

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 29

Paul Gets to Rome

The story is as old as Genesis. The 17-year-old boy Joseph went to sleep and dreamed not once, but twice, that his older brothers bowed to him. The brothers hated Joseph before the dreams, but even more so afterwards! Joseph does not immediately rise to the family prominence predicted by the dream. Instead, Joseph is sold into Egyptian slavery. While Joseph shines as a slave, he is soon falsely accused of a crime and sent to prison. While in prison, Joseph helps two of Pharaoh's servants understand their dreams with the promise that upon release one of the servants would remember to rescue Joseph. The man gets out, and forgets, leaving Joseph even further from his promised role in the family.

Yet in this prison, things finally turn around. Joseph is remembered and brought to help Pharaoh with his own dreams. The now 30-year-old Joseph begins working for the Pharaoh and rises to great prominence. Over seven years after Joseph starts working for Pharaoh, the brothers come to their near 40-year-old long lost brother and bow before him, even though they had no clue who he was.

The promises of God came to fulfillment, 23 years after Joseph received them. Joseph should not have been surprised. After all, this was the same God who had told his great-grandfather Abraham that Abraham and Sarah would have a child. It was sometime, however, before Sarah actually gave birth to Isaac.

We suspect Paul was not shocked then that although God had told him he would go to Rome to testify to the facts of God and his work among men, it took years for the promise to become reality. Yet, Paul never waivered in his faith; he took each challenge and each day gave his best, trusting God with the consequences.

In this lesson, we finally see the fulfillment of Paul's dream and God's promise that Paul would testify about God in Rome.

PAUL IN MALTA

We left Paul shipwrecked on the island of Malta. Paul spent the winter months there waiting for sea travel to reopen for the spring. Luke tells us this story in the final chapter of his two-volume history of Christ and his church (Acts 28).

Paul and the other 275 people on the ship made it safely to shore after the ship broke up on a reef off the island of Malta. When they first made land, they had no clue where they were, but the inhabitants told them the island's name. These

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native people, Luke notes, were unusually kind to the seafarers, building a fire to help with the bitter winter cold and rain.

We should pause here and note that while the ESV translates the passages in Acts 28:2 and 28:4 as “native people,” other versions use different terms. The NIV calls them “islanders.” The King James calls them “barbarous people” or “barbarians” as does the American Standard Version. Luke does in fact use the Greek word *barbaroi* (βάρβαροι) from which we derive the English word “barbarian.” But in the Greek sense, that word means that the people were not Greek speakers. To the Greek ear, those who did not speak Greek made sounds equivalent to murmurings of “bar bar bar bar” and in that sense termed non-Greek speakers barbarians.¹

Bruce and others note that the Maltese were native speakers of a Phoenician dialect. This would be a Semitic tongue that Paul would have likely been able to communicate with fairly well.²

Paul, in his typical helping fashion, went about collecting wood for the fire. As Bruce said, “Paul can make himself useful in small matters as well as great.”³ When Paul picked up a bundle of sticks and placed them on the fire, a “viper” came out of the sticks and bit onto Paul’s hand. The locals saw the viper hanging from Paul’s hand and considered it an omen. They thought it meant that Paul was a murderer who had somehow managed to escape the justice of the sea. Justice would not be thwarted, and they believed the viper was sent to bring Paul to his proper end.

These people had no idea that, as Jesus had promised before his ascension, “These signs will accompany those who believe...they will pick up serpents with their hands...it will not hurt them” (Mk 16:17-18). Paul was not worried. God had told him he would testify in Rome! Paul simply shook the viper off into the fire and kept doing his work. The locals were waiting for Paul to swell up and die, but instead Paul was completely fine. This caused the people to reevaluate and decide that Paul was not a murderer but a god!

The chief of the island was a man named Publius. He went out of his way to receive Paul, Luke, and others and entertain them for three days. There was no for

¹ For a good set of references to the usage of *barbaroi*, see the note on this text on page 538 of Robertson, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Eerdmans 1956) Vol. 2.

² See e.g., F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament; The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans 1988) rev’d ed. at 496.

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles – The Greek Text With Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans 1951) at 470.

real purpose Luke gives us for this beyond the man's hospitable nature. It turned out a very smart thing, however, as Publius's father was sick with a fever and dysentery. Paul went to the father, prayed over him, laid hands on him, and healed him!

News of the healing traveled fast and soon all the island's sick were coming to Paul for healing. No doubt, the physician Luke must have marveled at the hand of God as these people were healed one right after the other. The people were deeply and genuinely grateful, honoring Paul and his companions. When winter was over and the weather was right for the crew to resume travel, these natives made sure Paul was equipped with whatever he might need for the journey.

