on the shore in the early morning, and no doubt they were doubtful what reception they would have from the islanders who had been attracted to the beach. Their first question was, Where are we? so completely had they lost their reckoning. Some of the inhabitants could speak Greek or Latin, and could tell them that they were on Melita, but the most part of the crowd that came round them could only speak in a tongue strange to Luke, and are therefore called by him barbarians, not as being uncivilised, but as not speaking Greek. But they could speak the eloquent language of kindness and pity. They were heathens, but they were men. They had not come down to the wreck for plunder, as might have been feared, but to help the unfortunates who were shivering on the beach in the downpour of rain, and chilled to the bone by exposure.

As always, Paul fills Luke's canvas; the other two hundred and seventy-five were ciphers. Two incidents, in which the Apostle appears as protected by God from danger, and as a fountain of healing for others, are all that is told of the three months stay in Malta. Taken together, these cover the whole ground of the Christian's place in the world; he is an object of divine care, he is a medium of divine blessing. In the former one, we see in Paul's activity in gathering his bundle of brushwood an example of how he took the humblest duties on himself, and was not hindered either by the false sense of dignity which keeps smaller men from doing small things, as Chinese gentlemen pride themselves on long nails as a token that they do no work, or by the helplessness in practical matters which is sometimes natural to, and often affected by, men of genius, from taking his share in common duties.

The shipwreck took place in November probably, and the viper had curled itself up for its winter sleep, and had been lifted with the twigs by Paul's hasty hand. Roused by the warmth, it darted at Paul's hand before it could be withdrawn, and fixed its fangs. The sight of it dangling there excited suspicions in the mind of the natives, who would know that Paul was a prisoner, and so jumped to the conclusion that he was a murderer pursued by the Goddess of Justice. These rude islanders had consciences, which bore witness to a divine law of retribution.

However mistaken may be heathens' conceptions of what constitutes right and wrong, they all know that it is wrong to do wrong, and the dim anticipation of God-inflicted punishment is in their hearts. The swift change of opinion about Paul is like, though it is the reverse of, what the people of Lystra thought of him. They first took him for a god, and then for a criminal, worshipping him to-day and stoning him to-morrow. This teaches us how unworthy the heathen conception of a deity is, and how lightly the name was given. It may teach us too how fickle and easily led popular judgments are, and how they are ever prone to rush from one extreme to another, so that the people's idol of one week is their abhorrence the next, and the applause and execration are equally undeserved. These Maltese critics did what many of us are doing with less excuse--arguing as to men's merits from their calamities or successes. A good man may be stung by a serpent in the act of doing a good thing; that does not prove him to be a monster. He may be unhurt by what seems fatal; that does not prove him to be a god or a saint.

The other incident recorded as occurring in Malta brings out the Christian's relation to others as a source of healing. An interesting incidental proof of Luke's accuracy is found in the fact that inscriptions discovered in Malta show that the official title of the governor was First of the Melitaeans. The word here rendered chief is literally first. Luke's precision is shown in another direction in his diagnosis of the diseases of Publius's father, which are described by technical medical terms. The healing seems to have been unasked. Paul went in, as if from a spontaneous wish to render help. There is no record of any expectation or request from Publius.

Christians are to be like the dew on the grass, which waiteth not for man, but falls unsought. The manner of the healing brings out very clearly its divine source, and Paul's part as being simply that of the channel for God's power. He prays, and then lays his hands on the sick man. There are no words assuring him of healing. God is invoked, and then His power flows through the hands of the suppliant. So with all our work for men in bringing the better cure with which we are entrusted, we are but channels of the blessing, pipes through which the water of life is brought to thirsty lips. Therefore prayer must precede and accompany all Christian efforts to communicate the healing of the Gospel; and the most gifted are but, like Paul, ministers through whom faith and salvation come.

The argument from silence is precarious, but the entire omission of notice of evangelistic work in Melita is noteworthy. Probably the Apostle as a prisoner was not free to preach Christ in any public manner.

Ancient navigation was conducted in a leisurely fashion very strange to us. Three months delay in the island, rendered necessary by wintry storms, would end about the early part of March, when the season for safe sailing began. So the third ship which was used in this voyage set sail. Luke notices its sign as being that of the Twin Brethren, the patrons of sailors, whose images were, no doubt, displayed on the bow, just as to-day boats in that region often have a Madonna nailed on the mast. Strange conjunction--Castor and Pollux on the prow, and Paul on the deck!

Puteoli, on the bay of Naples, was the landing-place, and there, after long confinement with uncongenial companions, the three Christians, Paul, Aristarchus, and Luke, found brethren. We can understand the joy of such a meeting, and can almost hear the narrative of perils which would be poured into sympathetic ears. Observe that, according to what seems the true reading, verse 14 says, We were consoled among them, remaining seven days. The centurion could scarcely delay his march to please the Christians at Puteoli; and the thought that the Apostle, whose spirit had never flagged while danger was near and effort was needed, felt some tendency to collapse, and required cheering when the strain was off, is as natural as it is pathetic.

So the whole company set off on their march to Rome--about a hundred and forty miles. The week's delay in Puteoli would give time for apprising the church in Rome of the Apostle's coming, and two parties came out to meet him, one travelling as far as Appii Forum, about forty Roman miles from the city; the other as far as The Three Taverns, some ten miles nearer it. The simple notice of the meeting is more touching than many words would have been. It brings out again the Apostle's somewhat depressed state, partly due, no doubt, to nervous tension during the long and hazardous voyage, and partly to his consciousness that the decisive moment was very near. But when he grasped the hands and looked into the faces of the Roman brethren, whom he had so long hungered to see, and to whom he had poured out his heart in his letter, he thanked God, and took courage. The most heroic need, and are helped by, the sympathy of the humble. Luther was braced for the Diet of Worms by the knight who clapped him on the back as he passed in and spoke a hearty word of cheer.

There would be some old friends in the delegation of Roman Christians, perhaps some of those who are named in Romans xvi., such as Priscilla and Aquila, and the unnamed matron, Rufus's mother, whom Paul there calls his mother and mine. It would be an hour of love and effusion, and the shadow of appearing before Caesar would not sensibly dim the brightness. Paul saw God's hand in that glad meeting, as we should do in all the sweetness of congenial intercourse. It was not only because the welcomers were his friends that he was glad, but because they were Christ's friends and servants. The Apostle saw in them the evidence that the kingdom was advancing even in the world's capital, and under the shadow of Caesar's throne, and that gladdened him and made him forget personal anxieties. We too should be willing to sink our own interests in the joy of seeing the spread of Christ's kingdom.

Paul turned thankfulness for the past and present into calm hope for the future: He took courage. There was much to discourage and to excuse tremors and forebodings, but he had God and Christ with him, and therefore he could front the uncertain future without flinching, and leave all its possibilities in God's hands. Those who have such a past as every Christian has should put fear far from them, and go forth to meet any future with quiet hearts, and minds kept in perfect peace because they are stayed on God.