

CHAPTER 10

ARREST, TRIAL, VOYAGE TO ROME, FIRST ROMAN IMPRISONMENT

As far as we know, this fifth arrival in Jerusalem as a Christian was Paul's last (Acts 21:17). It marked a transition in his life and ministry. His three missionary journeys recorded in Acts were now over, and the rest of the book tells of his various trials and imprisonments, taking place over a period of about four years.

Yet, in spite of Paul's restricted circumstances, he was able to witness effectively for Christ. Paul could give his testimony to the Jews, to the rulers, and, through his friends and his epistles, to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). Even though Paul was in prison, the Lord was able to set before him "an open door" (Col 4:3). Throughout all these difficulties we can trace the sovereign working of God, protecting his precious messenger and spreading his eternal gospel throughout the empire.

Paul and the Jerusalem church

In the summer of A.D. 54, near the time of Pentecost, Paul arrived in Jerusalem with the delegates from the Gentile churches and with the offering he had collected. Paul's companions, listed in Acts 20:4, are as follows:

From Galatia:	Gaius (from Derbe) Timothy (from Lystra)
From Asia:	Tychicus (Western text: from Ephesus) Trophimus (21:29: from Ephesus)
From Macedonia:	Sopater son of Pyrrhus (from Berea) Aristarchus (from Thessalonica) Secundus (from Thessalonica) Luke (20:5, "us"; perhaps from Philippi, probably from Antioch-Syria)

No delegates from the churches in Achaia are named as accompanying Paul back to Jerusalem.

Luke says that when Paul arrived “the brothers received us warmly” (Acts 21:17). He does not mention that Paul delivered the offering to them, although he records Paul as speaking about it later (to Felix, Acts 24:17, “I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings”). We may assume that the leaders of the Jerusalem church gratefully received his offering, and recognized their kinship to the Gentile churches (Acts 21:19-20a).

The fact that Luke does not particularly mention that the elders officially received Paul’s offering is viewed as extremely significant by some critics. They assume that this omission proves that there was hostility between Paul and the Jerusalem church (for example, Paul J. Achtemeier, “An Elusive Unity: Paul, Acts, and the Early Church,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 [1986] 1-26, esp. p. 25). It is claimed that Paul was concerned that they might not accept his offering (cf. Rom. 15:31). However, this argument from silence is not convincing, even as there is a similar silence regarding the earlier famine offering (Acts 11:29-30; 12:25).

James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church, related to Paul the attacks being made against him in the Jewish and Jewish-Christian circles. Paul was being accused of convincing Jewish Christians of the dispersion to forsake the laws of Moses and the customs of the Jews. This accusation was false, not only according to the book of Acts (cf. 16:3; 18:18), but also according to his own epistles (e.g., 1 Cor 7:17-20; 9:20). Like Stephen before him, Paul realized that the Jewish temple service was no longer required to worship God, but he never opposed it as sinful or harmful for Jewish Christians (Acts 6:13-14; 7:48-49; 17:24; cf. Jesus in John 4:21-24). James recognized the freedom permitted under the Jerusalem Council, but thought it expedient at that time that Paul should perform a public act which would show his respect for the Mosaic laws, in this case, buying the required sacrifices and participating in the temple with four other Jews in their rites of purification after taking vows (apparently Nazirite vows, Num 6:13-20; perhaps they had a seven-day period at the conclusion of their vows because contracting uncleanness, Num 6:9-10; or perhaps Paul had to wait seven days before completing his own cleansing, Num 19:11-13; Acts 21:26-27). Earlier, on the second missionary journey, Paul had done this himself (Acts 18:18). Paul agreed, and on the next day went with them to the temple to begin the seven-day process (Acts 21:20-26).