THE FINAL LEG TO ROME

Paul and his companions spent three winter months on the island of Malta. Once winter was over, they boarded a ship that had wintered in the harbor to sail on to Italy. The ship was a grain ship from Alexandria much like the one shipwrecked upon the reefs.



Luke gives us a clear account of how the voyage finished. They went to Syracuse on Sicily where they harbored three days. From there, they sailed to Rhegium then on to Puteoli both coastal towns of Italy.⁴

⁴ The harbor of Puteoli is the modern bay of Naples. Puteoli was an ancient town in the province of Naples, about 170 miles from Rome. The town is today called Pozzuoli.

In Puteoli, there were other Christians who welcomed Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus. For seven days, the church in Puteoli hosted the travelers.⁵ Somehow during this stay, the church at Rome was alerted that Paul was close by and on his way. We should remember here that this is the very church that had received the longest letter Paul had ever written (at least that we know of), Romans. The letter that contained such deep and profound material was written to this church and we can assume that they had poured over the letter repeatedly. This is the church to which Paul had written, “I hope to see you” (Rom. 15:24). There is no question the level of excitement in the church was great.

Luke tells us that on hearing of Paul and the others nearby, Christians from the Roman church “came as far as the Forum of Appias and Three Taverns to meet us” (Acts 28:15).⁶ One must suspect that Aquila and Priscilla, Paul’s companions in the mission fields of Corinth and Ephesus were likely among the first to come greet Paul the prisoner! The term Luke uses that is translated “to meet us”⁷ (-ἀπάντησις ὑμῖν) is a “technical term for the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary by a deputation which went out from the city to greet him and to escort him there.”⁸ In other words, the church treated Paul’s arrival as the city would treat the arrival of a great official. They rolled out the red carpet, in modern parlance!

Once Paul got to Rome, he was allowed to stay by himself in a rented room under the care of the soldier charged with guarding him. As we try to figure out what life was like for Paul in Roman custody, we have several places to read. First, Luke gives us a good deal of information in the closing verses of Acts.

Luke tells us that after being in Rome three days, Paul called the local leaders of the Jews to his house. Paul told these leaders that he had not violated neither the Jewish people nor the customs of their fathers, yet was still delivered as a prisoner by the leadership in Jerusalem. Paul explained that the Romans had wanted to release him because after trying his case they found him innocent. But because

⁵ While we do not know the origins of the Church in Puteoli, scholars are not surprised that the church would have a presence at this time. Puteoli had a large Jewish presence in Italy. Josephus writes of the Jewish presence there as early as 4 BC (calling the town “Dicearchia” rather than Puteoli). See *Jewish Antiquities*, 17.12.1 and *The Jewish War*, 2.7.1.

⁶ These locations were 33 and 43 miles respectively from Rome. From here, Paul would have traveled the famous Appian Way; a road built over 300 years before Paul that led from Rome to the south. A portion of the ancient road can still be traveled today.

⁷ ἀπάντησις ὑμῖν (apantesin humin)

⁸ Bruce *Greek* at 475.

the Jews objected to releasing Paul, Paul made an appeal to Caesar bringing him as a prisoner to Rome.

Paul then turned the conversation to his true mission efforts. Paul explained that he was in chains because of the hope of Israel, Jesus. The Jews responded that no word of Paul had come to them from Jerusalem, but they did want to hear what Paul had to say about Jesus and the church (they called it a “sect”).

A day was set for this teaching and the Jews came to Paul’s lodgings in great numbers. Paul spent the entire day telling and teaching about Jesus using the Law of Moses as well as the Prophets. Some Jews came to faith; others did not. Paul pointed out the truth of the prophesies from Isaiah 6:9-10 about the Jews hearing but not understanding. Paul had good reason then for taking the message to Gentiles who would listen and understand.

Luke then closes his histories noting that Paul stayed in Rome two years “at his own expense” letting us know that Paul was paying for his own housing and continued for those two years to have a good bit of liberty. Paul was, as God had promised, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31). With that, Luke brings Acts to an end.⁹

We can go outside Acts to see a bit more about Paul in Rome. In several of the letters he wrote during that two-year period, Paul sets out a few other pertinent facts. First, as we will see when we study Colossians and Philemon, Luke stayed on with Paul as a co-worker for at least a while in Rome. Second, we will see in Philippians that Paul saw his imprisonment in Rome as something that God was using to further his mission. Paul wrote the Philippians:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (Phil 1:12-14).

