

God's Provision for His Servants

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Thank you.

Oh, it's empty now. You can... All right. Page 1124, Acts chapter 28.

As you can see, we're nearly at the end. If you were here last week, you know that this passage is a continuation from last week's passage, isn't it? And it begins with the words, Once safely on shore, we found that the island was called Malta.

And of course, last week I gave you a sneak peek. I said, yep, that's where they landed in Malta. And we find that out today. Now, if you look at it just by itself, the statement seems a rather mundane, almost unexciting statement.

But I want you to imagine what it was really like to be Paul and Luke and all the other 276 survivors on that beach in Malta.

[1 : 27] They would be dripping wet, right? As I said last week. Maybe a plank of wood in their hands or whatever. Some other bits of the ship. And once the relief of actually surviving has worn off, I think they would have looked around and had that dreaded question.

Where to from here? Because, apart from that piece of wood, they had nothing with them, did they? And they were still not there yet. So, if you look on the next slide, you'll be able to see that Malta, on the left there, is relatively close to Rome.

But actually, it's not close enough, is it? There were still a couple of sea channels to cross. And then they had to make their way up the coast of Italy. And if you watch Giro d'Italia, you know how far it is to be riding around Italy.

And so, even though they were close, so near, and yet they were not close enough. So close, and yet so far. And this time around as well, the Roman centurion that was meant to be looking after them or guarding them, he too had nothing with him.

So, basically, all 276 of them were just wet with the clothes on their back and pretty much nothing else. And yet, we shall see very soon, or you've already heard when Jackson was reading the passage, that very soon, things do fall into place, such that the journey to Rome almost seems like a walk in the park.

[3 : 03] When you compare it with Acts 27, this final leg of the journey seems rather easy. And in fact, if you look at the difference in the length of the passage, Acts 27 was such a long 44 verses worth of a passage, isn't it?

It was a long, torturous, arduous journey from Caesarea to Malta, with many challenges. And today, in 16 verses, we see that it's almost a breeze.

So, what happened was that the moment of dread on the beach very soon gives way to thankfulness. For God comes again to Paul's rescue. He provides for and protects his servant.

And if you look at the outline today, you'll see that I've given you six examples of this in the passage, dotted throughout. Beginning in verse 2, we see immediately that the islanders showed us unusual kindness.

They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. This welcome, Luke says, was unusual, but it is also unexpected.

[4 : 11] Because the word islander actually means barbarian. Not in a derogatory way, but to indicate that these were actually non-Greek Gentiles. Perhaps not quite connected with the empire.

Not familiar with the language. They could have been suspicious of these foreigners, the Romans and then the Jews. But instead, they responded with kindness. Now, it may seem like helping someone to build a fire is nothing.

Nothing. The leaders last night were building a fire. Maybe it was nothing. But any of you who have watched Survivor, and you know I have, you will know that building a fire is not easy.

Right? Because for those people on the show, when they first get to the game, the first thing they want is, as reward, the flint. Right?

Because without the flint, some of these tribes go for a week or so without any fire. It's cold and miserable. So it's actually hard to start a fire from scratch. And the islanders had to provide the necessary fire starters in order for them to get warm.

[5 : 19] But next, God specifically protects Paul as well, because he's immune to the bite of the viper. Verse 3. Paul gathered a pile of brushwood, and as he was putting it on the fire, a viper driven out of the heat fastened itself on his hand.

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, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live. So their expectation was that Paul would die.

But Paul shook off the snake into the fire and suffered no ill effects. 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.

Now, we'll never know whether this viper was actually poisonous or not. There was no pathology test done at the time. But it's probably a common enough occurrence that that was the expectation by the islanders.

And so the people thought it was a miracle, whether it was true or not. And whether there was real venom in the snake or not, God did protect Paul from the bite, didn't he?

[6 : 30] So that nothing unusual happened. Now, of course, the islanders got it wrong. They thought Paul was a god. In reality, all he was was a man of God, a servant of God, being protected by God.

But moving along, we soon find yet another instance, a third, of God's provision for Paul and his traveling party. For it says in the next line, there was an estate nearby that belonged to Poulos, the chief official of the island.

He welcomed us to his home and showed us generous hospitality for three days. Now, what's described here is not just plain old hospitality, like offering a cup of tea with a biscuit.

