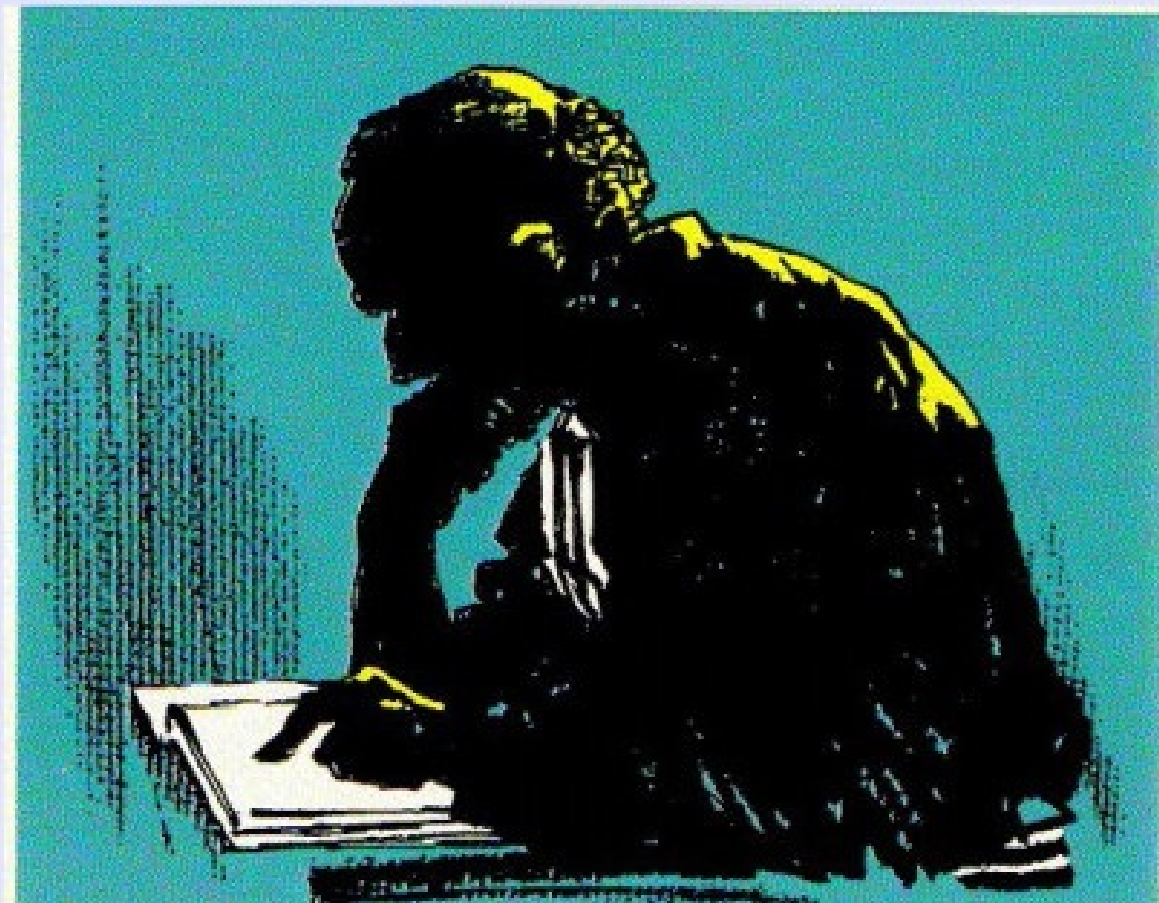


**Exploring the Word of God**  
**Acts of the Apostles, Volume 7:**  
**Acts Chapters 24–28**



By Paul Kroll



**GRACE COMMUNION**  
**INTERNATIONAL**

*Living and Sharing the Gospel*

# Exploring the Word of God

## Acts of the Apostles

### Volume 7: Chapters 24–28

By Paul Kroll

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# Paul the Prisoner of Rome, continued

## Jews bring charges (Acts 24:1-4)

Five days after Paul arrived in Caesarea, the Jewish prosecuting team arrived to state their charges against him (24:1). It was composed of the high priest Ananias, some of the Jewish elders, and a special legal counselor named Tertullus. Tertullus was a common Greek name, and he was probably a Hellenistic Jew chosen because of his expertise in Roman law and his skill in public speaking. The Sanhedrin was taking no chances on letting Paul slip through its grasp. It had hired Tertullus to act as its lawyer.