Seized in the temple by the Jews

The chronology of Paul’s activities in Jerusalem is carefully given in Acts; it covers 12 days (Acts 24:11). Bruce gives it as follows (*NIC*, rev. ed., p. 443, n. 22):

- Day 1, Paul arrives in Jerusalem and greets elders (21:17)
- Day 2, Paul and his companions received by James and the elders and given advice (21:18)
- Day 3, Paul initiates the purification ceremony (21:26)
- Days 3-9, the seven days of purification (21:27)

- Day 9, Paul attacked in the temple and rescued by Roman soldiers (21:27 – 22:29)
- Day 10, Paul brought before the Sanhedrin (22:30 – 23:10)
- Day 11, plot against Paul; Paul sent away from Jerusalem (23:12-30)
- Day 12, Paul arrives in Caesarea (23:31-33)

On the last day of the purification ceremony in the temple, some Jews who had seen Paul in the city with his Gentile traveling companion Trophimus, assumed that Paul's fellow worshipers in the temple were the same Gentiles. They immediately attacked Paul and began a riot; quickly they took Paul out and closed the temple gates (Acts 21:27-30).

The strictness of the rule against Gentiles in the temple is proved by notices, which were carved into the low inner wall in the temple court:

“Only two pieces of stone have been found which are known to have belonged to it [Herod's temple]. One was discovered in 1871 in a cemetery, and a portion of another came to light in 1935 near St. Stephen's Gate. They once were set in the gates leading to the Temple's inner court, and they bear a notice in Greek which reads: ‘No alien may enter within the barrier and wall around the Temple. Whoever is caught (violating this) is alone responsible for the death (-penalty) which follows.’” (G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, rev. ed., p. 227; photo of first inscription on p. 228; also in *ZPEB* 5:647; see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 446-51)

Cf. this stringent restriction with Eph 2:14, the “middle wall” is broken down.

Later Paul insisted that he had done nothing improper or even controversial, either in the city or in the temple (Acts 24:18). This would have been case, since he was on his “best behavior” to assure the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem that the attacks against him were false.

Taken into custody by the Romans

The fortress Antonia was built directly next to the northwest corner of the temple compound; it contained a cohort of Roman soldiers under the command of a military tribune, Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26).

A cohort was one of ten divisions of a Roman legion, consisting in NT times of about 600 soldiers, under the command of a military tribune, who was of the plebeian class (cf. Acts 22:28). Each 100 soldiers comprised a century, under the command of a centurion.

For a discussion and reconstruction of the Antonia fortress, see P. Benoit, “The Archaeological Reconstruction of the Antonia Fortress,” *Jerusalem Revealed: Archaeology in the Holy City 1968-1974*, pp. 87-89. For a picture showing Holyland Hotel model, see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, p. 447. Jesus may have stood in the Antonia when tried before Pilate (John 19:13, “the Stone Pavement”).

As the riot developed and the crowd was beating Paul, trying to kill him, Lysius took his soldiers to the scene and rescued Paul, taking him into custody (Acts 21:31-33). Lysius had Paul bound with two chains. Because of the uproar he could not hear the Jews’ nor Paul’s explanation; so Lysius led him up the stairs into the fortress, with the angry mob following.

This event was prophesied by Agabus (Acts 21:10-11). In an effort to show that NT prophecy could contain errors, Wayne Grudem has written that Agabus made several errors in his prophecy, which would have disqualified him from being a prophet in OT times. For a defense of the accuracy of Agabus’ prophecy, see John A. Battle, “Agabus and New Testament Prophecy,” *Journal of Modern Ministry* 4:2 (Spring 2007):137-146.

Paul’s speech from the castle stairs

Acts 21:37 – 22:21 tells how Paul gave his testimony to the Jewish mob. The tribune was surprised Paul could speak to him in Greek, as he thought Paul was an Egyptian rebel who had recently come back to Jerusalem to stir up more revolt.

This Egyptian is mentioned by Josephus (*Antiquities* 20:169-72 = 20:8:6; *Wars of the Jews* 2:261-63 = 2:13:5). During the reign of Felix (A.D. 52-56) he led a group of Jews out to the Mount of Olives; they were killed or captured, but the Egyptian escaped. In the *Wars of the Jews* Josephus lists this revolt along with others under the reign of Nero (A.D. 54-68), but does not explicitly state that it took place under his reign.