All right? This was generous hospitality. How do we know? Well, it went on for three days. Lots of food. And probably for the whole party as well.

That is 276 people. So that's a lot of generosity, isn't it? But again, this is another example of God's provision seeming to come easily.

[7 : 38] If you compare with last chapter, how much difficulty they had on the ship just trying to make headway, all of this just seems to come without effort.

Help was just nearby. Right? They didn't have to look far to find this estate. And who happened to own this estate but the chief official? If not the richest man on the island, then certainly the one that is most connected and with the most authority.

Of course, Paul then used this opportunity to continue his ministry. Verse 7. Paul's father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery, and Paul went in to see him, and after prayer placed his hands on him and healed him.

When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. I'll come back to this a bit later, but what we're seeing here is simply Paul going about doing what he's done throughout his ministry, healing with signs and wonders as he's gone about preaching.

Now, there's no specific mention here of preaching, but I'm pretty sure that if the language was not an issue, Paul would have certainly mentioned the gospel. Right? It's a bit hard to heal in the name of Jesus and not try to explain who Jesus is, even though Luke doesn't record it.

[8 : 53] But as a result of Paul's extensive ministry, we find then that God's provision, God then now gives them provision for the next stage of their journey. Verse 10.

They, that is the islanders, honoured us in many ways, and we were ready to sail. They furnished us with supplies we needed. And the word here, honour, is not just about honouring someone with, you know, thank you or words.

It's honouring with gifts. That's the many ways in which they were honoured. So much so that they had enough to get to Rome. And so, next then, having had enough, God provides yet one more thing, another ship for them.

Verse 11. After three months, we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island. It was an Alexandrian ship with a figurehead of the twin gods, Castor and Pollux. We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days.

From there we set sail and arrived at Regium. The next day, the south wind came up, and on the following day, we reach Puteoli. So, here's another Alexandrian ship. That's a ship that's come from Egypt.

[9 : 58] But this time, Paul mentions that it's got a figurehead of the twin gods, Castor and Pollux. These were the sons of the god Zeus in the Roman religion. And they were understood to be protectors of ships on the seas.

Now, I'm pretty sure Luke is not putting this detail in because he worshipped the Roman gods and he thinks that Castor and Pollux was the key to their good fortune. No, Paul. Luke knew that it was God and not these twins who brought protection for them.

So, we're not sure why Luke intended to put this detail in here. It could have been an inside joke, maybe, for believers, as though it's to say, ha-ha, everyone thought it's Castor and Pollux, but, you know, we know it's God, who is the real protector.

But what has happened now, of course, is if we look at the map, Paul and his companions make it to Italy. So, Syracuse is that city on the island of Sicily and Regium is on the mainland itself.

So, if you think of Italy as a boot, it's the little toe piece right at the tip there. And then from there, you can see that they sail up halfway to the shin of Italy to a city or town called Puteoli.

[11 : 12] So, just think about it. The journey from Caesarea to Malta has taken weeks upon weeks upon weeks. And we hear last week, many days they were struggling against the wind.

And now, by comparison, even though it's a shorter distance, it's no less still quite a way to go. Just take a look at how many days do you think that they make it from Malta to Rome.

If you discount the three days that they stop at Syracuse, it's not many days, is it? Maybe three or four days of travel.

Because it says the next day they were there, the next day, the next day. Things just happen very quickly, isn't it? Because God is enabling them to get to their destination by providing fair sailing and travelling conditions all the way.

And then, when Paul arrives at Puteoli, what did they happen to find there? Verse 14. There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them.

[12 : 17] And so we came to Rome. How amazing is that? Paul's never been to Italy, turns up at this random city, Puteoli. And what does he find?

Oh, some brothers and sisters in Christ. And they asked him to spend a week. More rest and provision. Just like that. And then more than that, just as they were getting closer to Rome, the brothers and sisters there, that is from Rome, had heard that we were coming and they travelled as far as the Forum of Apiis and the three taverns to meet us.

At the sight of these people, Paul thanked God and was encouraged. Now, you need to realise that these Christians, these brothers and sisters, have not really met Paul before.