When Felix asked Tertullus to present his case, he began with the usual flattery. Luke illustrated Tertullus' approach with these words as the introduction of his speech: "We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude" (24:2-3).

Tertullus' introduction was spoken in the style of orators when they spoke before dignitaries. The technique even had a name in Latin, the *captatio benevolentiae*. Luke gave us a summary of what Tertullus said. He probably described in some detail what he thought had brought peace and reform in Judea. However, Felix's administration was characterized by insurrections and unrest, so Tertullus may have found it difficult to find many pleasant things to say.

Of course, Tertullus was not particularly interested in whether his compliments reflected reality. He wanted to sway Felix to the Sanhedrin's position. Offering a twisted version of real events was simply part of business as usual. At some point, Tertullus must have realized he was belaboring the

flattery and said, “In order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly” (24:4). Legal presentations were sometimes timed by the use of a water clock, something that kept long-winded counselors from speaking too long.

### **The case against Paul (Acts 24:5)**

Tertullus next launched into a menacing accusation of Paul. “We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world,” he said to Felix. “He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect...” (24:5). Troublemaker—creator of riots—ringleader of the Nazarene sect—these accusations were meant to paint Paul as an insurrectionist who was threatening the Pax Romana. Tertullus framed his accusations in terms of political subversion rather than religious opinions. By accusing Paul of treason, Tertullus was hoping to involve a political ruler in what was really a factional religious dispute.

The Jews were trying to induce the governor to construe the preaching of Paul as tantamount to causing civil disturbances throughout the Jewish population of the Empire. They knew that the governors were unwilling to convict on purely religious charges and therefore tried to give a political twist to the religious charge. (A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, page 50).

Thus, it was claimed that Paul (and the Christians) were a threat to local order and to the security of the Empire in general. Paul, it seemed, was being charged with singlehandedly creating disturbances across the Roman Empire!

The charge is framed in such a way as to suggest that this is no mere religious dispute, but a threat to the stability of Roman government. Paul is accused of being generally a trouble-maker throughout the Empire, a promoter of a particular messianic movement (which would suggest political agitation to the procurator), and a violator of the Sadducean regulations for the

sanctity of the Temple, which were guaranteed by the Romans. (William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The New Century Bible Commentary, page 233)

Tertullus was trying to put Paul among the group of Jewish revolutionaries who were creating trouble for Felix. It's true that Paul's presence in a city did lead to riots among the Jews. But it was the Jews who created the disturbances, not Paul. Tertullus not only tried to put Paul, but the whole Christian movement on trial, by calling it a party or sect (Greek, *hairesis*)—"the Nazarenes." This is the only time the New Testament uses the plural "Nazarenes," and it is hung on Christians as a distasteful label. The Greek word *hairesis* meant a party such as the Sadducees (5:17) or the Pharisees (15:5). The Nazarenes could be seen as simply another sect of Judaism, one that happened to believe in Christ as Messiah. But that is not how the Jewish religious leaders looked upon the Christians. When Tertullus called the followers of Paul "Nazarenes," he meant it as an expression of contempt (24:14).

The Jews' case as described by Tertullus was based on false evidence. The Sanhedrin had used similar tactics before, in the trial of Jesus. Then, council members "were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death" (Matthew 26:59). The same was true in Paul's trial.

### **Desecrated the temple (Acts 24:6)**

Tertullus then moved to the theological aspect of his accusation. He said of Paul that he "even tried to desecrate the temple" and that to prevent him from doing so, "we seized him..." (24:6). The original accusation had been softened. Now the Sanhedrin was no longer claiming that Paul violated the temple, but that he "tried to" do so. Also, the earlier reference to the Gentiles being in a forbidden part of the temple had disappeared.

