

INTRODUCTION

Last week we left Paul and two hundred and seventy-five others in the water, clinging to broken pieces of a ship that had just come apart beneath them, trusting a promise that had never actually rested on the vessel surviving. This week, Luke tells us simply, "After we had escaped, we then learned that the island was called Malta."

I want you to notice how small that sentence is. After fourteen days without sun or stars, after a storm violent enough to break a ship apart on a reef, after watching everything they owned go into the sea — they don't even know where they are. They have to be told. Malta wasn't the destination. Nobody on that ship had planned to be there. It wasn't Rome. It wasn't anywhere on the itinerary at all. It was simply where the storm had put them.

I think most of us know what it feels like to wash up somewhere we never planned to be. In my other line of work, we have a name for this: IRROPS, short for irregular operations — basically the airline in full operational meltdown. All the redundancies built into the system to keep planes flying where they're supposed to go, crews positioned where they're supposed to be, layovers accounted for and covered — all of it fails at once. You're standing in the airport in Austin with no way to get to your next flight, because everything is on a ground stop. Crew scheduling can't even answer the phone because they're overwhelmed with calls just like yours. And if they could answer, they still couldn't tell you when — or how — you're actually getting to where you're supposed to be.

That's IRROPS. And I think it's a pretty fair description of what it feels like, spiritually, to wash up somewhere you never chose to be — a diagnosis, a layoff, a loss, a long stretch of waiting none of us put on our own itinerary. And one of the quiet temptations in a season like that is to treat it as a layover — to simply endure it, arms crossed, waiting for real life to resume once we finally reach wherever we were actually trying to go.

Acts 28 will not let Paul do that, and I don't think it will let us do it either. What we're about to watch is a man who has just survived one of the worst experiences of his life, stranded in a place he never chose, immediately begin serving the people right in front of him — not because Malta was the plan, but because faithfulness was never dependent on being in the place we planned to be.

I. EMPOWERED TO SERVE WHERE WE DID NOT CHOOSE TO BE (vv. 1–2, 7–10)

Luke tells us the local people showed the survivors "unusual kindness," building a fire to welcome them because it had started to rain and the air had turned cold. And notice what Paul does the moment he's ashore. He doesn't sit apart from the work, recovering from his ordeal while others take care of him, even though he would have had every reason to. He gathers a bundle of sticks and puts them on the fire himself. It's such a small, unglamorous detail that it would be easy to skip right past it. But I think Luke includes it on purpose. Paul's first act on an island he never planned to visit is simple, practical service — gathering firewood alongside everyone else.

That posture continues throughout his time on Malta. Publius, the leading man of the island, welcomes the survivors and entertains them for three days. When Paul learns that Publius's father is sick with fever and

dysentery, he doesn't wait to be asked. He goes to him, prays, lays hands on him, and heals him. Word spreads, and soon the rest of the island's sick are coming to be healed as well.

None of this was on Paul's itinerary. He wasn't sent to Malta to build a ministry there. And yet he spends three months on that island fully present, fully engaged, serving the people God had actually put in front of him rather than simply waiting out the delay until the real mission could resume.

I lived a version of this myself, in the very same season I've already told you pieces of. I had worked for Mrs. Fields and Great American Cookies for thirty-two years, with no plans whatsoever to leave. I loved that work. It was, in every sense, a sweet career, and I fully expected to stay until retirement. Then came the layoff I never saw coming, and eighteen months of searching that followed — eighteen months with no meaningful offers, no real prospects, in spite of three decades of solid professional experience behind me. So I drove Uber. Not because I wanted to. Not because I enjoyed it. Eighteen months of it, thousands of miles, hundreds of conversations with strangers, simply trying to keep the bills paid while I waited for a door to open somewhere else.

Then, one ordinary ride, a young woman got into my car. She noticed on my driver profile that I spoke German, and she asked, half amused, if I'd speak German with her the whole way from the airport to downtown, where she was headed for a job interview that required the language. I asked her what kind of job in Houston required German. She said she was interviewing to be a German-speaking flight attendant for United. I dropped her off, and as she was getting out, she told me I should apply too — said I'd be great at it. I laughed it off. I told myself I was too young for a midlife crisis and didn't think about it again.

Two weeks later, without ever having searched for anything like it, I opened Indeed for something entirely unrelated, and the very first listing on the page was a German-speaking flight attendant position with United Airlines. I asked my husband, Jay, what he thought. He laughed and said, half joking, "Well, you wouldn't be a very pretty stewardess — but what's the worst they could say to you?" I prayed about it, and the peace came, the same quiet confidence I'd felt before at other turning points in my life. I had absolutely no idea, applying for that job, that the real reason God was opening that door was that a small church in San Bruno, California, was going to need a pastor right about the time my training finished.

Eighteen months of driving strangers to wherever they needed to go never once looked, from the inside, like it was leading anywhere in particular. It looked like survival. It looked like waiting. But it turned out to be exactly the unplanned island God used to position me for a door I never would have found on my own — much the way three unwanted months on Malta turned out to be exactly what positioned Paul for Rome.