Because Paul has not preached or ministered in this part of the Roman Empire. These are not Christians that were converted or discipled by Paul, we don't think. And so in a sense, these are actually total strangers to Paul.

Only united with him in Christ. And yet, they must have heard, perhaps, that Paul had been in prison many years in Caesarea, trying to prove his innocence, or maybe even heard of his shipwreck, and while he was spending three months in Malta, Christians might have brought word about that to them.

[13 : 37] So even though they haven't met Paul, they actually had already developed a great affection for him, and a bond with him, so that when they found out that he was on his way to Rome, they took the trouble to travel from Rome to meet him.

Now, the Forum of Apiis is about 40 miles from Rome. So, you know, this is not a day's journey. It's not like, you know, your friend's coming to Box Hill and you just take the bus down to Doncaster to meet them.

No, this is 40 miles, probably two or three days, if you're walking as well, two or three days of journeying. The three taverns, that's about 20 miles from Rome.

So there's a fair way away, and these were probably rest stops along the way that people could stop to meet. But you can see then what that kind of impact it had on Paul when he met them, didn't you?

We're not sure how many brothers and sisters there were, but it almost feels like a welcoming party, lining the route to welcome Paul to Rome, to greet him.

[14 : 45] If you compare that to the mob that was in Jerusalem trying to kill him and chase him out, and then in Caesarea where there was assassination attempts on him, and then the shipwreck being hungry and bitterly cold, this sight would have warmed Paul's heart greatly, more than the fire on the beach in Malta.

It reminds me, in the Old Testament, of Elijah, whom, when he was ministering, he was discouraged, and God told him that there were 7,000 in Israel that had not bowed the knee to bow.

There were people with him, God was telling Elijah. And same with Paul. If you look back in Acts chapter 18, God told him when he went to the city of Corinth that he would be safe there. Why?

Because God had many people in that city. And so Paul, I think, when he saw these people coming out from Rome, realized that there were already God's people in Rome waiting for him, to encourage him.

And so Paul thanked God and was encouraged. This was just the boost that he needed before entering the city of Rome. Now, I don't know whether you've been to Rome before, but, you know, for a grand city like this, this is the capital of the Roman Empire, right?

[16 : 04] Imagine if you entered Rome for the very first time in those days. I imagine that it would be very intimidating. I've got a slide here. It's from Gladiator, so it may or may not be right, but it gives you a sense, doesn't it, of what the city of Rome might be like for someone, one single person walking into this big city.

That would happen in the Colosseum, you know, and the stories you hear about things that happened in the Colosseum. Roman soldiers everywhere, people with power in their chariots, whatever, moving around.

And Paul was coming here not for, you know, this is not a tour that he's coming on, you know, travel for leisure. He was coming to face trial, wasn't he?

And so it could almost feel like Paul was walking into the lion's den. But no, God was encouraging him to say that there were his people with Paul here to guide him into Rome and honour God almost.

And then, of course, when Paul finally gets to Rome, we read in the last verse, when Paul was allowed to live by himself with a soldier to guard him.

[17 : 18] And here, again, I think it's another provision from God. Because Paul could have been in a dungeon, locked up, dark, nothing to eat, you know, smelly, rats.

But instead, what he's provided with is light-touch imprisonment. One soldier only to guard him. He would have visitors come and go freely.

So it's house arrest, yes. He's not allowed to just walk around by himself, but it's not bad, isn't it? Doesn't need to do his own shopping. People bring him, you know, visiting him, bring him his daily groceries.

So I think it's God, again, being kind to provide for him while he was in Rome. We'll keep going next week to get to the finale of Acts, but this little section here finally sees Paul arrive at Rome, isn't it?

And I think, even though it's just a small snippet, it gives us a picture of Paul as a disciple of Jesus Christ. In a sense, there's nothing new here.

[18 : 21] A lot of what's happening here has already been happening to Paul as he conducted himself through the book of Acts. in life and ministry. But I think, as we reflect over the last few chapters, what Luke has been doing is recounting these events in a way that draws similarities to Jesus' own life and ministry.

And in particular, in these last few chapters, we see that Paul's journey to Rome has mirrors to Jesus' own journey to the cross.

Now, not everything is a direct parallel, but let me show you what I mean, because, for example, all the trials that Paul has faced have similarities with Jesus.