⁹ Many scholars hold that Luke’s abrupt ending of his histories likely stems from the date of composition. Luke ended his history at this point because this was the time he was finished writing! See, e.g., Bruce Greek commentary at 481; J. McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Baker Academic 2003) at 251. Other scholars believe that Luke intended a third volume. See, e.g. Robertson, *The Expositor’s Greek New Testament* at 553.

We also know from Colossians that many other Christians in ministry with Paul made the trip to Rome to join him in his labors there. John Mark, Timothy, Aristarchus, and others were with Paul at various times there (Col. 1 and 4).

These letters Paul wrote in Rome are the next areas of his life we will study. We will then look at why we believe Paul was ultimately released from this Roman imprisonment¹⁰ to continue his mission efforts until his execution from a subsequent imprisonment in Rome.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “No doubt this man is a murderer’... They changed their minds and said he was a god” (Acts 28:6).

In one breath, the people thought Paul a murderer. The next breath, they thought him a god. They were wrong both times! Superstition is extremely unreliable when it comes to determining truth. This is true whether the superstition is pagan or Christian! There are times where God makes a promise and we can rely fully on the promise coming true. Paul going to Rome to testify is a prime example. There are other times, however, where *we think* we see God behind something that seems right to us at the time, only to find out later it was not as we thought. We must be careful here. God is not a plaything that we lightly figure out.

Remember Peter in Matthew 16? It was the one chapter where in one breath he proclaims Jesus the Son of God, to which Jesus responds, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 16:17). Same Peter, same Jesus – six verses later, Peter rebuked Jesus saying he should surely never go to Jerusalem and be killed, Jesus tells Peter, “Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me” (Mt 16:23).

Let us carefully and with reverence consider what we know is from God, living prayerfully in every circumstance and situation.

2. “Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks” (Acts 28:3).

¹⁰ Some scholars have tried to make the case that Paul would have had a release after two years in Rome because the failure of the prosecutors to state a case within 18 months gave rise to an automatic dismissal (something akin to a modern statute of limitations). It would then take roughly six months to process Paul’s release. See the arguments and cites of Bruce in his Greek commentary at footnote 1 on page 480. Bruce later changed his opinion after the suggested re-dating of an ancient manuscript that gives the 18-month deadline. The new date for the manuscript suggests that the 18-month deadline did not become law until the 200’s. See F. F. Bruce, *Paul – Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans 1977) at 377.

Paul the magnificent apostle who traveled the world and gave his life to proclaim the truth of the gospel of Christ; Paul the eloquent writer who penned the great works that the Holy Spirit has placed into holy scripture to teach and edify the body of Christ; Paul the intimate of God who had seen the resurrected Christ, who had visions and appearances from the divine; Paul the mystical man who experienced being caught up into the third heaven seeing things he could not explain; Paul the devoted prayer warrior who prayed for many with a heart frequently too moved for words; Paul the healer who God used to work miracles of healing even bringing Tychicus back from the dead; Paul gathered sticks for the fire. There was no act of service too small for Paul. He did not live in an ivory tower or on a mountaintop. Paul lived a life of love and service in big and small ways, just like his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

3. “When we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed” (Acts 28:10).

Isn't it wonderful how God supplies our needs? That does not mean that everything is always easy or in abundance. This is the same Paul who would write soon from Rome “I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:12-13). Yet when the book is over, and the final chapter is written, we have the same opportunity to proclaim the faithfulness of our God who, through plenty and hunger, has met our needs. We are not orphaned; an eternal heavenly father sees to our truest needs with love and care.

4. “And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came” (Acts 28:15).

We must be touched at the reception Paul had after a very difficult two years in custody. Paul had been worshipping in the Temple when accosted by the Jews and arrested by the Romans. Death plots and death threats, multiple trials, and an incredibly hard journey by ship followed the arrest. Paul is finally two days walk from Rome, no doubt wondering what kind of reception he would receive; especially after the letter he had sent years before. Paul must have felt great warmth and a great charge to see the brothers coming out so far to meet him. No doubt the reception made quite an impression on the Roman guard as well. Paul was no run of the mill prisoner! He had called the weather, made dead-on predictions of mishaps, openly prayed and spoke to his God (and this was a God who answered in ways that were absolutely accurate!). Paul healed with his prayer and the touch of his hands. Paul was well known and cared for by people of his faith in multiple ports. Then, finally the centurion sees the church venture

out to escort Paul into Rome! No doubt Paul was a discussion point for Caesar's guards!

As we read this of fellowship we are reminded of Psalm 133:

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!
It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of
Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life
forevermore.

In this fellowship, God met Paul's needs and touched his heart, all while fulfilling God's master plan of reaching others with the gospel message.