I think this matters enormously for a congregation in a season like ours. It would be easy, in a season of genuine uncertainty about the future, to quietly treat the present as a layover — something to get through rather than something to live fully. Acts 28 won't let us do that. Wherever we currently are, whatever season we're actually in right now, is not a delay from ministry. It is ministry. Ordinary, practical, faithful service — gathering the firewood right in front of us — has never depended on first knowing exactly where the road eventually leads.

II. EMPOWERED EVEN WHEN THE SNAKE BITES (vv. 3–6)

Just when it seems Paul has finally found a moment of rest, Luke tells us a viper, driven out by the heat of the fire, fastens itself onto his hand. After surviving a shipwreck, after two weeks without sleep, after everything that had already gone wrong on that voyage — now a snakebite. It's almost cruel timing, the kind of moment that makes you wonder if the universe is simply piling on.

Watch how the islanders interpret it. Seeing the snake hanging from his hand, they say to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." They already had a story ready-made to explain his suffering: he must have done something to deserve it. But when Paul simply shakes the snake off into the fire and suffers no harm, they swing to the opposite extreme entirely and begin saying he is a god.

I find that swing fascinating, because both reactions completely miss what's actually true. Both reactions are really about the islanders' need to explain what they were witnessing, more than they are about Paul himself. When he suffers, they assume it must be judgment. When he doesn't, they assume he must be divine. Neither one is willing to simply say: here is a faithful man, in the hand of a faithful God, and neither his suffering nor his deliverance is really about him at all.

I know exactly what that feels like, because I lived through a version of it during those same eighteen months of unemployment and Uber driving. A lot of people around me, sincerely and often kindly, assumed the reason things had gone the way they had in my life was that my faith must be weak somewhere, or that I had somehow missed God's will along the way. To someone raised in the evangelical church, as I was, that explanation sounds perfectly legitimate. It has the shape of biblical wisdom. It would have been easy to simply accept it as fact.

It reminded me, honestly, of Job's friends — sincere people, offering a tidy explanation for suffering they didn't actually understand. They weren't cruel. They were simply wrong. Sincerely wrong, but wrong all the same.

What I could not see then, but can see clearly now, is that none of it was wasted. Every stop along the way — the layoff, the eighteen months, the Uber rides, even the well-meaning but mistaken explanations offered by people who loved me — was, in hindsight, intentional. And that gives me a strong confidence now about whatever comes next for St. John's, something neither I nor anyone else can yet clearly see. If God was that purposeful in the small, humbling, misunderstood details of one uncertain season in my own life, I have no reason to doubt He is being just as purposeful in this one.

I think churches live inside both of those temptations too. When a congregation goes through a hard season — declining numbers, financial strain, painful conflict — it is tempting for others, and sometimes for the congregation itself, to read that as judgment, as though difficulty must mean something has gone wrong spiritually. And when good things happen — renewal, healing, a season of health returning — it's tempting to swing the other direction and credit human effort, personality, or strategy rather than the faithfulness of God. Acts 28 reminds us that neither extreme is usually true. Paul doesn't correct either crowd. He doesn't argue with them or capitalize on their misunderstanding. He simply keeps doing the next faithful thing, and lets God's character speak for itself over time.

III. EMPOWERED TO LEAVE A PLACE BETTER THAN WE FOUND IT (vv. 7–11, 15)

By the time Paul and the others finally leave Malta three months later, something remarkable has happened. What began as an unplanned, unwanted detour has become a season of real, visible fruit. The sick have been healed across the island. Relationships have been built. Luke tells us the islanders honored them with many gifts, and when it came time to sail, they put on board whatever the travelers would need for the rest of the journey.

Do you see what that means? The very people Paul served during an unplanned layover ended up provisioning him for the next leg of a journey he never stopped believing in. The season that felt like a detour wasn't wasted time. It became the very place where God prepared and supplied what was needed for what came next.

Then, as they finally approach Rome itself, Luke adds one more small but beautiful detail. Believers from Rome, hearing that Paul was on his way, travel out to meet him — some as far as the Forum of Appius, others to the Three Taverns. And Luke tells us, "On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage." After everything — the storm, the shipwreck, the snake, three unplanned months on an island he'd never heard of — the sight of a few faithful people coming out to walk the rest of the road with him was enough to renew his courage for what still lay ahead.

CONCLUSION

I think about the eighteen women who kept a ledger for this congregation in 1915, faithfully doing the next small thing without any way of knowing what would come of it. I think about Gateway of Hope, nine people and two hundred and fifty dollars, faithfully serving in a place and a season that looked nothing like what anyone would have planned. And I think about Malta — three unplanned months that became, in hindsight, exactly the provision Paul needed for the road still ahead.

None of those seasons looked, from the inside, like the destination. All of them turned out to matter enormously anyway.

INVITATION

So let me leave you with this question this morning. Where has God actually placed you right now — not where you planned to be, not where you hope to eventually arrive, but the actual island you've washed up on this season? And what would it look like to gather the firewood in front of you, to serve the people God has actually put in your path, rather than simply waiting for this season to pass before you begin living faithfully again?

Whatever island we currently find ourselves on, as individuals or as a congregation, it is not a delay from God's purposes. It may well be exactly where He intends to provision us for what comes next.

Let us pray...