He appears before a Roman ruler, a Herodian king, before the Sanhedrin and the high priest. These were all things that Jesus himself faced. He came up against trumped-up charges, just like Jesus.

And just like Jesus, both the Roman rulers, right, so Pilate, in the case of Jesus, and Festus, in the case of Paul, both of them found no basis for a charge against Paul.

[19 : 31] And they even admitted it. And yet, in both cases, neither Paul nor Jesus were released. Just like Jesus, we also have plots to kill Paul.

And in our passage this week, as we witness the people lining up along the road to Rome to greet Paul, what does that remind you of? It reminds you of Jesus himself, isn't it?

on Palm Sunday, where the people were lining the road as he was walking and entering Jerusalem. Now this final detail that some people talk about may be stretching things a little bit, but some have said that the treacherous voyage in the rough seas that Paul just experienced may be symbolic of Paul's own experience of death.

Symbolically, not actually, which then mirrors Jesus' own death. Because in ancient times, the sea is associated with Hades, the place of death. Now, I'm not showing any of these things to you to indicate that Paul is some sort of Messiah, that he was dying to save us from our sins.

No, that's not the case at all. But rather, I'm trying to say that as a disciple of Jesus, Paul is simply following in the footsteps of his Lord and Savior.

[20 : 52] That he too will suffer. He too will be falsely accused. But that as he does, God will protect him. God will provide for him just as he did for Jesus. Only in the case of Jesus, Jesus was not spared death itself, whereas Paul is protected and provided for in his journey.

Last week, we saw how the Lord shepherds us in the verses from Isaiah 40. Well, again, this week, I've chosen another shepherd passage from Psalm 23 because we need to know that the Lord leads his flock to lie down in green pastures and to quiet waters.

And of course, the assurance in verse 6 is that the goodness and love of the Lord will follow us all the days of our lives, just as it was for Paul. So God is indeed our shepherd and we as his sheep, we will be provided for and protected.

But against this idyllic picture, we must remember that we're not just sheep in some pasture roaming around, you know, without a care in the world, without a purpose in life.

That's true, but we're also called to be God's servants and therefore given a mission to do his work. And that's what Paul does exactly, that even when God is providing for him and shepherding him, whether it's in the highs or the lows, Paul lives out his calling as a witness to Jesus.

[22 : 22] Whether it's in front of kings, on the deck of a sinking ship, at the house of Plyblis, or now on the road to Rome. Whatever the weather, whatever the season, we too, like Paul, are called to be Christ's servants.

And so, this picture of Paul's life as a disciple of Christ is also a picture for us, isn't it? As disciples of Jesus. And in fact, this picture demonstrates what Jesus meant when he declared in Acts chapter 1 verse 8 on the next slide, that when you will receive power, the Holy Spirit will come on you and you will be witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

That's what God intends for us as his servants, that once the Holy Spirit comes upon us in power, we will be witnesses, called to be witnesses, from Jerusalem to Judea, the Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

Except in Paul's case, he physically, in one person, covered all those territory. We're called as a church, as a body of Christ, to cover the entire world.

Well, Paul, in one sense, he himself went from Jerusalem right to the ends of the earth in Rome. And although in our passage today there's no explicit mention of the Holy Spirit, we know that Paul has been so empowered because we see signs and wonders that he was able to perform at the house of Publius.

[23 : 52] Now, I'm not saying that every time we're empowered by the Spirit, we need to be able to do signs and wonders. That's not so at all because often we mistake power of the Holy Spirit with somehow having something that's so tangible that we're moving people by faith or making such bold changes in other people's lives.

But actually, if you think about it, that was not the case even for Paul, was it? Because since the time of his captivity, his conversion rate has not been very good, has he?

He has not managed to convert many people to which he's preached. And yet, whether there's success or not, whether there's signs and wonders or not, we all know that as Christ's disciples, we have the power of the Spirit because Jesus declares in Acts 1.8 that the evidence of the Spirit's power is seen in our witness.

It's not seen in the conversions, it's not seen in the signs and wonders, but rather, when the Spirit comes on us in power, we will bear witness to him in word and deed from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Being a witness, therefore, is the sign of the Spirit at work in your life. If conversions happen afterwards, then that's the Spirit's work too.

