

'This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.' Acts 28.4.

And so, after 14 days at sea in a fearful storm, all 276 people are safely landed on dry land at Malta, just as St Paul had told them the angel had said. Naturally they were wet and bedraggled, so they started to build a fire. As they all gathered wood, what looked like a stick but was in fact a viper, fastened itself to Paul. 'Aha,' the rest of them said. 'We all knew he was a wrong un'. He might have escaped the storm but Justice has finally caught up with him.'

They didn't shew much gratitude for the man who had just saved their lives, did they? But then, when Paul survived the snake, they all said he must be a *god*! Talk about going from one extreme to the other. One minute he's a murderer, and the next he's a god! These are unstable people. Modern society is very unstable just like this. We either have hate-figures whom we persecute through the media or we praise people up to the skies. It's all part of the celeb culture. Did you see the photo of Victoria Beckham the other day getting out of her car with a little chappie behind her carrying her hand-bag? Why do we do this to really very ordinary people? We're unstable.

Let's go back to what the other survivors of the storm said when the viper grabbed Paul. They shewed no concern for the man who had just got them through the storm. Had it not been for Paul, all the prisoners would have been killed by the soldiers, 27,42-43... It was Paul who urged them to stay with the ship, 27.30-32...It was Paul who told them to eat, v33f...

Instead, they concluded that Justice had finally caught up with Paul, when the snake struck, 28.4... But what curious thinking they displayed! Where did this idea of his being a *murderer* come from? It wasn't as if they *knew* he was a murderer, and finally justice had caught up with him. They saw the snake attacking him, and surmised that he *must* have been a murderer. Why? because bad things only happen to bad people.

This wild conclusion of theirs reveals a very odd mind-set. The word that sums it up is the word 'cold'. They were very cold-hearted and ungrateful to Paul. They had no compassion towards him. And even this belief in 'Justice' (which the NIV spells with a capital letter) is cold. Their world is run on the lines of cold Justice. You get what you deserve in life, and you cannot escape the god of Justice, Dike. All Greek tragedy is based on the immutable law of justice. Nemesis always follows hubris. You cannot escape the avenging angel. Paul might have escaped the storm, but the snake finally got him. The world is a cold place of actions and consequences.

So naturally the other passengers concluded, 'Well, he *must* have done something bad, because bad things don't happen to good people, do they?' And that, friends, is *the* question.

When I pose the question, 'Do bad things happen only to bad people?', you will answer, 'Of course not!' But here's the strange thing. When tragedy hits you, there will be times when you ask yourself, 'What have I done to deserve this?' It's our frantic attempt to make sense of our personal tragedy, by seeing some sort of cause and effect connection. When we lost

our baby Edgar, we asked ourselves that question many times, but then I had to remind ourselves of Karen Matthews from Dewsbury Moor who with her paedophile partner kidnapped her own daughter, Shannon, for money. Did she have a child because she was good, and we didn't because we were bad? And every day we reminded ourselves that a terrible thing, the worst thing, happened to Jesus Christ, the purest man who ever lived. They murdered him on a Cross. Did he get what *he* deserved?

If we continue on p1126 with the account of the landing on the terra firma of Malta, we see Paul being looked after by Publius, the chief official of the island, 28.7... When Paul saw that Publius' father was very sick, he went in, prayed and healed him by the laying on of hands, v8... Now why should Paul have done *that*? Why should Paul have helped the enemy? Wasn't Publius part of the regime that was holding him as a prisoner? Paul wasn't a doctor. He could easily have said he wasn't able. And why should Paul *then* have gone on to heal *other* people on the island? Couldn't he have said, 'I'll heal you, if you let me go free'? But he didn't. He did these acts of compassion without any thought of something in return.

So let's see the contrast here. The other passengers saw the attack of the viper as Paul getting what he deserved. That's how they saw life: getting what you deserve. But with *Paul*, we see a completely different mind-set. He gave people precisely what they did *not* deserve. He could easily have said to Publius, this official of the enemy, 'Why should I?' But he didn't. He gave them what they did not deserve. And there is a Bible word for that, a wonderful, beautiful word - Grace.

This Grace is of God himself, and is so different from the world's way of getting what you deserve. Grace is about giving something to someone when they *don't* deserve. It's about making the first move to someone. It's about love. It's about unconditional love. It's about giving without calculating what you will get back in return. It's about *for-giving*, giving *before* the other one does.

You might be confused about the Jacob and Esau story. *Why* did God choose Jacob and not Esau? Wasn't Esau the better man? Well, for a start, God is sovereign and free to do whatever he likes. And he is also *gracious* and willing to use unworthy people like Jacob. Paul knew from his own personal experience that at one time he had been a cruel persecutor of Christians, and yet the living Lord Jesus came even to him, and laid his hand on him to call him as the missionary to the Gentiles, bringing him through storms to Rome, the heart of empire.

God does not give us what we deserve. I remember my old prof once saying that if God gave us what we deserved, we would all be in hell. Instead he calls us, like unworthy Jacob. He uses feeble, weak-willed sinners like us to do his work. The disciples Jesus chose were hopeless losers. They did not deserve his presence with them for three years. Peter who denied Jesus three times, did not deserve the second chance the Saviour gave him. We do not deserve that Jesus should have died on that Cross and risen from the dead to save us. John Newton the slave-ship owner did not deserve that Christ should call him and convert him. That was all grace. Only Christianity has this grace. That's why John Newton called it *Amazing* Grace.