

On the Island of Malta

Key Verse:

“He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us again. On Him we have set our hope...”

2 Corinthians 1:10

Extra: How can we give the Gospel to others?

Level 5 lesson 41

Read: Acts 28:1-10 and 1 John 1:1-4

ALL SAFE TO LAND: In fulfilment of Paul’s revelation from God during the terrible storm, (Acts 27:22-24) everyone on board made it safely to land from the stricken ship. However, we can be sure they were all exhausted after their ordeal. Remember: they’d been tossed about in a ferocious storm for two weeks, during which it would have been almost impossible to eat or sleep properly. On top of that, they had endured a frightening trip through the pounding surf, clinging desperately to some piece of wooden wreckage to keep their heads above the dark waters that threatened to engulf them. We can imagine their relief at feeling the sandy bottom beneath their feet and finding themselves all safely ashore!

However, although safely landed, the storm continued, with pouring rain and a biting, cold wind that cut right through the bedraggled group. In His providence, God had brought them ashore at Melitta Island (or Malta, as we know it today) at a place called St Paul’s Bay by the Maltese. Observing the unfolding saga in the early morning light, the islanders immediately came to the aid of the shivering survivors, welcoming them with food and clothing and getting a warm fire going on the beach.

A MIRACULOUS INCIDENT: Paul, as you would expect, made himself useful by gathering wood for the fire. However, as he put some wood on the fire a miraculous incident occurred. A viper (a deadly poisonous snake), trying to escape the fire, bit Paul savagely on the hand. The locals seeing this and knowing that a bite from one of these creatures meant certain death, expected Paul to soon be dead. “This man must be a murderer,” they said to one another, “for though he escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live!” (v4)

Now the philosophy of these people was quite good. They believed that sooner or later, a person would be punished for their crimes. They thought a man might escape for a time, but not altogether, and this is true.

Only those saved from the penalty of their sins (through faith in Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf) will ever escape the judgement of sin. Every transgression and disobedience will receive its just punishment. (See Hebrews 2:2-3)

However, the islanders were wrong about Paul. He didn’t drop dead. Instead, he simply shook the snake off his hand into the fire again and went on with the job as though nothing had happened! For some time afterwards the islanders kept watching him, fully expecting him to suddenly fall down dead. But hours went by and nothing happened. So they reversed their judgement, saying that Paul “must be a god!” So they elevated him from a murderer to a god. Wrong again! Paul was neither, but simply a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Once again, he had experienced God’s miraculous power to save him, just as he had on many other occasions since becoming a Christian.

MUCH BLESSING TO MANY: Around this time, Publius the governor of the island appeared on the scene. He was a wealthy man, who welcomed the shipwrecked people warmly and showed them all great kindness and hospitality. Learning that his father was gravely ill, Paul went to see him, prayed over him, laid his hands on him, and healed him. News of this travelled like wildfire among the heathen islanders, who quickly brought their sick folk to Paul to be healed too. We can be quite sure Paul shared the Gospel with them, explaining how they might accept Christ as Saviour, and so receive spiritual and physical healing.

Undoubtedly, the surprise visit of these people to their island proved a great blessing to the islanders. But above all, to see the hand of Almighty God in all of this is hugely encouraging. God was controlling and guiding His servant Paul and making weather, sailors, soldiers and islanders all serve His Sovereign purposes. The islanders appreciated their blessings and when the time came for the shipwrecked people to leave, they loaded them up with gifts and supplies for their voyage.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. On what island did the shipwrecked men land?
2. What was the islanders’ first opinion of Paul after the snake bit him?
3. What changed their opinion of Paul?
4. Who will escape the penalty of their sins?
5. In what ways can we see God at work in all these events?

My Name is Age

Paul Arrives in Rome

Key Verse:
 “...I am so eager to preach the Gospel also to you who are in Rome.”

Romans 1:15

Extra: Would you agree or disagree with Paul’s reasoning about Jesus?
 Why?