Paul assured Lysius he was a respectable Jew of “Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city.” Paul then asked permission to speak to the crowd. After Lysius granted permission, Paul spoke to them from the fortress stairs. He spoke in Aramaic. When they heard him speaking in their own language, the Jews quieted down and listened.

Paul’s speech is the second account of his conversion in the book of Acts. It is adapted to the circumstances. Paul emphasized his Jewish background, his training under Gamaliel, his zeal for the law, his persecuting of “the Way,” his conversion on the Damascus road (more detail is given here than in Acts 9), his baptism by Ananias, “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there,” his worshiping and vision in the temple in Jerusalem (not mentioned in Acts 9), and his sense of guilt for persecuting Stephen and the other believers.

But when Paul then mentioned his commission: “Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles,” the crowd became incensed again. He had mentioned the trigger word “Gentile.” The

uproar resumed. They demanded his death and behaved in a crazed fashion (Acts 22:22-23). If the Romans had not had custody of Paul, he likely would have met the same fate as Stephen, whom he had just mentioned.

Paul the Roman citizen

Acts 22:24-29

Since the tribune probably did not understand Paul's speech in Aramaic, he assumed by the reaction of the crowd that Paul was indeed an instigator of riot. He ordered Paul brought into the fortress and questioned by flogging. When the soldiers stretched and tied him, Paul objected that he was a Roman citizen, and could not be flogged, especially before proven to be guilty. The punishment was the dreadful scourge (Greek *mastix*, Latin *flagellum*), which had been used on Jesus. It consisted of a wooden handle, with leather thongs, into which were embedded rough pieces of metal or bone; it literally tore the flesh from the bones. Roman citizens were exempt from this punishment. Before Paul had been beaten with the thirty-nine stripes of the lash by Jews and with rods by the Romans, but never the scourge. This punishment would often kill or permanently cripple the victim. At this point he drew the line, and invoked the privileges of citizenship before the beating took place. Earlier, in Philippi, Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned before they declared their citizenship (Acts 16:22-24, 37-39).

Being warned by the officiating centurion, Lysius stopped the proceeding. Lysius said he paid much for his citizenship (indicating his status as a plebeian); Paul said he was born a citizen, a higher status. Lysius was disturbed that he had bound Paul, a Roman citizen, before proof of guilt. Later, in his letter to Felix, Lysius put an entirely different cast to the situation and to his actions (Acts 23:27).

Paul before the Sanhedrin

Acts 22:30 – 23:11

To determine what were the charges against Paul, Lysius brought Paul to the assembled Sanhedrin. When Paul declared his innocence and good conscience, the high priest Ananias ordered him struck on the mouth. Paul objected to this unlawful and outrageous action. When told he was addressing the high priest, he said he did not realize he was the high priest (cf. Exod 22:28). Some have suggested that Paul could not see well because of some eye disease (cf. Gal 4:13, 15; 6:11). It is probable, due to his long absences from Jerusalem, that Paul would not have recognized which man was Ananias.

Paul knew that the Sanhedrin was divided between the high priestly family and their allies on one hand, the Sadducees, and the more popular Pharisees. Luke lists the theological differences (23:8). Paul, himself a Pharisee and Christian, called out that he was on trial because of his belief in the resurrection of the dead. In fact, his gospel, like that of Jesus, was centered on

the kingdom promises of God's covenants (e.g., Acts 28:31), and those promises centered on the resurrection, beginning with the resurrection of Christ (cf. Acts 17:18; 26:22-23).

We assume that Paul hoped and planned to proceed with his message, preaching the gospel of Jesus' resurrection. But, at these words the Sanhedrin divided, with the Pharisees defending Paul ("What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?"). Lysius could see that nothing could be accomplished or learned at that meeting, and that Paul was not safe there; he took Paul back to the fortress.

