

A Desperate Ruler and a Miracle-Working Prisoner

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Publius looked up at the sky uneasily. It was quiet, but seemed to mask some seething anger. Most all the inhabitants of the Malta knew what it was like just before a storm arrived—a subtle drizzle, dark grey clouds, and white caps on the sea. But there was more than just the weather troubling Publius' mind. One would think that he would be in high spirits always—he was the chief official of the island of Malta in the western Mediterranean, he was very wealthy, and he owned a rich Roman estate on the island. But lately, that had held no prominence in his mindset. His father, who also lived on the island, was dangerously ill with fever and dysentery, and no one knew how to cure him.

A big drop of rain smote Publius' cheek. Then another on his nose, and then more and more. It was obviously time to duck for cover. Publius was standing in his courtyard, surrounded by his house, so he retreated back into the covered walkway.

“Publius, sir!” shouted a familiar voice, “Publius, sir!”

He turned to see his little servant girl, Phoebe, running toward him. Her face was knotted in anxiety; normally she would not address her master this informally, but frankly, Publius didn't care. He could guess what the matter was.

“Your father Carpus is fading,” she panted, “he is not conscious.”

Publius ran his hand through his hair. Things were heading from bad to worse—much worse. He sighed.

“I'll come.”

As Publius entered his father's chamber, he could tell the ailing man would not be living much longer. Something had to be done.



The Roman ship lurched to its right again, as more water swept over the deck. The frantic sailors yelled to each other over the earsplitting roar of a hurricane's frightening temperament. At times the frayed and wounded masts almost touched the water, as the ship was tossed and thrown to a terrifying angle. Often the ship was nearly completely engulfed in the colossal waves.

The tempest had taken quite a toll on the 276 men on board. The storm had been raging for two weeks now, with truly no end in sight. Most of the men on the ship had originally sailed from Judea, then a province of the vast Roman Empire. There were several prisoners too, and all were ultimately bound for the city of Rome. They had sailed along the coasts of the northeastern Mediterranean, before passing by Crete. Then, unexpectedly, hurricane-force winds had exploded upon them, and they were mercilessly driven along westward. They were now roughly fifty miles south of Sicily.

As some men took soundings to figure how deep the water was, and some busied themselves with bailing, other sailors prayed desperately for daylight to come, as it was the storm's fourteenth night. The soundings showed 120 feet, then later, ninety feet. As men frantically tried to hold the ship together, the prisoners stayed in the lower parts of the ship.

Then, something unusual happened, around half an hour before dawn. A loud voice shouted tenaciously over the tempest. It was a voice that few had expected to hear at all during the voyage, but it had been one of the few men who said anything encouraging, during the storm especially. It was one of the prisoners from Judea headed for Rome. He had remained calm even in the midst of terrifying circumstances. But now he spoke up, again in a reassuring manner. He was encouraging the men to eat.

“For the past fourteen days, you have been in constant suspense! You haven’t eaten anything! Now I urge you—take some food! You need it to survive!”

Men looked up from whatever they were doing, in wonder. The man’s composure, and something about his tone, amazed everyone.

“For not one of you will lose a single hair from his head!”

What?! Are you kidding?! some thought. *If we survive the next few minutes intact, that would be a marvel!* But others reminded themselves that some days earlier, this man had told them that he had seen a vision, in which an angel of God came to him and told him that none on the ship would be lost.

The prisoner took some bread and looked up to the sky. Men wondered what he was doing. Everyone quickly realized that he was praying. In fact, he was thanking God for the food. His words expressed earnestness and love for his God. Where did this come from? Men looked up at the sky with him. How could anyone pray in these circumstances? Then the man broke the bread in his hands and began to eat. Men stared at him in astonishment, before getting some bread for

themselves. Everyone feverishly devoured their food, as the rain bored holes in the ship.



The livid storm was taking out its rage on the island of Malta as well. As the villagers ran for cover, Publius looked out in amazement at the tempest from in his estate. His father’s ill health hung despondently over his mind, but this storm—he could hardly remember anything ever like this. He had a commanding view of the sea. It was in such frothy mutiny that the sandy beach was nearly all buried under an angry flood. A fishing boat was being propelled up the hill from the beach by the wind. It bounced and rolled like paper. The taste and feel of salt was everywhere.

Publius ducked away from the window. The storm raged on.



“Straight ahead!” screamed the captain over the storm’s roar. The battered ship’s crew had decided to run the vessel aground on an island they had spotted. It appeared to have a sandy beach—perfect.

Suddenly, a piercing scraping noise rose above the storm’s bellow. Most of the men knew what that was. The ship slowed, and then completely halted. The captain cursed; the ship had struck a sandbar. Men threw up their arms in disbelief.

As men frantically tried to figure out what to do, some observed that their ship probably wouldn't last much longer. The stern was taking an incredible beating, thrashed around like it was nothing. It was finally crumbling, and little could be done about it.