Here, Tertullus probably wanted to argue that Paul's case should properly

be heard by the Sanhedrin. No doubt he would have liked to press the issue that the Jews should be given the right to impose the death penalty on Paul. Tertullus had to get around the fact that it couldn't be proved that Paul had profaned the temple. He cleverly claimed the temple police had grabbed Paul *before* he could carry out his plan. Thus, if challenged on the fact that there were no witnesses to the supposed profanation, he could say that was because it never took place.

We the readers know the facts, and that Tertullus was putting his own spin on the situation. Paul had not attempted to profane the temple, nor had he done so accidentally. Neither was there an orderly arrest of Paul by temple police, as Tertullus tried to imply. A frantic mob had grabbed Paul and was trying to kill him, all on the basis of an unsubstantiated rumor (21:27-31).

### **What became of verse 7? (Acts 24:7-9)**

Some ancient manuscripts (the Western text) add the following words to the end of verse 6: "...and we would have judged him in accordance with our law. But the commander Lysias came and took him from us with much violence, ordering his accusers to come before you" (New International Version footnote).

Since verse 7 is absent from what most scholars consider the best manuscripts, it is often omitted from modern versions, or placed in a footnote. Whether verse 7 was part of the original or came about as a later copyist tried to clarify the text, it adds an interesting dimension to the account. If this verse described part of Tertullus' argument, it implied that the Jews had planned to try Paul themselves, most likely for a crime against the temple. Tertullus blamed the Roman commander for interrupting what he claimed was about to become a legal hearing on the matter by the council. This might explain why Felix insisted on postponing the case until Lysias could come to Caesarea to give his testimony (24:22).

Tertullus ended his testimony by encouraging Felix to examine Paul so that he “will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him” (24:8). This at first seems odd, as Paul was certainly not going to admit to something he had not done. But in ancient trials, “examine” often meant some form of beating or torture, and Tertullus perhaps hoped Paul would incriminate himself in some way.

### **Paul’s defense (Acts 24:10-13)**

After Tertullus finished presenting the Jews’ case, Felix motioned for Paul to speak. Paul then went on the offensive, contesting the accusations made against him. He began by acknowledging that Felix had “for a number of years...been judge over this nation” (24:10). This was fact, not flattery. Paul was appealing to Felix’s experience as governor of the province. He had seen a number of violent acts that involved Jews. Based on that, he would surely recognize that it was they, not Paul, who started this circus of events.

Paul was implying that the Jews’ antagonism against him was another example of the cantankerous religious and political atmosphere in Judea. Paul referred to Felix having been in Judea for a “number of years.” This is thought to show that Tacitus (*Annals* 12.54) may have been right in saying Felix had served in Judea before becoming governor.

Paul explained that he had only recently arrived in Jerusalem, having come there about 12 days ago (24:11). He spent perhaps a week of this time as a prisoner (24:1). He would have had little time to organize a riot. He had come to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, not cause trouble. Paul flatly denied that he had stirred up trouble. “My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city,” he said (24:12). To engage in public debate was not a crime. But Paul was saying he had not even disputed with anyone, much less engaged in any activities that would result in a riot.

## **”I admit...” (Acts 24:14-16)**

After denying all the charges, suddenly Paul said he was about to confess to something. But it was not to a chargeable offense. “I admit that I worship the God our ancestors,” said Paul, “as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect” (24:14). The phrase “God of our ancestors” (Exodus 13:3) was familiar to his accusers. They would have known that Paul claimed to worship the same God they did.

Paul had once persecuted those who followed “the Way” (9:1-2). Now, in an ironic turn of events, Paul himself was being persecuted for being a Christian. However, Paul rightly claimed that his being a Christian did not mean he was violating the Holy Scriptures. “I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets,” he insisted (24:14). The phrase “Law and Prophets” was a well-known description of the Jewish Scriptures.

Paul chose his words carefully. Though he claimed to be a Pharisee, he said he only believed and practiced what was in harmony with the written law. This was a deft way of saying it was the Jews standing before Felix who by their beliefs and practices sometimes did not agree with the ancestral Scriptures. In a sense, Paul was claiming that he was the true Pharisee or worshipper of God.