That night the Lord in a vision reassured Paul, promising him that he would testify for the Lord in Rome. This promise must have comforted Paul during the next two years of trial and danger.

The plot against Paul, and his transfer to Caesarea

Acts 23:12-35

The next day (Day 11) a group of over forty fanatical Jews vowed not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul (one wonders what became of them). The high priest cooperated, calling for Paul to come again to the Sanhedrin. This would give them their opportunity.

Paul's nephew (son of his sister) was in Jerusalem, and heard of the plot. We do not know how he heard, and we know little more of Paul's family relations or of their attitude toward him (cf. Andronicus and Junia in Rom. 16:7, Herodion in Rom 16:11, and perhaps those listed in Rom 16:21). It is possible that he had been disinherited (cf. Phil 3:8). Perhaps Paul's sister lived in Jerusalem; or perhaps this young man was studying in Jerusalem, just as Paul had done. In any case, Paul's nephew reported to Paul, who had him tell the plot to Lysius. Thus, in God's providence, Paul's life was spared.

Lysius knew that he must deliver Paul quickly out from Jerusalem and into the immediate custody of the procurator in Caesarea. That night he arranged a strong and fast escort of nearly 500 soldiers, who were able to transfer Paul before the Jews suspected their plan. He sent a letter to Felix explaining his actions and reasons (vv. 26-30). The letter, as many other passages in Acts, shows that the official Roman government had no charge against Paul or the Christian movement.

That night they traveled to Antipatris, where the foot soldiers returned to Jerusalem. Paul and the cavalry continued on the next day to Caesarea. Felix read the letter and said he would hear the case when Paul's accusers should arrive from Jerusalem. He kept Paul under guard in his official residence, "Herod's palace," the palace built earlier by Herod the Great.

Marcus Antonius Felix was a former slave who skillfully rose through all the ranks to become a procurator, which normally required a citizen of the equestrian order. His character, however, seemed to reveal his baser origin. Tacitus said, "He exercised the power of a king with the mind of a slave" (*History* 5:9).

Drusilla (24:24), his third wife, was the daughter of Herod Agrippa I, who had died for his pride (12:21-23). Felix was appointed procurator of Judea by Claudius in A.D. 52, and was deposed by Nero in A.D. 56.

Trial and imprisonment under Felix

Acts 24

After five days the high priest Ananias and some of the elders went to Caesarea to bring their case against Paul to Felix. They employed a lawyer named Tertullus. The speech of Tertullus against Paul (vv. 2-8) is in an affected and ingratiating style. Refusing to call Christianity “the Way” or to use the word “Christian” (meaning “follower of Messiah”), Tertullus referred to it as “the Nazarene sect (heresy).” He accused Paul of stirring up riots all over the world, and of desecrating the temple (which was a capital offense). The other Jews there assented to his charges.

Paul gave his reply (vv. 10-21). The little note of Luke (Felix “motioned for him to speak”) shows that he was an eyewitness at this point. Paul was more straightforward and unflattering with Felix than Tertullus was. He rejected the designation “sect,” calling his faith “the Way” (v. 14; cf. 22:4). He defended his conduct, especially in Jerusalem; he was ceremonially clean and was behaving properly. His testimony to the Sanhedrin merely was a defense of the resurrection.

Felix decided to delay judgment, until Lysius could come and give his report in person. Luke notes that Felix “was well acquainted with the Way” (v. 22). Probably he kept in touch with religious movements among the Jews, aided by his Jewish wife Drusilla. When Felix and Drusilla did hear Paul several days later, Paul was able to deliver a strong gospel message to them, so much so that Felix “was afraid.” Along with “faith in Christ Jesus,” Paul’s message included the themes of “righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come” (vv. 24-25).

As it worked out, Felix never did decide Paul’s case. Instead, he was hoping for a bribe to release Paul (v. 26). During the next two years he frequently spoke with Paul, but apparently to no spiritual advantage. With the gospel curiosity, even conviction, is not enough.

