



On your marks

Sometimes in life we end up in places we never intended. Paul wanted to get to Rome but, instead, a natural disaster, bad luck and other people's poor decisions meant he had to spend three months on Malta. However, it's not what happens to us that is important, but what we do with what life throws at us. In Paul's case, his time in Malta became an opportunity to bring the good news of Jesus to the islanders in word and deed. What an encouragement to us when we find ourselves where we definitely didn't intend to be.

Get set

You will need:

- a rubber ring or water wings (as used in a swimming pool)
- speech or thought bubble post-its
- a copy of a painting from the Internet (see below)
- a dozen small stones.

You can find this story in Acts 28:1-11.

Go!

Background to the story

The story of Paul's mission on Malta comes after one of the most dramatic and vividly written stories in the whole of the Bible. The author, Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, was with Paul on the boat that was taking him as a prisoner to Rome so he could appeal to the emperor as a Roman citizen. Luke's account of the journey and the shipwreck is widely acknowledged as one of the best contemporary records of travel by sea in the first century.

Before the crash landing on Malta (in what is now known as St Paul's Bay), they had been riding out the storm for 14 days, had all but lost hope of survival, faced mutiny from the crew, seen their valuable cargo thrown overboard and finally had to swim for their lives when the boat began to break up. In the midst of all this, Paul prayed and heard from God. He told them that everyone would survive - only if they stayed together. Then comes Luke's account of what seems to have been an early inclusive communion service on board ship as bread was shared among all 276 on board. During this, Paul must surely have told them about the love of God shown us in the life and death of Jesus and, following their miraculous survival, those words and actions must have been something that none of them would have forgotten.

Opening up the story

In advance of the session, prepare your group space by creating a huge mess, as if a bomb has hit

the area. Include upturned furniture, objects scattered on the floor, cushions and carpets thrown around, books and papers tipped up, and, amongst it all, include some rubber rings, armbands or floats.

Introduce the disaster zone.

- What's happened?
- Why has this happened?
- What do you feel about everything being like this?

For added effect, you might even invite a few volunteers to lie on the ground groaning, as 'bodies' amid the chaos.

It must have looked a bit like this on the beach on Malta after the shipwreck: bits of wreckage, personal property, splintered wood and people everywhere. This is not what the ship's crew had signed up for on their Mediterranean cruise. It was also not what Paul hoped for on his journey; nor what Captain Julius had expected to happen – although Paul had warned him!. So what's the next step? Despair or hope? Resignation or trust in God?

Telling the story

This is an unusual way to arrive on the beautiful island of Malta. But just as Paul had said, God hadn't given up on them – see Acts 27:22.

Play-act the story as you tell it, inviting reactions from the group or congregation.

- The soaking wet and confused survivors receive a friendly reception. How might the locals have helped them?
- They built a fire to warm themselves. Act out building a fire in the middle of your presentation area.
- They went to salvage what they could from the wreckage. 'Pick up' various items – what have you found? (This could be the moment to put straight the mess you created for the first stage of this outline.)
- They prepare some food for themselves. Imagine cooking over an open fire.
- But then a snake comes out of some of the kindling used to start the fire and it stings Paul. It was a poisonous snake that the locals knew about. Mime people's reactions to this.
- But Paul didn't swell up and die. He was unharmed and the people were amazed. Again, imagine the people's reaction to what they're seeing.
- Crowds begin to gather to listen to Paul. He must either be a god or come from God, and maybe he would bring good luck to the island. Paul takes the opportunity to tell them about Jesus. He goes on to pray for people who are sick, just as Jesus had done in his ministry.
- The Roman governor gets to hear all about this. His own dad is ill and he asks for Paul's help. Paul uses this opportunity not just to heal the governor's father but also to tell him about Jesus.
- The islanders get to hear the gospel, as well as Paul's fellow prisoners, sailors, guards and the



Captain Julius, who have all survived the shipwreck,

- God turns a disaster into a day of opportunity.

Talking about the story

This story could be told from many different perspectives. Invite various volunteers to become: Captain Julius; a local farmer on the island; the governor's wife; a member of the shipwrecked crew; a fellow prisoner; a local snake expert!

- What might each of these say about what happened? What did they see? What did they do?
- What new insights into the story do these witnesses bring?
- How might Paul have talked about all the disasters that happened to him? Take a look at Romans 8:28 and 2 Corinthians 4:8-12

Playing with the story

Find a picture of Paul on Malta on the Internet - [see for example this image](#) - and print off a copy. Now using post-it thought and speech bubbles, share the group's ideas of what each of the people may be thinking and saying, and stick them on the picture. Imagine where you would be in this picture and what your reaction would be to what happens.

Reflecting on the story

The Chinese character for 'danger' can also mean 'opportunity'. God can turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones, if we trust in him.

Scatter some small stones on the floor and let them represent the particular problems, setbacks or disasters that may have happened to you, your family, your friends or at your church. Ask for God's help through a simple prayer and then as an act of faith rearrange the stones into a shape that speaks of hope - for example, the letter 'H', or a path, or a flower. Give everyone who wants to an opportunity to reshape the stones into a different positive image. Turn all this into a prayer for everyone facing unexpected times this week.