

Research: Acts 28:3–9

Paul shakes off the viper and heals Publius

3And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand.

“And when Paul — Who had learned to make himself servant of all, and would stoop to any thing by which he might be serviceable, was laying on the fire a bundle of sticks — Which he had gathered; there came a viper — Which had been concealed among the wood; out of the heat, and fastened on his hand — Round which it probably twisted itself, and bit it. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast — Or the fierce animal, as θηριον should rather be translated; the word beast being a very improper term for it; they said — Seeing also his chains; No doubt this man is a murderer — “They concluded he was a murderer, (says Elsner,) rather than a person guilty of any other crime, because they saw the viper hanging on his hand, which therefore they judged to have been the offending member, according to the rule which prevailed among the ancients, that persons were often remarkably punished in that part of the body which had been the immediate instrument of their sin;” whom, though he hath escaped the sea — Hath not been destroyed by the tempest and shipwreck; yet vengeance suffereth not (Greek, ΟΥΚ ΕΙΩΣΕΝ, hath not suffered) to live — They looked upon him as, in effect, a dead man already, after having been bit by that venomous creature. The poison of a viper so inflames the blood, that a person infected with it is usually tormented as with fire, and quickly dies” (Benson Commentary).

4And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live.

“No doubt this man is a murderer.—They knew, we may believe, that St. Paul was a prisoner. It is hardly conceivable, indeed, that he could have come on shore bound by two chains, or even one, to his keeper, but, looking to the jealous care which the soldiers had shown in the custody of the prisoners ([Acts 27:42](#)), it would be natural that they should resume their vigilance over him as soon as they were all safe on shore. And so the natives of Melita, seeing what they did, and ignorant of the prisoner’s crime, and with their rough notions of the divine government of the world, rushed to the conclusion that they were looking on an example of God’s vengeance against murder. It was in vain that such a criminal had escaped the waves; a more terrible death was waiting for him” (Ellicott’s Commentary).

5And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm.

“And he shook off ... - In this was remarkably fulfilled the promise of the Saviour [Mark 16:18](#); "They shall take up serpents," etc.” (Barnes’ Notes).

6Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god.

“When he should have swollen - When they expected that he would have swollen from the bite of the viper. The poison of the viper is rapid, and they expected that he would die soon. The word rendered "swollen" πίμπρασθαι pimprasthai means properly "to burn; to be inflamed," and then "to be swollen from inflammation." This was what they expected here, that the poison would produce a violent inflammation.

“Or fallen down dead suddenly - As is sometimes the case from the bite of the serpent when a vital part is affected.

“They changed their minds - They saw that he was uninjured, and miraculously preserved; and they supposed that none but a god could be thus kept from death” (Barnes’ Notes).

7In the same quarters were possessions of the chief man of the island, whose name was Publius; who received us, and lodged us three days courteously.

“*In the same quarters* — In the neighbourhood of the place where the ship was stranded, and the shipwrecked company had met with such kind treatment; *were possessions of the chief man of the island* —

“The chief in wealth, if not in power also; *who received and lodged us three days* — The first three days of their stay in the island, till they could all be disposed of properly through the island. For such goodness Paul was soon able to make some return” (Benson Commentary).

“*The chief man of the island*] The Greek word is “Protos,” which is known from inscriptions (see Bochart, *Geogr.* ii. 1. 26) to have been the official title of the governor of Melita. The island of Melita belonged to the province of the Sicilian Prætor (Cicero, *Verr.* iv. 18), whose legate Publius probably was. Tradition makes him become bishop of Malta.

“*who received us*] This was only natural in the Roman official, for Paul was under the charge of a Roman officer, and had appealed for hearing to the Roman Emperor.

“*and lodged* [*R. V.* entertained] *us three days*] This was until arrangements could be made for a more permanent dwelling-place. As they must remain in the island through the stormy weather of winter, before they could start again, it would be needful to provide them with settled quarters. They could not be guests for the whole three months.

8And it came to pass, that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux: to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him.

“A bloody flux - Greek: dysentery” (Barnes’ Notes).

“*To whom Paul entered in and prayed* — Thus showing that he could do nothing of himself, but looked to, and depended on, the living and true God alone for the recovery of the sick person; *and laid his hands on him* — Thus, not acting as a physician, to restore him by medicines, but as an apostle, to cure him by miracle; *and healed him* — Made him perfectly well in an instant” (Benson Commentary).

“ the father of Publius lay sick of a fever—“fevers.” The word was often thus used in the plural number, probably to express recurring attacks.

“and of a bloody flux—“of dysentery.” (The medical accuracy of our historian's style has been observed here.)

“to whom Paul entered in, and prayed—thereby precluding the supposition that any charm resided in himself.

“and laid his hands on him, and healed him—Thus, as our Lord rewarded Peter for the use of his boat (Lu 5:3, 4, &c.), so Paul richly repays Publius for his hospitality. Observe the fulfilment here of two things predicted in Mr 16:18—the “taking up serpents,” and “recovering of the sick by laying hands on them.” (Jamieson-Fausset-Brown).

9So when this was done, others also, which had diseases in the island, came, and were healed:

“*the others who had infirmities*. The Greek gives the article, and states the fact that there was something like a rush, continuing for some length of time, of all the sick people in the island to profit by the Apostle’s power of healing” (Ellicott’s Commentary).