Paul was saying he had not deviated from Israel’s *true* ancient faith. He claimed that his being a Christian did not make him an apostate Jew. He did not believe everything that the non-Christian Pharisees did. But neither did the Sadducees, Essenes or some other splinter group within Judaism agree. Paul was arguing that he and the followers of the Way were within the spectrum of Judaism—they worshipped the same God as the Jews, respected fully the Holy Scriptures and believed in a resurrection of the just.

## **Hope of Israel (Acts 24:15)**



Paul continued by saying, “I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked” (24:15). He had already raised the issue of the resurrection before the Sanhedrin (23:6), something to which he would refer again in this speech (24:21).

It’s not clear which of the accusers standing before Felix would have believed in the resurrection. The high priest and the other members of the Sadducean party did not share this belief. However, some of the “elders” that came from Jerusalem might have been Pharisees, and they would have believed in the resurrection (24:1). A significant number of Jews (the people of the land) did believe in the resurrection, since the Pharisees taught among the people and were respected by them. In that sense, Paul would have been in step with the Jewish nation regarding belief in the resurrection.

In any case, Paul had moved the debate from insurrection and profaning Jewish law to a theological discussion of the resurrection. By doing so, he focused on a substantive issue of the gospel and at the same time got to the crux of the Jews’ real problem with him. In short, they didn’t like Paul’s theology. Paul thus undercut his accusers’ attempt to frame their allegations in a political context and get him convicted of a crime against the state.

The Way is not some radical new innovation but something that stands in line with the central affirmations of historic Judaism. It is the Way’s claim of the resurrection of the dead which is at issue in the debate and is the cause of contention between the Way and the high priest (24:21). (William H. Willimon, *Acts*, page 174)

## **Two views of resurrection (Acts 24:15-16)**

We mustn’t lose sight of how differently from the Christians the Pharisees framed their belief in the resurrection. For the Pharisees, the resurrection of the just was a future event, with justification dependent on an individual’s

personal commitment to keep the law. For Paul, the pledge of a future resurrection—a down payment on the promise, so to speak—had already occurred in the resurrection of Jesus. An individual's personal zeal to keep God's ways, while perhaps laudatory, was not relevant to the issue. (All Christians, even after conversion, were subject to sin, and fell short of God's glory.)

Thus, Christians had a different approach to salvation. They had to be called by God, believe in Jesus as Savior, be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit. Then, by Jesus Christ living in them through the Spirit, they were accepted by God as righteous or holy. Christians lived generally new lives according to God's will and asked for forgiveness when they sinned.

There may have been a second difference between the Christian and Jewish view of the resurrection. Paul spoke of a "resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked" (24:15). It's not clear that the Pharisees believed in a resurrection of the "wicked." The evidence from Josephus, for example, is ambiguous (*Wars* 2:163; *Antiquities* 18:14).

Both Daniel (12:2) and Revelation (20:11-15) spoke of both a resurrection of the just and unjust. So did Jesus in John (5:28) and Matthew (25:31-46). As it's described in Revelation, the just receive salvation and the unjust eternal punishment. Acts 24:15 is the only place where Paul explicitly states that he believes in a resurrection of both righteous and unrighteous dead. Even the "resurrection chapter" of 1 Corinthians 15 doesn't discuss the resurrection of the wicked. However, Paul does speak of all people who have lived as one day being raised up to face God's judgment (Romans 2:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:1).

Since those who do evil things will be judged accordingly, Paul said he strove to keep his conscience clear (24:16). That is, he tried to live in fulfillment of the great law of love, so he had nothing to feel guilty about.

Paul told the high priest the same thing (23:1). This led to the ugly scene in which the high priest ordered Paul to be struck.

Paul insisted that the real contention of Ananias and the Jewish elders opposed to him was that they didn't like his religious beliefs. However, Paul said he better conformed with the beliefs and practices of his people than did his accusers, which must have galled the high priest.

