

GOD WITH US

Part 9: ACTS

Message 7 – Paul’s Arrest and Journey to Rome

Acts 21:37 – 28:31

Introduction

Paul made 3 major missionary journeys planting churches in the Roman Empire. His 3rd journey ended in Jerusalem, where he was attacked by an angry mob (angry because they thought Paul was promoting an anti-Jew, pro-Gentile message throughout the world) and arrested by the Roman commander of the city. From this point forward, he will be “an ambassador in chains” (Ephesians 6:20), proclaiming the gospel of Jesus as he moves from place to place as a prisoner of the Roman state.

Before we look at Paul’s arrest and final journey to Rome, let’s look back at a couple of his best friends who helped him establish churches and encourage believers throughout the Roman empire.

Priscilla: A Woman Who Partnered with her Husband

Comments from Shirley

Priscilla is one of the most inspiring women in the New Testament. She and her husband Aquila were in the top tier of Paul’s closest co-workers. Five out of the six times the couple is mentioned, Priscilla is placed first! She is mentioned 3 times by Luke in Acts Ch.18 (18:1-4, 18-20, 24-28), and 3 times by the Paul in his letters (1Corinth.16:19; Romans 16:3-5; 2Timothy 4:19).

True Partners in Life and ministry: *It’s hard to separate Priscilla from her husband because they were a true example of a marital partnership. Perhaps they weren’t able to bear children, as none are mentioned, so they used their energies to work and serve Christ and be available to move around the Roman Empire co-laboring with Paul. They were Jewish believers who knew the Old Testament Scriptures and ministry of Jesus, using every opportunity to disciple and teach people wherever they lived. Together they owned a tent-making business, sewing tents and leather goods for Roman soldiers, Greeks, shepherds, and Jews.*

Priscilla’s Gifting and Feminine Strengths: *Priscilla, as a wife, being named 1st before Aquila was unheard of, and is still not acceptable in many cultures. Perhaps her family’s heritage was more prestigious than Aquila’s, or her spiritual knowledge and leadership strengths*

were more effective than his. Regardless, her respectful demeanor towards her husband and other men was notable. They respected her character and Biblical knowledge, welcoming her wisdom and impact for Christ.

Women were not allowed to be educated; therefore, she had to acquire her business skills and Scripture knowledge informally. She used her heart for hospitality to host Paul, the house churches, and disciple men and women in Rome, Corinth and Ephesus. Priscilla was courageous, risking her own life with Aquila to protect Paul, probably when in Ephesus.

Priscilla and Aquila's Impact: Seeing God's timing in people's lives is exciting! The Roman Emperor Claudius deported all the Jews out of Rome, forcing Priscilla and Aquila to move to Corinth. Some think they may have left a house church in Rome, and also their tent-making business. It must have been difficult for them to start life all over again, wondering what God was allowing in their lives. But it was just after they had settled in Corinth that the Apostle Paul 'happened' to arrive, whom they had never met! Nothing is ever by mere 'coincidence' when we are praying and following the Holy Spirit's promptings. Priscilla and Aquila provided Paul a place to live and work with them for the next 18 months, since he too was a tent-maker. He preached about Jesus each Sabbath and together they began a house church in Corinth. That time together fused their friendship for the rest of their lives!

Then Paul asked them to move again. To accompany him to Ephesus, a strategic city, where he left them to begin a new house church, entrusting them with the ministry until he returned. After Paul left, Apollos, a Jewish Evangelist from Egypt came to preach. But he needed help with his message. I'm challenged by the wise way they invited Apollos to their home to teach him more fully about Jesus. Their discipleship of Apollos prepared him to pastor the church back at Corinth, where they had begun the ministry with Paul.

Years later Priscilla and Aquila returned to Rome and hosted another house church. Paul wrote to the believers praising Priscilla and Aquila as his fellow workers who risked their lives for him, and all the churches of the Gentiles including himself, were grateful to them. Church history records that they were martyred for their faith under Nero.

Priscilla was an influential leader, who was faithful with her life to the very end. She was a true partner with Aquila, a blessing to Paul, and a devoted, fruitful disciple of Christ. May we seek to all live like Priscilla and Aquila!

Paul Attacked and Arrested in Jerusalem: 21:37 – 22:29

Within a week after Paul arrived in Jerusalem at the end of his 3rd journey, he was attacked by a mob when they saw him in the temple. They thought he had defiled it by bringing Gentiles into the sacred space where only Jews were allowed. The Roman commander in Jerusalem rescued Paul from the mob, then granted his request that he be allowed to address the crowd. He spoke to them in Aramaic, their native language, pleading with them as he gave his entire testimony, going back to his early days as a devout Jew and a persecutor of the Christians. He told of his conversion and his attempts to bring the message of Christ to his fellow-countrymen. Then, when he spoke of how God sent him to “*the Gentiles*,” the crowd erupted in anger.

