

PAUL'S SHIPWRECK

Acts 27-28

Things that make big news can go crash in no time. The rock group “Pearl Jam” came out this year with a long awaited new album. It sold great the first week, then tanked. Kristi Noem was seen as a leading candidate for Vice-President; then in a week’s time, she lost all credibility. As Iowa State fans we know that any successes our teams have are so often short lived. The Olympic stars now will be forgotten once football starts.

In the story of Paul’s shipwreck we hear about some amazing things that happened to him, things that we don’t seem to hear among us Christians today.

Paul was on a ship headed from modern day Turkey to Rome, Italy. Even today sailing ships are warned to avoid sailing in winter on the Mediterranean Sea. A strong wind called “Boreus” (from the Greek word for “north”) can come out and make great storms. When you sailed the Mediterranean you followed the prevailing current, which meant to go west as Paul was, you traveled the north end of the sea. The winds apparently came early that season driving the ship south, off course. Then when things got worse, Paul warned them to stay on the ship. Paul was a tentmaker. What did he know about sailing? As they got near a rocky coast, it would make sense to get into boats they could row to get away from being drowned on a ship thrown against rocks. But Paul insisted they stay on the ship, which ran aground. All were able to fight through the surf to get to dry ground. This happened because Paul was told to do this by God.

Then when they got ashore, Paul was bitten by a snake. Traditionally Paul was shipwrecked on Malta, but there are no poisonous snakes on Malta. Perhaps there were back then. But many scholars think that they actually landed on the small island of Melita in the Adriatic Sea which has the horned viper, *Vipera ammodytes*, which is highly poisonous. Not only did it bite Paul, it hung on to him a while giving him a full dose of venom. Yet, nothing happened to Paul. This was amazing to everyone.

Later additions to the Gospel of Mark have Jesus saying after Easter:

And these signs will accompany those who believe: In My name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.

We see the Christians in the book of Acts doing all these special things—Peter and John healing a crippled man in the temple. Paul chasing demons out of the sons of Sceva, Philip healing people in Samaria. Why can’t we do that today? Wouldn’t it be so much easier to share the Gospel if we could do amazing things like that? Think of all the press coverage with our instant and international new media. Think of how it would spread over social media.

One way to deal with that is to say our problem today is that we lack the faith of someone like Paul. If we had that faith we too could be bit by venomous snakes and not be affected. When we did student spring break service projects in West Virginia, we were driven by rustic church buildings that our hosts said were sites of “snake handlers,” people who take those words from the addition to Mark’s Gospel and handle Eastern diamondbacks.

Another way to deal with it in our modern world is to say that those were embellishments of people who didn’t know what really happened or exaggerated it. We heard last month about how the angel of death killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers who were threatening Jerusalem. Many today would say that is an exaggeration because ancient armies were not that big—they didn’t have the logistics to handle that many soldiers.

But either way we are missing what happened in all those situations like when Peter and John healed the lame man in the temple, when Paul drove out the demon of that girl in Philippi, when Stephen in death saw Jesus in heaven. These were signs just like when Jesus did miracles. Though they did help people in need, their importance was to show that what they said was the Word of God. When a pastor preaches on Sunday or when we read something in a devotion, or discuss something in Bible study, then whatever is true about that is supported by Scriptures. But when Jesus and the apostles spoke—and the prophets before them did—they were giving the content to the Scriptures. They didn’t need Scripture to back them up because what they shared was directly from God.

So we do not have to see those same “signs” today because we have the complete Word of God in Scriptures. People before the New Testament had to wait for more to be revealed, as it was through the writers of the Gospels of Jesus and the apostles who wrote the rest of the New Testament. But now that we have it, there is nothing to be added. We have in Scriptures all we need to have a living relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

That may sound a lot less “newsworthy” than handling snakes or driving our demons, or healing the sick as the apostles did. But even the “signs” that Jesus did were not enough to convince people. Of all the “signs” of Jesus, nothing was greater than His resurrection. Yet, His enemies, who clearly knew He had risen, still denied it. The “sign” wasn’t enough. They had not received faith through God’s Word, that way the Holy Spirit works new life in us to believe.

What is “newsworthy” comes and goes. Our news was dominated by the fighting in Gaza, then switched to the concerns about President Biden after the debate. While we hear about people dying in Ukraine and Gaza, nothing is heard about those dying in Yemen or the Congo. We are reminded of the horrible history of slavery in our country, but hear little about how there are more slaves in the world today than before the Civil War. The “signs” might make big news one day, and then they would be forgotten.

God instead works slowly and surely through His Word. So many of Jesus’ parables involve agriculture—the gradual growth of plants. That is how God’s Kingdom grows in this world. Because Jesus came not to break the internet, but to give eternal life. His ministry was a marathon, not a sprint, a long sustained drive, not a long bomb instant touchdown.

We see that in Paul who shook off that viper into the fire and went about what he was doing. What God did for him gave him credibility as he wrote so much of the New Testament, so much that inspires and sustains us as Christians. And Paul especially needed that as the apostle who had been a persecutor of the Church. But what kept Paul going was not those signs, but the Word of God—that word from the Old Testament that he knew from his upbringing and that he had properly focused on by the appearance of Jesus, the Word of God, to him. According to tradition as a Roman citizen Paul had the right to die rather painlessly through beheading rather than crucifixion like Peter. But I can assure you as he bent over for that what was on his mind was not the memory of shaking off a snake or driving out demons but the Scriptures, the Words he had learned as a youth, just as people today face death singing a hymn or repeating a Bible verse they learned as children—the Word of God.

God can miraculously heal us from cancer, strike down our enemies, and spare us from an accident. But He even works continually in our lives leading us through His Word to trust in Him, the Word which is nothing less than Jesus Christ. Then we can be sustained to the end in eternal life with God.

God created the world by His Word. It is by the same Word that He promised a Savior. That Savior, Christ Jesus, is the Word of God. That is all we need. As Isaiah wrote, “The grass withers, the flower fails, but the Word of God remains forever.”