### **Absent for several years (Acts 21:17)**

Paul had set the record straight on the nature of the accusations against him, as well as his insistence to be a law-abiding Jew. Next, he proceeded to explain why he had come to Jerusalem. "After an absence of several years," he said to Felix, "I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings" (24:17). Perhaps up to five years had elapsed since his last visit to the city, a visit barely mentioned in Acts (18:22). Before that, according to Acts, he had not been to Jerusalem since the apostolic conference of A.D. 49.

The reason Paul came to Jerusalem was to bring an offering to his fellow Jews. The alms were not for Jerusalemite Jews in general, but for those who were disciples (Romans 15:26). This is the only time Luke refers to the collection Paul had organized among the Gentile churches (Romans 15:25-31; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15).

The collection had been of the utmost importance for Paul. He saw it as a way for the Gentile churches to show their love toward the Jewish disciples in Jerusalem. But Luke did not mention the offering when Paul and his delegation came to Jerusalem. He left it to this point in his narrative to make but a single, and somewhat oblique, reference to it. Yet, for Paul, the offering was an immense and important project.

Luke's motive for downplaying the offering is not known. Perhaps looking at it from a later time he could see it in its proper perspective. It

didn't turn out to be important to the preaching of the gospel or the church—at least in the long term.

### **Ceremonially clean (Acts 24:18-21)**

Finally, Paul answered the charge that he had profaned the temple. He insisted that he was ceremonially clean when the Jews discovered him in the temple. There was no menacing group with him in the temple precincts, nor was he involved in any disturbance (24:18).

Paul's real accusers, who had started the wild rumors about his desecrating the temple—Jews from the province of Asia (21:27), were not even present. Presumably, they had returned home after Pentecost. Paul said to Felix they “ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me” (24:19). But the Asian Jews who had raised the issue to begin with had not remained to follow through on the charge. This was a serious matter in Roman jurisprudence.

Roman law imposed heavy penalties upon accusers who abandoned their charges...and the disappearance of accusers often meant the withdrawal of a charge. Their absence, therefore, suggested that they had nothing against him that would stand up in a Roman court of law. (Richard N. Longenecker, “Acts,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, page 541)

The council had taken up the charge and was pressing it, though in a rather different form. But it must have been obvious to Felix that its representatives were on thin legal ground. Paul, knowing this, turned to his accusers and said to Felix, “These who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin” (24:21).

Before anyone could answer, Paul did the same thing he had done at his defense before the Sanhedrin. He again claimed he was on trial because of the resurrection, something he had already alluded to (24:21, 15). Paul insisted that the real issue was religious. The Sanhedrin's official inquiry had

established nothing except that Paul believed in the resurrection. Now, the hearing before Felix was again steered into this issue by Paul.

Paul claimed that the prosecution had no case—unless Felix wanted to make Jewish theology the case. This would mean the Pharisees and many of the people of the land would also have to stand trial—since they believed it as well.

### **Understood “the way” (Acts 24:22-23)**

Luke didn't describe Felix's reaction at the way the hearing was going, but he must have been exasperated with the proceedings. At this point, he abruptly suspended the hearing (24:22). Luke noted that Felix “was well acquainted with the Way” (24:22). He had acquired a knowledge of the Christian movement (“the Way”) from his years in Judea. This probably came about because of the prominent position of the church in Jerusalem and Jewish antagonism to the Christians (24:24). His wife Drusilla was Jewish. She would also have been aware of this “strange sect” within Judaism.

From his experience with the Way, Felix must have clearly understood that the charges against Paul were theological in nature. The accusations of sedition or profaning the temple simply had not been proved.

Felix now had a problem on his hands. As governor, he had a responsibility to preserve the peace, which was already being threatened by fractious Jews. Felix knew about the great disturbance that Paul's presence in the temple had instigated. He must have surmised that to release Paul could have caused an even more extensive riot. Felix had already offended the Jews on several occasions, and he must have wanted to avoid another offense by freeing Paul.