Trial before Festus, and appeal to Caesar

Acts 24:27 – 25:12

In A.D. 56 Nero removed Felix from his office. Felix had been guilty of bribery and other crimes, and of seemingly excessive violence against the Jews. The new procurator was Porcius Festus, who ruled until his death in A.D. 62. His rule, though also marked by violence, was not marked by scandal.

(For date of accession of Festus, see notes on chronology of Paul)

Anxious to placate his new subjects, Festus kept Paul in prison and wearing a chain (26:29). When he met the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, they urged him to bring Paul back there, so they could kill him en route. But he wisely kept Paul in Caesarea; his trial would be held there.

About ten days later he convened the court, and the Jews renewed their charges. Paul responded, showing that the charges were false and could not be proved. Instead of declaring Paul innocent and releasing him, Festus desired to favor the Jews, asking Paul to go for further trial to Jerusalem. At this point Paul demanded justice. He already had waited two years under Felix. Festus had no reason to hold him. He appealed to Caesar. Later he spoke of this injustice as primarily the fault of the Jews (Acts 28:17-19).

The right of appeal to the emperor was granted to Roman citizens. The suspect would pay his own passage and expenses, but the local court had to honor the appeal. No doubt Festus was relieved when Paul made this appeal, as it extricated the new procurator from a difficult dilemma.

Testimony to Herod Agrippa II

Acts 25:13 – ch. 26

Herod Agrippa II (Roman name Marcus Julius Agrippa) was the son of Herod Agrippa I, who had been given the title king of the Jews by the Romans. At this point Agrippa II did not yet control all the territory his father did, as Judea was back under the control of Roman procurators. He did rule over territory to the northeast of Judea. On this courtesy visit his sister Julia Bernice accompanied him.

Festus asked Agrippa, who, being a descendent of Herod the Great, was familiar with Jewish religious questions, how to introduce Paul's case to the emperor. He recounted his trial, putting himself in a better light than he deserved. Agrippa asked to hear Paul personally.

Paul's *apologia* to Agrippa is one of the magnificent portions of Acts (Acts 26). It is the third account in Acts of Paul's conversion. He graphically depicted his initial zeal and persecuting fervor (vv. 9-11). In contrast to his defense in Acts 22, Paul emphasized his ministry to the Gentiles (vv. 17-18, 20, 23). He also especially stressed the importance of the doctrine of the resurrection (vv. 8, 23).

Festus interrupted him, "Your great learning is driving you insane!" Paul replied that these things were public knowledge, and could be verified. Furthermore, the prophets predicted these events. Paul boldly asked Agrippa if he believed the prophets (v. 27). Agrippa huffed in return, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul's gracious response showed his concern for the souls of all who were there.

After the hearing was completed, Agrippa told Festus that Paul should have been set free (another statement in Acts showing approval by government officials for Christianity). However, it was now too late; Paul already had appealed to Caesar.

Paul's voyage, shipwreck, and journey to Rome

Acts 27 – 28:16

For an excellent article defending this narrative in Acts as the eyewitness account of Luke, see the excellent article by WRS graduate Luuk van de Weghe, “Acts 27-28: The Cerebral Scars of Shipwreck,” *Tydale Bulletin* 70.2 (2019) 205-220. He documents the reliability and endurance of the vivid memories of survivors of shipwrecks.

Paul and other prisoners were placed on a ship that came from Adramyttium, near Troas on the Asian coast, bound back to the coast of the province of Asia. Paul was placed under the guard of a centurion named Julius, of the Imperial Regiment, who was bringing a group of soldiers back to Rome. Julius probably planned to change ships in Asia, finding one sailing to Rome. Along with Paul sailed Luke and Aristarchus, “a Macedonian from Thessalonica” (27:2). Both Luke and Aristarchus were with Paul later in Rome, when Paul wrote from prison there (Col 4:10, 14; Phle 24). It appears that Julius treated Paul and his companions with respect during the voyage.