The soldiers on board the ship were preparing to kill the prisoners, so they could not swim away and escape. This troubled the centurion on the ship, as he didn't want the prisoner to die who had prayed and been so encouraging to everyone: he ordered the soldiers not to kill the prisoners, but everyone was to jump overboard and swim to safety. Sailors unable to swim were to get to shore on pieces of the ship or on the backs of others.



As Publius was tending his father, the solace (*inside* the house, of course) was abruptly disrupted when a man ran into the room, panting. He was sopping wet, obviously from the storm. He seemed to be in quite a hurry, and was escorted by one of Publius' servants.

"Sir," he said, "I was sent here to inform you that a Roman ship has run aground on a sandbar about a quarter of a mile out. It has been nearly destroyed by the storm. All its crew and some others have swum to shore. They are being tended to by the villagers. You are needed greatly."

Publius shook his head. "I must tend to my father. He is ailing."

“Sir, the villagers are begging for you to come,” the messenger insisted, “they want you to talk to these men from the ship. After all, you are the chief official on this island.”

“No,” persisted Publius, “I must stay with my father.”

The messenger looked disappointed.

“Well, come when you can, I beg. Farewell.”

The messenger walked out of the room, followed by the servant.

Publius looked back at his father, who was resting on a bed, propped up with pillows (the old man was struggling to breathe).

Publius considered that he might be needed down at the shore, where the shipwrecked men were being helped.

He pulled out his cloak from the rack on the wall, and put it on. He did not wish to be noticed, as there would inevitably be a crowd. But he wished to at least know what was happening and where the men had come from. He wished to learn whatever news from the outside world that he could possibly get.

Publius said Goodbye to his father, and furtively slipped out of the estate.

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Down at the beach, the shipwrecked men were hovering around a large fire, trying to stay warm. The villagers of the island were showing amazing benevolence. They had gathered blankets and food for the dazed and disheveled crew. Two weeks straight in a near-hurricane had been exhausting, to say the least!

Incredibly, every man had made it to shore alive. The prisoner's vision had been proven accurate. Mostly everyone was unscathed, save by fatigue. Now they sat around the fire, in a little gully by the sea, which by this time had calmed considerably. The storm had almost passed, but the men were still cold. Everyone was sat or stood, holding his hands up close to the fire. The prisoner who had prayed and encouraged the crewmen was helped to gather firewood and brush to throw in the blaze.

As he dumped in another pile of wood, one of the pieces started to move and wriggle. It suddenly leaped at the prisoner, who had turned his back and was walking away to get more. Everyone watching quickly realized that it wasn't wood, but a viper! It was clasped to the prisoner's hand! The villagers all sucked in their breath, and silence fell over everyone. Folks whispered among themselves.

"This man must be a murderer!" held an old man.

"Yes," hissed an aged woman, "he escaped from the sea, but Justice hasn't allowed him to live."

"A strange fate, I say," added a younger man.

"But there's no way for him to avoid it," replied the woman.

Everyone gasped again, when to their amazement, the man merely shook the snake off, and it fell into the fire. He continued on his way, under the wide eyes of all. He appeared not to notice, but everyone expected or half-expected him to fall over dead, or his whole arm to swell up or his face to turn odd colors, or something of the sort.

Nothing happened.

The minutes ticked by, as the villagers stared at the prisoner in expectation.

“He is a god,” whispered the man in his twenties.

“Yes,” agreed the old woman.

“There’s no other explanation,” put in the old man.

Now everyone pretended to look like they had never noticed the incident. They started to engage in conversation. The prisoner that had shaken off the snake sat down and warmed his hands.

Publius, standing in the shadows some distance away, observed the entire episode, and was quite honestly amused. But he wondered how this man had been able to shake off the viper and come out of it unhurt. After all, things like this didn’t just happen anywhere and everyday.

As people continued to talk, the sailors started to feel their strength returning, but they still wished for a good night’s sleep, something obviously denied them since this ordeal began. The issue came up of who would host them? No one had a house nearly big enough. Maybe they could sleep in separate houses?

Suddenly a voice from the back spoke up.

“It’s Publius,” people whispered.

“My fine crewmen,” he said, “My name is Publius. I am the chief official of the island, and have an estate up the hill where you could all stay for several nights, as more permanent accommodation is prepared elsewhere. I have plenty of room for all.”

The grateful men nodded to themselves, and mutually agreed that this was the best thing to do.



The men were amazed at the home they were staying at. Publius was obviously an upper-class citizen, and his rich estate reflected that. The pillars, the mosaics, the two beautiful courtyards, and even the clothes its residents wore—everything was wealthy. This was the third day the men had been here.

During the past days, Publius had tried to keep quiet the issue of his father's illness, as he didn't want to trouble the crewmen with it.

Publius now sat in the courtyard talking to the ship's prisoners. Suddenly, Phoebe, the servant girl, ran up to him.

"Publius!" she yelled, "Your father is...he's dying, I think."