The Sanhedrin was not averse to using political intimidation against Roman governors to get their way. We are reminded of the tactic the council used against Pilate, who wanted to set Jesus free. “If you let this man go, you

are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar” (John 19:12). Felix didn’t want the Jews to accuse him of working against Caesar by letting an insurrectionist like Paul go free. To avoid the problem, Felix simply delayed the confrontation. He talked about deciding the case when Lysias the commander came to Caesarea to give his testimony (24:22). But it’s doubtful that Felix had any intention of bringing the case to a decision. Luke doesn’t tell us whether Lysias ever came to Caesarea to give testimony. Most likely he was never summoned.

Meanwhile, Paul was put under guard, though he was allowed some freedom, and his friends could visit him and attend to his needs (24:23). He was granted what was called “free custody,” since he had not been charged with a crime.

### **Felix and Drusilla (Acts 24:24)**

Paul remained imprisoned in Caesarea for two years (24:27). But Luke mentioned nothing of Paul’s activities or the church during this time. There are many things we might have wished to know. For example, what happened to the Gentile delegation that had come with Paul to Jerusalem? What were Luke and Timothy doing? What role did the church in Jerusalem and Caesarea (and in Antioch) play in helping and supporting Paul?

Luke related only one incident after Paul’s suspended trial and before his final defense before being sent to Rome. Several days after the aborted hearing, Felix came to see Paul with his wife Drusilla. She was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I, the Herod of Acts 12 (Josephus, *Antiquities* 19:354). Drusilla was also the sister of Agrippa II, in front of whom Paul would soon give testimony (25:13).

Drusilla was the third wife of Felix. According to Suetonius, Felix was able to marry a succession of “three queens” despite his lowly origins as a slave (*The Twelve Caesars*, “Claudius” 28). Drusilla had been married to

Azizus, the king of Emesa, a small state in Syria. But it was an unhappy marriage. When Felix saw Drusilla (she was only 16), he was smitten with her beauty and decided on a ruse to acquire her as a wife. He sent an acquaintance, a Jew from Cyprus, who pretended to be a magician, and persuaded her to leave her husband for Felix (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:141-44).

The Western text inserts an explanatory note at verse 24, which may clarify the background of the incident of Drusilla and Felix's visit to Paul. The text adds: "She asked to see Paul and hear the word. So desiring to satisfy her he [Felix] sent for Paul."

This is important because Josephus said Felix caused Drusilla to "transgress the laws of her forefathers" in order to marry him (*Antiquities* 20:141-143). She would have been considered an apostate Jew. Perhaps Drusilla was hoping to be able to re-enter Judaism through Paul's sect. But she and Felix got more than they bargained for when Paul began to speak about "righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come" (24:25).

### **Righteousness and judgment (Acts 24:25-26)**

The marriage of Felix and Drusilla had been built on adultery, betrayal, lies and sorcery. Now, the imprisoned Paul was teaching the couple that they were living lives that were incompatible with gospel. The gospel has a moral dimension, and speaks to personal behavior. A life of faith in Jesus Christ involves living an ethical life, based on the principles of God's law.

At some point, Felix became agitated and fearful at the direction the meeting was taking. Perhaps he and Drusilla had thought of having a philosophical discussion on religion in general. Or they wanted to discuss Drusilla's reinstatement. But Paul's talk had turned into a discourse on personal responsibility. Perhaps both of them didn't want to hear that they needed to change their lives. Or Felix may have been afraid Paul would talk

Drusilla into leaving him. He decided to abruptly end the encounter, and told Paul, “That’s enough for now! You may leave” (24:25).

It is interesting that John the Baptist was involved in a similar circumstance in which he spoke of righteousness and self-control to Herod. He had taken Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, as his own. John had told him, “It is not lawful for you to have her,” and this especially angered his wife, Herodias (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29). For his truth-telling, John the Baptist was beheaded. Here was a similar circumstance in which Paul, too, could have “lost his head.”

But the situation was different, and Felix promised Paul that he would see him again when he found it convenient. True to his word, he did send for Paul “frequently and talked with him” (24:26). But it was not to dispose of his case, nor to hear moral instruction. Felix “was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe” (24:26). Felix thought Paul had the means to pay a large bribe in order to gain his release. He knew that Paul had come to Jerusalem with a relief fund offering for the church, which must have been substantial. Paul had mentioned it in his defense (24:17). Felix may have thought Paul had additional large sums with which he could buy his freedom.