As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?” (22:23-25).

It was unlawful for a Roman citizen to be punished without a fair trial. Paul informed the commander that he was “born” a Roman citizen (unusual for a Jew, and a surprise to the commander). This means that Paul’s Jewish father was granted Roman citizenship.

Scholars have conjectured that, since Paul was from a family of tent-makers, perhaps Paul’s father provided a service to the Roman army by making tents (or other goods) for them and was granted the right of citizenship in return. In this way, Paul would have been “born” into a family with citizenship. The more important point involves the sovereignty of God – because *it was Paul’s Roman citizenship that protected his rights as he went from one trial to another, ultimately leading to him standing before Caesar’s tribunal in Rome.* An ordinary Jew, or other foreigner, would *never* have been granted such privileges and would have certainly been executed early in the process so that the Roman authorities could keep the peace (e.g. as Jesus was condemned by Pilate without true “due process.”)

Paul addresses the Sanhedrin: 22:30 – 23:11

After Paul's unsuccessful defense to the crowd, the commander decided to call for the Jewish Sanhedrin to come and hear from Paul the next day, so that he could understand the cause of the uproar. Paul had the opportunity to address the Sanhedrin; but instead of reciting his story, he used 'party loyalties' to set his opponents against one another on the basis of theological beliefs:

Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead." When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. [The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things] (23:6-8).

Once again, the Roman commander had to intervene to spare Paul from being torn apart by angry Sanhedrin members. He was put in prison. Then, the Lord appeared to Paul and gave him a promise:

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about Me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome" (23:11).

From that moment forward, Paul knew that it was God's will for him to make it to Rome . . . and nothing could thwart the divine assignment – although as the rest of the book of Acts shows, the journey to Rome was filled with challenges and turmoil.

The Plot to Kill Paul: 23:12-22

God had His plan for Paul . . . but Paul's enemies had other plans. Forty men put took an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. Their plot: The Sanhedrin would ask the commander for another meeting with Paul; but when Paul was being brought to the meeting, they would assassinate him. A cunning plan . . . *but the Lord overthrew their plot with an unlikely hero.*

"But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." So, he took him to the commander" (23:16-18).

Paul's young nephew was used to save his life! That night, the Roman commander ordered the transfer of Paul out of Jerusalem to Caesarea, where he was kept under guard in Herod's palace. From this point forward, Paul will remain a prisoner of the Roman state.

Yes, God's promise to Paul was that he would testify in Rome (i.e., he would make it out of Jerusalem alive). But God used an unlikely person to fulfill that promise – the young nephew of Paul who 'just happened' to overhear and thwart the assassination plot of the Jews. You never know how God will fulfill His promises. He may use the most unlikely people or circumstances. You can just know that He is faithful, and He will perform His will for your life. Leave the details to God. Take Him at His word. Rest in His promises . . . as Paul did.

Paul testifies before Felix: 24:1-27

Luke now follows Paul through a series of trials before several Roman provincial authorities. Some scholars have suggested that Luke, by recounting these trials, was preparing a "trial-brief" that could serve Paul's lawyer well when it came to his final trial in Rome before Caesar. His first trial was before Felix the governor at Caesarea. The Jewish high priest Ananias came from Jerusalem with elders and a lawyer named Tertullus. Acts 24:1-21 provides a glimpse into how Roman trials were conducted. Felix heard opening arguments from both sides, and then delayed judgment until more witnesses were brought in. In the meantime, . . .

"Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." At the same time, he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison" (24:24-27).

A bit of historical background may help us understand why Felix and Drusilla were afraid to hear Paul speak about "righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come." Felix had fallen in love with Drusilla, because of her beauty; but she was already married to a Jewish man. He persuaded her (with the help of a Jewish

magician who promised her good fortune) to leave her husband and become his wife. Thus, according to Jewish law she was illegally married (still being married to her former husband) to a man who did not profess the faith in the God of the Jews, all on the advice of a magician! No wonder they were afraid to hear Paul speak about “righteousness, self-control, and future judgment.”

Paul testifies before Festus: 25:1-12

Festus succeeded Felix as the provincial governor. While in Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders asked him to grant them a favor by having Paul transferred to Jerusalem for trial. He told them to come to Caesarea and present their case against Paul. When they did, and when Paul protested his innocence of the charges they were bringing against him, Festus forced Paul’s hand:

Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?” Paul answered: “I am now standing before Caesar’s court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!” After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: “You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!” (25:9-12).

A Roman citizen had the “right of appeal” to a higher court. Since Paul was a citizen, he invoked his right at this juncture when he felt that his citizen-rights were being violated (by the demand that he go to Jerusalem, a place of bias against him, to stand trial). Festus was required, by Roman law, to honor Paul’s appeal to have his case heard in Rome, before the highest court in the land.