Publius' face lost much of its color. He stood up.

"What?" exclaimed the extraordinary prisoner who had prayed on the ship, "What's wrong with your father?"

"He has fever and dysentery; he is very weak and we don't know how long he has to live."

The prisoner looked grave. "Where is he? I want to see him."

"There's nothing you can do," said Publius.

"Actually, there may be. Can I not simply go to see him?" said the prisoner.

Publius raised an eyebrow. He had heard all about the things he had done on the ship, encouraging the crew and inspiring hope. Perhaps he could do something. But what?

As Publius led the prisoner to where his father lay, he marveled at the irony of his letting a prisoner attempt to help his father.

They were just entering the room where Publius' father was, when Publius looked back and noticed that the prisoner had quite a following. Apparently, many of the crewmen were concerned about Publius' father, but they had come mostly to see what the prisoner would do. It seemed his prayer on the ship and his general demeanor had piqued their curiosity.

As everyone crammed into the small room, the prisoner stood over the ailing man, with a sober but expectant expression. He seemed a bit irritated that the crowd was there solely to watch him. But he said nothing, and a silence fell over the room.

Suddenly he began to speak. He was praying.

"Lord Jesus..." he paused, his eyes closed, "...I, Paul, your meek servant and apostle, appeal for mercy on this man and his family's behalf. You have said that with You all things are possible, and though it would seem that nothing could cure this poor man, You have the ability to do so, and so much more. You created this man, You created me, You created all here, and are a God of blessing, and You created this man's life. Dear Father, if it is in Your will, I implore You for this man's health. You are our Creator, Judge, Friend, and Healer...Amen."

Publius had not expected Paul to *pray* for his father. Publius wondered: Who exactly was this Jesus that he spoke of? Why did Paul talk about Jesus creating everyone? Why did he call Him Creator, Judge, Friend, Healer? All the gods that Publius knew were Roman and Greek gods, all stern, unforgiving, distant gods. But Paul spoke of a loving God. And why did....

Paul, his eyes reopened, had now placed his hands on the forehead of Publius' father Carpus. Then he took his hands away.

Publius stepped forward, and looked intently at his father on the bed.

Nothing happened.

Minutes passed. Still nothing.

People started to shuffle indignantly. They had hoped for a miracle.

All of a sudden, Carpus mumbled inaudible words. His head turned. His eyelids fluttered. He stared listlessly at the ceiling.

“Father!” exclaimed Publius, “Carpus!”

He bent down and touched his father's face. It was cold and pale, but the man was alive. He looked at Publius and his face lit up, but he seemed too weak to say anything. However, it appeared that the fever and dysentery were gone. Paul's God had healed the man.

The watching sailors were amazed. They stared at Carpus, then at Publius, then at Paul, then back at Carpus. Who was this prisoner's God? How could He heal like this? Astonishment filled the room.

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As men filed out of the room slowly, discussing among themselves what had just happened, the questions began to make their way to Paul.

Paul answered them.

“You are asking me how I was able to heal this man. I assure you, it was God Who healed him! The God I serve made the world and

everything in it. He is the Lord of heaven and earth, and does not live in temples made by human hands. His name is Jesus!”

“And God has sent me out to preach a message of the mercy of Jesus, how He has come to save the world from its sins. But most of His people, the Jews, have rejected Him!”

Some listening to Paul remembered hearing about the famous Jesus, his miracles and ministry and his crucifixion in Jerusalem. His disciples had later reported, though, that He had risen from the grave, before ascending to heaven after forty days.

Paul continued, “I am an apostle of Christ, and part of the faith that is on the rise in the world, but is often persecuted by the Romans. Many people are fiercely opposed to this gospel. I am certainly not unfamiliar to suffering and maltreatment, to say the least!”

He answered many people’s questions about him and his beliefs. Many of the men were acutely stirred, and Paul in fact converted many that day. Others, however, protested, claiming that the Roman gods were greater.

Paul explained, “God is a loving, gracious God, and He wants more than anything to be personally involved in the life of every one of you! The scriptures call Him a jealous God, for He desires every heart. He wishes that none will die without knowing Him. His love abounds to the human soul!”

Paul was abruptly interrupted when a large group of people suddenly began to enter the courtyard. They appeared to be villagers, carrying others on stretchers. It looked as if the word had spread of the miraculous healing of Carpus. Most of the island’s sick and ailing were

being brought to Publius' residence, with expectation that Paul would heal them.

Very many were cured that day. The island's residents showed immense gratitude to Paul in countless ways. Wherever Paul moved about there, he and his God made a great impact. To this day, Paul's accidental visit remains a pivotal part of the island's history. For Malta's inhabitants, love had come knocking on their door.

Nathan Hart lives in Des Moines, Washington in the United States. This story was originally conceived when his great-grandma requested that he write a short story for her. Nathan is actively involved in his youth group at his church, and writes for his school newspaper. This story is taken from the Bible, Acts 27-28.