Level 5 Lesson 42

Read Acts 28:11-31 and Philippians 3:12-4:1

Our last study in the Book of Acts ends with Paul’s much anticipated arrival at Rome, the Imperial City. One can only wonder at the emotions running through Paul’s heart as he surveyed this famous city he had longed to visit for so long.

ROME AT LAST: After three months on Malta, the shipwrecked company farewelled their friendly hosts and departed in an Alexandrian ship, bound for Syracuse in Sicily. After a short stay of three days in Syracuse they sailed on to Rhegium, a port in the south of Italy. From there, they sailed north to Puteoli, where their travel by ship ended. From Puteoli they began the overland journey of about 160 kilometres to Rome on foot! Julius, the Roman Centurion, kindly allowed Paul to meet with the local Christians at Puteoli for a short while, before beginning the long march to the capital. On two occasions as he neared Rome, at ‘Apii Forum’ and ‘Three Taverns,’ groups of Christians journeyed out to meet and encourage Paul.

Soon after being settled under house-arrest in Rome, Paul arranged for a meeting with the chief leaders of the Jews, to explain his presence there as a prisoner. He told them that despite having done no wrong against the Jewish people or their ancient customs (a fact that the Roman authorities themselves recognised) the Jews had objected to him being set free and threatened him with violence. For his own protection (not because he had any charge to bring against his own people) he had therefore exercised his right of appeal to Caesar. Paul was willing to forgive and forget all the wrong they had done to him. His actions had only been for the good of Israel, helping them to understand that Jesus of Nazareth really was their Messiah. His ‘reward’ to that point was the chain binding him to a Roman soldier.

PAUL’S FAITHFUL WITNESS: The Jewish leaders listened attentively to Paul’s explanation. In response, they professed ignorance of any conflict between Paul and his fellow-countrymen.

“We have not received any letters from Judaea concerning you, and none of the brothers who has come from there has reported or said anything bad about you,” they claimed. It would seem as though the Jews in Judaea had given up hope of getting their hands on Paul and so had ceased their activities against him. They may have even thought he had disappeared and if left alone his influence would die out. If so, they made a great mistake; some of Paul’s greatest work was yet to be done from his prison in Rome, like writing the epistles of Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians.

The Jews however, were interested to hear Paul’s views on this ‘Jesus of Nazareth sect,’ which people everywhere seemed to be ‘bad-mouthing.’ Paul happily agreed to this, and on the appointed day, large numbers of Jews arrived at Paul’s rented house. “From morning till evening” we read, “Paul explained and declared to them the kingdom of God,” striving to convince them from the Law of Moses and the Old Testament prophets that Jesus truly was their promised Messiah.

THE GOSPEL FOR ALL: Once again we see the same result to Paul’s preaching: some believed and some did not. Aware of the disagreement among his audience, Paul closed his long address with some very solemn words from the prophet Isaiah. These spoke of blindness and deafness falling on the Jewish nation because of their refusal to listen to the truth. At his words, some of the group began to leave, but not before Paul had clearly stated, “God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, (those who are not Jews) and they WILL listen!”

So the gathering ended: the Jews largely continued to reject Jesus as their true Messiah, and Paul continued with his testimony to all who came to see him, either Jew or Gentile, with no-one given priority. It is great to notice as we conclude our studies in the Book of Acts, that for the next two years, Paul continued a marvellous ministry from his house-prison, welcoming visitors and “boldly and without hindrance” preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching about Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What happened at ‘Apii Forum’ and ‘The Three Taverns’?

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2. What did Paul do soon after settling in Rome?

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3a. What were the Jews interested in hearing Paul’s views on?
 3b. What was his response?

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4. What great work did Paul do in prison?

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5. What was the final word Paul gave when the Jews refused to listen to the ‘Truth’?

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With Christ

Key Verse:

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

2 Timothy 4:7

Extra: Why was Paul's life a good example for anyone to follow?