Long before we are born, God already knows the days He has prepared for us (Psalm 139:16). And He prepares us in advance for the assignments He has for us during our stay upon earth. It was no mistake Paul was born into a family with Roman citizenship. Your family of origin, and the circumstances of your birth and upbringing are also no mistake. Everything happens for a reason. Have you even stopped to consider how your family of origin prepared you for what God has called you to do?

Paul testifies before Agrippa: 25:13 – 26:32

While Paul was awaiting his transfer to Rome, he had yet another opportunity to “*testify before kings*” (Acts 9:15). The Jewish puppet-king, Agrippa, arrived in Caesarea along with his sister Bernice. Agrippa was the last in a long line from the Herodian dynasty, dating back to Herod the Great. While visiting with Festus, Paul’s case came up in conversation. Thus, Festus arranged for Agrippa and Bernice to hear from Paul. Since Agrippa was very knowledgeable about Jewish issues and customs, Paul gave a detailed explanation of the matters concerning himself. But toward the end of Paul’s explanation, Festus interrupted him:

At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.” “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.” Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains” (26:24-29).

The hearing was over. Agrippa, Bernice and Festus all agreed that Paul had done “*nothing worthy of death or imprisonment,*” noting also that “*he would have been set free, if he had not appealed to Rome.*” In their eyes, it was a sad mistake that Paul had appealed to Rome; but in God’s eyes, it was all part of His plan to have Paul testify before even higher authorities – in Rome.

Paul’s journey to Rome: 27:1 – 28:10

The story of Paul’s journey and shipwreck at sea is one of the most detailed accounts from ancient history of a sea-voyage and how sailors handled life-threatening storms. (Luke’s attention to details is strong here.) Once the ship was caught in “the perfect storm,” the crew gave up all hope for survival. Then, Paul spoke:

When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, “Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this

damage and loss. Yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.’ Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on a certain island” (27:21-26).

The ship ran aground and was torn apart just off the island of Malta. All 276 people on board managed to swim to land or float ashore on debris from the ship. Once on Malta, the natives of the island treated the visitors kindly. When Paul was bitten by a viper, and survived, they thought he was a god! Paul had the opportunity to clarify the source of his powers. He healed the father of Publius, a leading man on the island . . . which then led to sick people from all over the island coming to be healed in Jesus’ name. Needless to say, the gospel made a huge impact on Malta.

Paul wrote to the Colossians: “Make the most of every opportunity” (Colossians 4:5). He certainly modeled this on Malta. He had no intentions of going to Malta, especially via the perfect storm and a shipwreck! Yet, he made the most of the opportunity and established a Christian movement on Malta. How can you make the most of your opportunities this week?

And thus, we came to Rome: 28:11-31

Once in Rome, Paul lived under house arrest until his trial. Luke emphasizes how he was free to share the gospel with all who came to him. Paul first called the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome to come to him. He explained his personal story and demonstrated from the O.T. Scriptures that Jesus was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Some believed, others did not. Once the Jews had heard enough, he turned to the Gentiles with the message of salvation through Christ. Luke ends with this:

“And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered” (28:30,31).

The book of Acts ends before Paul's trial, so we must turn to other sources to piece together what happened to him. Scholars believe that after his first appearance before Caesar's tribunal Paul was acquitted and released. He traveled widely throughout the Roman empire, particularly to the West. During the reign of the emperor Nero, Paul was arrested again. Nero blamed a fire in Rome on the Christians (though many believed he started it himself to make way for his lavish building projects). It was during this 2nd imprisonment that Paul wrote his final letter – 2 Timothy. Paul may have languished for as long as 2 years in the most deplorable of the Roman prisons. He had an initial trial that did not go well (note 2Tim.4:16,17). Sometime after the writing of 2Timothy, Paul had a 2nd trial, was condemned to death and executed (roughly 68 A.D.). Tradition has marked a spot on the Appian Way, about 3 miles outside of Rome, where Paul was executed.

The question that has intrigued scholars for centuries is *why* Luke did not provide a 'proper ending' to the story. It is almost like he ended with a series of ellipsis points (. . .) rather than a period (.). It is here that we see something of the literary artistry of Luke – for the book of Acts was not about Paul, or Peter, or any other person. It was about the *Spirit-empowered proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the earth, until Jesus returns and says 'Stop.'* The "un-ending" of Acts is really a challenge from Luke to his readers to continue the story in their own lifetime. How can each successive generation write their own "Acts 29" story? A commentator from long ago put it this way in his final comments on the book of Acts:

***“Here, O church, thou hast thy pattern;
It is thy duty to keep it, and to guard the deposit.”***
J. A. Bengel, 1742

Discussion Questions

1. What strikes you most about the character of Paul from this part of his life story?
2. How do you see the hand of God (or the 'sovereignty' of God) at work in Paul's life. Does this encourage you concerning your own situation?
3. Study the quote below from Theodore Roosevelt. How do you see this played out in the characters in the book of Acts?

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”