### **Two years passed (Acts 24:27)**

But Paul had neither the resources nor the inclination to buy his way out of Felix’s prison. With no bribe forthcoming—as well as Felix’s disinclination to offend the Jews—Paul simply languished in jail, though he was given some freedom of movement. Felix didn’t release Paul because he feared a violent Jewish reaction. “Because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison,” wrote Luke (24:27). In the end, he wasn’t helped by this maneuver and was recalled to Rome after being accused by the Jews of crimes against the people.

Two years after Paul was brought to Caesarea, Felix’s governorship over



Judea came to an end. He had been governor from A.D. 52 to 58 or 59. Josephus said Felix was recalled to Rome by Nero, and replaced by Porcius Festus, who arrived in perhaps A.D. 59 (*Antiquities* 20:182; *Wars* 2:266-271). What may have caused the downfall of Felix was his rough handling of a civil disorder that pitted Jews against Greeks in Caesarea. He had retaliated against the Jews, indiscriminately killing them and plundering their goods. Felix could have suffered severe punishment for his action. But his influential brother Pallas successfully petitioned Nero on his behalf.

Festus, who replaced Felix, governed Judea from A.D. 59 to his death in A.D. 62. We know little about Festus, though he seems to have been a reasonably good governor, especially in comparison with the man he succeeded as well as his successors, Albinus and Florus (Josephus, *Wars* 2:272-283).

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## Acts 25

### **Festus goes to Jerusalem (Acts 25:1-3)**

As a new governor, Festus needed to become familiar with the local authorities. Three days after arriving in Judea, he went to Jerusalem to meet with the Jewish leaders. This was a dangerous time for Paul. The religious leaders would see the change in procurators as an opportunity to take advantage of a new and inexperienced governor. (In a similar situation a few years later, James would be killed by the high priest after Festus died and before the next governor arrived to take the reins of office.)

At Festus' meeting with the Jewish leaders, they "requested" that he transfer Paul to Jerusalem so that he could be put on trial (25:3). They were preparing to ambush Paul on the way and kill him. (Luke didn't explain how the plot became known.) We are reminded of the 40 men who had sworn to kill Paul two years earlier (23:14-15). There was a difference with this plot, though. The Jewish leadership itself seemed to have concocted the plan. This may explain why Paul appealed to Caesar in Rome (25:10). He knew that he would never survive a trip to Jerusalem.

For their part, the Jewish leaders had nearly abandoned their attempt to get at Paul through the Roman legal process. Perhaps all they could hope for, if the plot failed, was to have Festus give them the opportunity of trying Paul for profaning the temple. They just didn't have the proof to get him convicted of a state crime.

Festus was in a tricky position regarding Paul. The Jewish leaders had asked him to transfer Paul "as a favor to them" (25:3). This was probably presented in some politely intimidating manner. They may have reminded the new governor that charges against Felix were being prepared (or had already been given) by them in Rome. It was expected that Festus would want to

forge a closer and more understanding relationship with the elders. One way Festus could do that would be to grant the Jews' simple request to bring Paul to Jerusalem.

### **Transfer is refused (Acts 25:4-7)**

Festus, perhaps unwittingly, foiled the Jewish conspiracy. He invited some of the Jewish leaders to come with him to Caesarea and press charges against Paul there (15:4-5). Why he did this isn't clear. Perhaps it was simple logic. Paul was already in Caesarea, and Festus was returning there (25:4-5). Caesarea was the headquarters of the province, so that seemed the reasonable place to have the trial.

After eight or ten days in Jerusalem, Festus returned to Caesarea. He convened the court the next day. Paul was brought in and the Jewish leaders "stood around him. They brought many serious charges against him," but Luke says "they could not prove them" (25:7).

If it were not so serious, the case was becoming a humorous farce. It began with a hearsay-caused tumult in the temple. Then came a riotous hearing before the Sanhedrin and an ineffectual plot on Paul's life by the 40 zealots. The case next moved to Caesarea in which a bumbling Jewish prosecution failed to prove anything against Paul. However, the waffling Felix could make no decision for or against Paul. Now the case was being opened again, with the same unprovable charges flying about. And there was more to come.