[25 : 11] But even if it doesn't happen, the Spirit is still working because that is what he does in us to ask us to be faithful to declaring our allegiance to Jesus wherever we are.

I want to end with a little story from a sister of Christ that we have. She's actually a member down at St. John's at 8.30. Her name's Lorraine. And some of you may have heard me share about her in the past.

She's rather frail at the age now and her health is not good. So a few weeks ago she had to go to hospital and she's had to do this a few times and every time she goes to hospital it's a real ordeal.

It's not just day surgery or even a few days recovery. No. It's taken her three or four weeks rehab and all that and thankfully she's finally home.

But every time she does it it's lots of pain. Being away from home a lot of discomfort. And yet she always shares with me that every time she goes into hospital and so this time is not even the first time God gives her an opportunity to witness to Jesus.

[26 : 25] And you know when she does and you look at her you go are you sure that the power of the Spirit is in her given her physical yes because every time she has an opportunity to witness to Christ it is the Spirit's power that's working through her.

Anyway this time around I visited her a few days ago she shared with me that she even got to witness to the hospital chaplain. So normally it's the other way around the chaplain witnesses to the patients but this time she managed to witness to the chaplain.

This chaplain came to see her one day to have a chat and Lorraine sees a cross hanging around her neck and hence we had that starter question at the start and so Lorraine asked what does the cross around your neck remind you of every time you look at it?

Now the chaplain was a bit surprised by the question and then she looked down on the cross held it and then sort of said the humanity of God I guess which is not a wrong answer but the chaplain was intrigued and then asked what about you?

And that's when Lorraine said it represents where my Lord and Saviour died for me to take away my sin so that I can be assured of heaven. So that was her witness one sentence not much but that was pretty much the gospel isn't it?

[27 : 44] And Lorraine got such a buzz out of this that since that time afterwards every time a nurse or doctor came in and they were wearing a cross she asked that question of them as well and one time she had a nurse who had the cross and she asked the nurse what it meant to her and the nurse simply held the cross close to her and said such love and Lorraine was sort of really touched by that thought that was really beautiful and thought I can actually improve my witness because my answer was very factual you know I need to put some love into it as well and show the passion that I have for the Lord Jesus so even then she was trying to improve her witness which was great now of course in one way you know it's sort of like you could say this is God giving Lorraine all these opportunities isn't it great to witness but in another sense if you look at it the other way it's Lorraine simply just using what is in her life and being a witness for that because every time there was a pointer to Jesus in her life and the cross was certainly a pointer she simply took the opportunity didn't she to witness and so you can say

I'm waiting for opportunities for God to give me or the other way of looking at it is to say look the opportunities are already there because the evidence of God and Christianity is all around us we simply need to use it and I guess my point is this that to be Christ's witness we don't need to be a full time missionary like Paul in fact if you look at it in the final chapters of Acts Paul was not a full time missionary was he he was a full time prisoner and yet he continued to witness even as he was a prisoner and so it's the same with us we don't need to be a full time pastor or gospel worker or whatever when we believe in Jesus and we have his spirit then whether we're working or not tied up in chains or free in good health or poor sent abroad or stuck at home we can still be Christ's witnesses wherever we are isn't it that when we have the spirit the evidence of that spirit is that we will share with others what God has done in our lives through his son

Jesus whether we do it well we don't do it well it doesn't matter as long as we are in word and deed telling others and showing them that we are disciples of Jesus that is being a witness isn't it and just telling others how God is providing for us and protecting us as he does because he's our shepherd well that too is witnessing to the Lord Jesus isn't it so let me encourage you wherever you might be whatever your circumstances you might think that now is not the time you know I've got so many things on I need to get on with those things before I can serve the Lord Jesus that's not true you can serve the Lord Jesus wherever you are in whatever situations that you are in because when the power of the spirit has been poured out in our lives that is what we will do let's pray Father thank you for providing all that we need in life and as sheep of your pasture but we also know that while you care for us you have a job for us a role to be your servants to be your witnesses thank you for pouring out your spirit into our lives help us to obey and answer to the prompt of the spirit to faithfully wherever we are whether we're in Melbourne

Victoria, Australia or to the ends of the world help us to be faithful witnesses to Jesus in his name we pray Amen