

## Of shipwrecks and servanthood

**W**HAT CAN A SHIPWRECK teach us about servanthood? Let's consider the apostle Paul's experience.

Sailing to Rome to stand trial before Caesar, Paul, along with his shipmates, found himself in a violent storm at sea. Acts 27 provides the riveting details. For two long weeks, the storm battered the helpless vessel. For two long weeks, the ship's crew and passengers anguished in suspense and fear for their lives. When at last they neared shore, the ship ran aground on a sandbar in the island's bay. The relentless surf pounded the disabled ship, breaking it into pieces. Those who could swim jumped overboard and made for the beach. The rest floated to shore on pieces of the wreckage.

Acts 28:1-6 tells what happened next.

Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead, but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god.

### A Servant's Heart

Couched in the danger and excitement of this gripping story of nautical disaster lies an equally gripping insight

into the heart of the apostle. Paul has just fought his way to shore following a harrowing ordeal at sea. The emotional drain of this calamity must have been overwhelming. Once ashore, he met with inclement weather. The only bright spot in this dismal scene was the hospitality of the islanders, who kindly built a fire to warm the exhausted survivors.

Sore, fatigued, and emotionally spent, it seems natural that Paul would sit back and allow himself to be served by the kind islanders. Instead, we find

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him gathering brushwood for a fire he neither built nor was responsible for tending. Why would he do this? Because he had a servant's heart. He didn't have to think about it. Serving was second nature to Paul, an immediate response to a perceived need.

No wonder. Paul was a disciple of Jesus Christ, the greatest servant the world has ever known. The one who, for our sakes, "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:7). Paul was a servant because his Lord was a servant.

### A Servant's Motivation

But serving alone is not our goal. We don't serve to serve. We serve to honor God. In his popular book *Celebration of Discipline* (HarperCollins, 2002), Richard Foster makes the following distinctions between self-centered service and God-centered service.

Self-centered service focuses on the obvious. God-centered service finds it almost impossible to distinguish the small service from the large service.

Self-centered service requires

external rewards. It seeks applause, recognition, and pats on the back. God-centered service is content with hiddenness. It doesn't fear attention, but neither does it seek it.

Self-centered service is concerned with results. It waits to see if the person served will reciprocate, and is often disappointed when that doesn't happen. God-centered service is free of the need to calculate or expect results. It serves regardless of the response.

Self-centered service picks and chooses whom to serve. At times the powerful, the popular, or the pretty are served because that will insure a certain advantage. At other times, the weak, the overlooked, or the disadvantaged are served because that will ensure an image of humility. God-centered service is indiscriminate in its ministry. It is motivated by the desire to be "the servant of all."

Self-centered service is affected by moods and whims. It serves only when the feeling to serve is strong. God-centered service ministers simply and faithfully because there is a need.

Self-centered service is temporary. It lasts only as long as the service it performs. God-centered service is a lifestyle. It acts from ingrained patterns of living. It is the natural result of a life yielded to the glory of God.

How can you become a God-centered servant? Look to Jesus. Study his life and pattern your life after his. Trust him who said, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28). ■



Shawn McMullen, editor