

Acts

Acts 28:1-31 - How the Spirit reaches people

So imagine being an inhabitant on the island of Malta and Paul arrives on your doorstep out of the blue, after being blown thousands of kilometres off course. You've never heard of Paul, or heard his message. Christianity is a total unknown to you, so how does the Holy Spirit, starting completely from scratch, get the gospel message through to you?

Well, look at the Maltese people's response to Paul. In **Acts 28:2** "The islanders showed us **unusual kindness**," which is interesting, because the Greek word used for "islanders" here is *barbaroi*, or as we'd say, "barbarians." How, then, were these primitive, uncivilized barbarians so **extraordinarily** kind, happily venturing out into the cold wind and rain to build a huge fire to warm hundreds of what could be highly dangerous criminals under the guard of a Roman centurion and several soldiers?

Being "unusual" or extraordinary, though, gives us a clue that the Holy Spirit was way ahead of the game, as usual, in "**opening their hearts to respond to Paul's message**," just as he did with Lydia in **Acts 16:14**. The situation was perfect, because all that these Maltese folks had experienced in their lifetimes so far was the total emptiness of satanically driven paganism. It's all they knew. But here was Paul, who'd been given the job of "turning people from the power of Satan to God" in **Acts 26:18** with a message that could lift these folks out of that blinding, useless, unfulfilling nonsense they'd been immersed in to "the company of those who begin real living by believing in Jesus" (same verse, The Message). These were people, therefore, who would find it so much easier to grasp **the enormous contrast** between their lifestyle and what Paul was preaching.

So was all this the Spirit's doing, blowing the ship off course to begin with, so that Paul would land on Malta where the people knew nothing of the gospel, to educate us Christians all through the ages that the first step to becoming a Christian is **the Spirit preparing a person's heart ahead of time** to respond to the gospel when they hear it? If so, it's very encouraging in a world like ours where the gospel message is totally new to so many people too.

Their view of Paul quickly changed, however, because out leapt a viper from the sticks he'd dropped on the fire, and sunk its fangs into his hand, **Acts 28:3**.

To these pagan barbarians it was a sign that “This man must be a murderer, for though he escaped from the sea, Justice (with a capital ‘J’) has not allowed him to live,” **verse 4**. In their minds it confirmed why Paul was a prisoner. So now we learn that these folks were very much **tuned to the supernatural giving signs**, which the Holy Spirit obviously knew as well, opening up a grand opportunity to reach these people with a sign of his own. Again, it’s encouraging to know that the Holy Spirit knows exactly how to get through to people, **according to their own superstitions** or ‘religious’ bent.

But when Paul had simply shaken the poisonous viper off his hand and he hadn’t swollen up like a balloon or dropped down dead, the islanders immediately changed their minds again, and decided this was **another clear sign** that Paul was in fact “a god,” **verses 5-6**. So here was the first step in Paul’s job of turning these people from the power of Satan to God. It was through the use of signs, because this was the most effective way in reaching people who were hooked on signs. Jesus had also promised in Mark 16:17-20 that his first apostles would do signs to open people’s eyes to HIS supernatural world as well, which included poisonous snakes not hurting them. So now we see the Spirit **gearing to the culture in which people lived** - which again is encouraging if we’re thinking there’s no way of getting through to a post (or anti) Christian culture like ours.

Still gearing to these people on Malta, the Spirit then follows up with another sign that Jesus promised his first apostles in Mark 16:18, that they’d “place their hands on sick people, and they would get well.” And that happened too, when the father of “Publius, the chief (of the Roman government) on the island,” **verse 8**, was instantly healed of his fever and dysentery when Paul prayed for him. The result of which was, “the rest of the sick on the island came and they were cured” too, **verse 9**.

Again, this is so encouraging, because the Holy Spirit was geared to **doing good things for these people in terms that would reach through to them**, just like Jesus gained great favour with people during his ministry, as “he (too) went around **doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil**, because God was with him,” **Acts 10:38**.

So this is how the Spirit reaches people; he does good things for them to win them over. It worked with Publius (the Roman governor of Malta) because he “welcomed us into his home and for three days entertained us hospitably,” **Acts 28:7**. And it was the same with the islanders too, because they “honoured us in many ways, and when we were ready to sail they furnished us with the supplies we needed,” **verse 10**.