Level 5 Lesson 43

Read 2 Timothy 4 and Philippians 1:19-26

We read very little else about Paul's last days. A few scraps of information in his later writings and other ancient history books, indicate that he was released from prison, only to be re-arrested and finally put to death for his faith in Christ. Let's look briefly at these last months of Paul's earthly life.

HIS ENEMIES: After enjoying that wonderful two-year period of ministry to so many in Rome, Paul was freed. He immediately returned to visit and encourage various groups of Christians and preach the Gospel wherever possible. In AD64, while he was away from Rome, a disastrous fire broke out and destroyed the greater part of the city, causing great suffering and grief to many. Nero, the mentally unstable and evil Roman emperor, falsely accused 'Christians' of being responsible for it, and as a result, a brutal persecution broke out against them. Thousands were thrown to the lions or put to death in other terrifying ways.

Paul was arrested at Ephesus and returned to Rome to stand trial before Nero. He was acquitted but remanded in prison. Paul said Alexander had "done him a great deal of harm." We can only guess as to what this meant, but he was a bitter opponent of Paul and the Gospel and may have influenced this decision. Note that Paul rightly commended him to God for judgement, rather than harbouring resentment and vengeful thoughts in his heart toward him.

HIS FRIENDS: Paul no longer enjoyed the privileges of being under 'house-arrest' as he had earlier, and to be a despised 'Christian' in a Roman prison at this time was not nice! How he must have needed friends and Christian comfort, yet so many of his friends were now dead, or far away. Only Luke seemed to visit him at this time. Even Demas, once Paul's friend, had lost his love for God and forsaken his friend, choosing the temporal pleasures of the sinful Roman lifestyle rather than suffer as a believer in Jesus Christ. Contrast that with the words of Hebrews 11:25 about Moses, who "chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God, rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time."

Friends, beware of the temporary attractions of the world and Satan! How easily they rob us of our love for God, and our Christian friends (often including those who have been most kind and helpful to us).

HIS TRIUMPH: Paul lived knowing that at any moment he could be put to death, and his second letter to Timothy proved to be his last words. Paul could've easily folded his hands and waited mournfully in that dungeon for the end to come. Instead, he continued to write and encourage his friend to keep the faith and fight the good fight! What was the secret of his courage and confidence? Verses 17-18 show it was due entirely to the faithful character of the One in whom he trusted. "The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength," he wrote, and "He will bring me safely to His Heavenly Kingdom!" Paul's faith was in God and His promises. This sustained him throughout his Christian life!

History tells us that Paul was probably beheaded soon afterwards. That ended his earthly life, but not his soul, as the 'real Paul' went straight to Heaven "to be with Christ, which is far better" (Philippians 1:23). What a welcome he would've received from the Lord Jesus Christ whom he had served so well! How glad he would've been that he had "fought the good fight" and "kept the faith."

The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write what he did and God overruled in His own wonderful way to keep the letters from being destroyed. Our Bible is copied and translated from the parchments on which those original messages were written. We owe a tremendous debt to early Christians who copied them by hand, and to others who later translated them and printed them so that we might have the Bible in our own language to read over 2000 years later!

OTHERS SHARE THIS TRIUMPH: Down through the centuries since Paul lived and died, many others have also died for being a follower of Jesus Christ. Even today, Christians in many lands continue to die for their faith in Him. Yet Christ continues to "build His Church" (Matthew 16:18) and today the Gospel is preached in more lands than ever before. Paul knew the reality of His Lord standing by him to strengthen him in trials. May you too know the Lord's presence in trials and be strong for God, for He has promised, "I will never leave you or forsake you." (See Joshua 1:5)

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What did Paul do when he was freed from prison for a time?

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2. Why did Demas forsake Paul?

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3. What was the secret of Paul's courage?

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4. What happens when a Christian dies?

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5. How did God preserve the Bible for our use today?

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The Birth of Christ

Read Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 2:1-20

Key Verse:
“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...”