Luke describes the voyage in detail. It is obvious to careful scholars that Acts 27 was not written by an armchair historian. The times, places, and conditions described are too accurate for anyone but an eyewitness. One of the most unique books in NT scholarship was written in 1848 (4th ed. 1880, often reprinted) by James Smith, *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*. Smith himself sailed all over the Mediterranean, charting and timing Paul's voyage route. He also studied ancient shipping in detail. The result of his work is confirmation of the historical accuracy of Luke's account in Acts 27.

The ship sailed north along the coast of Palestine, and then west along the southern coast of Asia Minor. At Myra in Lycia they transferred to a ship sailing for Rome from Alexandria, probably a grain ship. It carried 276 people (v. 37). From there they had difficulty sailing westward along the coast, and dropped south to sail along the southern border of Crete. They finally reached Fair Havens, near Lasea. Paul urged them to winter there, since sailing was now dangerous.

It was “after the Fast,” i.e., the Day of Atonement (Acts 27:9). Probably it was mid-October.

However, Julius and the ship's captain and owner all agreed to continue, seeking the larger harbor at Phoenix to winter.

Starting under a favorable wind, they set out, but soon the great storm came, the “Northeaster.”

The reading in Acts 27:14 should be εὐρακύλων *eurakulon*; the UBS text rates it a {B}. The term is compound, from Latin *Euro-aquilo*; *eurus* = “east,” and *aquilo* = “north-east”; thus the term means “east-north-east,” the direction from which the wind came, and can well be translated the “Northeaster.” After the 9th century some Greek texts were changed to read εὐροκλύδων *eurokludon*. Cf. the discussion in Smith’s *Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*, pp. 159-61.

For two weeks the ship was driven to the west, and hope of survival was lost. Nonetheless, Paul never gave up hope, and his cheerful testimony won the respect and admiration of the officers. Paul took a prominent part in the proceedings. He stopped a plot of the sailors to leave the ship for their own safety, and by his testimony so impressed Julius that he saved his own life and the lives of the other prisoners. When the ship broke up off the small island of Malta, all the people made it safely ashore.

On the island of Malta they were received by the local inhabitants and entertained by the official Publius. The Lord enabled Paul to heal his father, and many other inhabitants of the island. After the winter had past, the islanders equipped them, and they sailed on in another Alexandrian ship, with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux, patrons of shipping.

From Malta they sailed north, going between Italy and Sicily, and then on to Puteoli, where they disembarked in Italy. There they found some Christians, and stayed a week with them. Word of Paul’s arrival reached the church in Rome, and they sent a delegation to meet him (Acts 28:15 uses the same expression as 1 Thess 4:17, “we shall *meet* the Lord”). They met Paul at the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns, and accompanied him back to Rome.

Paul’s first Roman imprisonment

Acts 28:16-31; Prison Epistles (Eph, Col, Phlm, Phil)

According to Acts 28, Paul was able to live in his own rented house, and to have access to his friends. He stayed there two full years (A.D. 57-59), awaiting his appeal to be heard by Nero. Luke relates how the Jews of Rome sent a delegation to hear Paul’s message. They had heard that Paul’s followers were a sect, or “heresy” (Acts 28:22). Some of them believed, but most of them rejected the gospel. Paul saw in their rejection the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, that God would for a time harden the hearts of his people (vv. 25-27, quoting Isa 6:9-10). As a result, Paul was able to freely offer the gospel to the Gentiles in Rome, and the gospel continued to spread there.

This point ends the narrative of the book of Acts. The gospel has reached Rome. Now Luke’s reader (and perhaps his patron) has the whole story how the gospel began with Jesus Christ, and spread through the empire to Rome itself. Theophilus can be sure that the teaching he has heard is indeed the truth.

Additional details about Paul's first Roman imprisonment can be found in Paul's prison epistles. These details especially concern his companions, and his contacts with churches in Asia and Macedonia. These will be studied in the notes on those epistles.