Such kindness shown to Paul by Julius, Publius, and these so-called Maltese “barbarians,” was a clear sign that the Holy Spirit was softening hearts to be responsive to the gospel and those preaching it. And how encouraging is that, not just to Paul (verse 15) but to us too, knowing that **whenever we encounter kindness today we can rightfully assume it’s the Holy Spirit at work in people’s hearts - and giving them open minds too** - putting them well on the road to being responsive to the gospel when they hear it.

We have further evidence of the Holy Spirit preparing hearts and minds to respond to the gospel when Paul arrives (at last) in Italy, at the huge grain unloading port of Puteoli (verses 11-13), where he’s met, amazingly, by a group of Christians who “invited us to spend a week with them” (verse 14). And if that wasn’t surprising enough, when Paul got to Rome he was met by Christians there too, some of whom had travelled over 60 kms to greet him (verse 15).

Take into account that Paul had never been to Italy and nor had any of the other apostles either, and yet here were Christians already, who’d somehow heard the gospel and responded to it, thanks to the Holy Spirit.

And thanks to the Spirit softening hearts again, “Paul was allowed to live by himself” in a house in Rome, **verse 16**, with just one soldier to guard him, which gave him the perfect headquarters for “calling together the leaders of the Jews,” **verse 17**. It’s amazing these Jews even turned up, though, because none of them had even heard of Paul (verse 21), and to them Christianity was just a “sect” that “people everywhere were talking against,” so to them it was merely a chance to “hear what Paul’s views” were (verse 22).

Paul starts off by explaining to these Jews that he’s in Rome as a prisoner “because of **the hope of Israel**,” **verse 20**, the “hope” being the coming of the Messiah to fulfill all the promises God had made to Israel in the Old Testament. The Jews in Jerusalem, however, had thought he was advocating “against the customs of our ancestors,” but Paul was declared “not guilty of any crime deserving death” by the Roman authorities (verses 17-18). The Jews had so strongly objected to this verdict, though, that Paul “was compelled to appeal to Caesar” in his defence. But never did Paul bring “any charge against my people,” **verse 19**, despite all the horrible things they’d done to him. Again, we see the Holy Spirit at work, wanting to win people over, not condemn them.

The Jewish leadership in Rome then “arranged to meet Paul on a certain day” and “came in even larger numbers to where Paul was staying,” **verse 23**. And from “morning to evening” he explained to them from the Law and the Prophets that the promised kingdom of God had arrived in the person of Jesus.

So, again, here's the Holy Spirit starting from scratch, this time with a group of Jews who had never understood the importance of Jesus. But, again, note how the Spirit works with these people: he's all for winning them over, because he provides them with Paul, the best teacher in the world to explain Jesus clearly to them.

And it worked, because "some were convinced by what Paul said," **verse 24**, even when it was vastly different to what they'd believed in up to that point. It didn't work with everyone, however, because all through Acts we also see people closing their minds to clear facts and explanation, and their hearts turning cold (verses 25-27) - just as predicted in Isaiah 6:9-10.

The goal of the Holy Spirit remains, though, to soften hearts and open minds so that people turn away from the empty satanic nonsense of their culture to the love and healing power of God and his kingdom. That's exactly what Jesus came to do when he was here, and he's been continuing it ever since through his Holy Spirit inspired church too.

What we see in the book of Acts, then, is the Holy Spirit inspired church of Jesus at work, reaching out to Jews and Gentiles alike who are stuck in the mindset of their culture, and have little to no understanding of Scripture or what Jesus came for. And there are clues here in Acts 28 in how to do that effectively, like taking into account people's superstitions and religious bent, understanding the culture in which people live, doing good things for people in ways they appreciate, and being able to explain Scripture well.

Most of the book of Acts is about Paul taking the gospel message to people who'd never heard it. Or as he phrases in **verse 28**, "God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles," but note the last words in that verse - "**and they will listen.**" What the Holy Spirit is doing through the church, then, does have an impact. It really can win people over from the satanic culture they're stuck in to a whole new way of thinking and acting that Jesus lived by and made possible for us to live by too - which we (the church) are living witnesses to.

And people will notice. Think what being an honest person does in a culture like ours that's riddled with lying and hypocrisy. Or being respectful in a culture that's obsessed with gaslighting and virtue signalling. It's the kind of dramatic contrast people need to make the switch to the power of God.

That's why Paul kept on "boldly preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ," **verse 31**. Because on hearing that teaching about Jesus and seeing that kingdom of God life being lived, it really did soften hearts and open minds and win people over from Satan to God.