1 Timothy 1:15

Extra: What is significant about the birth of Christ?

Level 5 Lesson 44

Christmas is a wonderful time of year isn't it! Family 'get-togethers,' Christmas trees with sparkling lights, and of course all those presents! With Christmas here once more, let's spend some time considering again what it is really all about. It's a celebration of the greatest 'gift' of all: the gift of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour!

HOW: The Gospels of Mathew and Luke provide us with the details concerning this most significant of all events. Though to onlookers it appeared quite normal - even tinged with an element of scandal (v19), the Scriptures reveal the true facts. The people of Nazareth presumed Joseph to be the father, whereas in fact, Jesus was totally unique: He had no human father. Joseph was our Lord's father legally, but not physically speaking. The Lord had only one earthly parent - Mary. Jesus was "conceived of the Holy Spirit" (v20) and so was born by Mary who was a virgin (v23). This fulfilled the Scriptures written 700 years before: the prophet Isaiah prophesied, "The virgin will give birth to a son and will call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). His birth had to be very different from ours; He was "God incarnate" (God in human form) and had come into the world from Heaven.

WHY: In verses 20-21, the angel told Joseph, "You are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins." Of course, if Jesus had been born of two earthly parents, being the Saviour would have been impossible, because He would have inherited their sinful nature and needed a Saviour Himself. But in verse 25 we see God kept His promise and Mary bore a son, and Joseph named him JESUS. This sinless child (fully God and fully man) would Himself one day bear sin's awful penalty on Calvary's cross. This made it possible for sinful mankind to be saved from their sin. All who trust Him for salvation and accept His sacrifice on their behalf can now be saved from God's righteous punishment of their sin. Make sure you are His by repenting from your sins and trusting Him as your Saviour!

WHEN: In Luke 2:1-2 we read that Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, ordered a census, when "Quirinius was governor of Syria."

Caesar's order set the whole Roman world in motion. Everyone had to return to the place of their birth, in order to be registered and taxed. Historical research shows Quirinius was governor of Syria in 1A.D. the year of our Lord's birth.

WHERE: Joseph and Mary were in Nazareth up in the north of Palestine, but to comply with Caesar's command, they had to travel 100 kilometres south to Bethlehem, the city of David, because Joseph was a descendent of David (v4). Caesar knew nothing of this but God directed everything so Jesus would be born in Bethlehem just as He had prophesied centuries before (see Micah 5:2).

So Joseph and Mary came to Bethlehem where Jesus was born (Luke 2:6-7). But consider for a moment exactly WHERE in Bethlehem our Saviour was born! Not a modern, hygienic hospital with freshly painted room; not even a cradle for their beloved child. No! Instead the Creator of the Universe, the Son of God, was born in a lowly stable behind an inn (which had no room for Him) and was laid down in an animal's feed manger.

That very night, while some shepherds were guarding their sheep in the fields, a dazzling light suddenly shone around them and an angel announced, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you: He is Christ the Lord!" No wonder a great crowd of angels joined in praise to God singing, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to men, on whom God's favour rests" (v14)

Yes friends, THIS is the 'event of all time!' While the world slept in darkness, Jesus the Saviour was born! The news was given first to humble shepherds who hurried to town and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in a manger" (v16). These humble shepherds bowed and worshipped at His feet. And these humble shepherds spread the wonderful news to all they met!

Will you join with those humble shepherds and thank God for this great event, the birth of Jesus the Saviour? Will you confess your sin and your need to be saved? Will you receive Jesus Christ as your Saviour, Lord, and Master? Will you tell others as the shepherds did? Have you done this? If so, the praise God! If not, we'd love to help you understand these things more fully.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. In which Gospels are details of our Lord's birth given?

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2. Why was our Lord's birth different from every other birth?

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3. What does one Old Testament Prophet have to say about the birth of the Lord Jesus?

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4. What is the meaning of the name "Jesus"?

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5. In what ways can we respond to Jesus as the shepherds did?

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