### **Paul's defense (Acts 25:8-9)**

Luke narrated Paul's defense before Festus briefly, omitting most of the details of the Jews' charges and Paul's defense. We already know the case well, from what Luke has previously narrated. We know that the prosecution has no real evidence, so we are confident that Paul will not be convicted.

Luke summarized Paul's defense in a sentence. He had Paul say to Festus:

“I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar” (25:8). This is a summary of the Jews’ three-fold accusation, and Paul has already successfully defended himself against the charges.

Festus must have been puzzled by the accusations. He was in the same situation as Felix had been in. There was no criminal act for which Paul could be prosecuted. But Festus didn’t want to let Paul go free because of the possible repercussions from the Jews.

Then he thought of a possible way out of his dilemma. The Jews had previously asked Festus, as a favor, to transfer Paul to Jerusalem for trial. There seemed no harm in doing this. He could gain their good graces and rid himself of a potentially volatile situation. So Festus turned to Paul and said, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?” (25:9). Luke added that Festus (like Felix before him) said this “wishing to do the Jews a favor.”

It’s difficult to see what this change of venue would have accomplished. The same ground had already been gone over twice, once before Felix and now before Festus. The Sanhedrin also had attempted to try Paul. Nonetheless, Festus wanted Paul to defend himself *again* in a court session in Jerusalem because he was worried the Jews might riot over Paul. However, it’s not clear that Festus would have acted as judge. In one place he was ambiguous on the matter, saying only that he wanted Paul to “go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges” (25:20). But there should have been no need for any trial since Paul had been found innocent—again.

Festus was dealing with what seemed to be a mish-mash of religious and political offenses. Some issues were properly in the domain of a governor to decide, and some for the Sanhedrin to rule on.

It is unlikely that a formal session of the Sanhedrin could have been held with Festus as president. What may have been in the procurator’s mind was a trial in Jerusalem before the Sanhedrin on

the religious charges—contravention of Jewish law and, in particular, violation of the Temple—followed by a trial on the political charges before the procurator himself. (Neil, 238)

He might have reasoned that witnesses would be more easily available in Jerusalem. He might have allowed the Jews to try Paul on the temple or religious issue. They might decide Paul should be executed and Festus could go along with it. Then he would not be in the awkward position of first having to declare Paul innocent on the political issues. The matter simply wouldn't come up. Perhaps Festus could have dismissed the political charges first without doing himself much political harm. After all, he was still allowing the Jews to try Paul on the religious charges. In his mind, he could give the prisoner his due and still do the Jews a favor. In any case, it must have been clear to Paul that for him it was a lose-lose situation.

### **“I appeal to Caesar!” (Acts 25:10-11)**

Festus couldn't simply turn Paul over to the Jews. He was dealing with a Roman citizen who had no official charges proven against him. His duty as a Roman ruler was to protect Roman citizens from local injustice. Festus apparently could not make a preemptory decision regarding a place of trial. He had to get Paul's agreement for a change in venue.

Paul was now at the crossroads. To agree to a Jerusalem trial was to play into the hands of his accusers. He would have been tacitly agreeing that there was, after all, a case to be decided. Perhaps Paul knew of the plot against him, or must have suspected one would be hatched. Besides, since Festus had already made one concession to the Jews, how many more was he prepared to make?

Paul understood that to return to Jerusalem was to place himself in serious jeopardy. It would be tantamount to being turned over to the Sanhedrin; for once he was in Jerusalem, the Jewish authorities would exert every pressure on Festus to have

Paul turned over to them for trial on the charge of profaning the temple. (Neil, 545)

So Paul told Festus: “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 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!*” (25:10-11). The right of a citizen to appeal to Caesar was an ancient one. It was called the *provocatio ad Caesarem* or “appeal to the emperor” for trial. (This should be distinguished from the appeal *after* a sentence.)

### **Nero was emperor (Acts 25:11-12)**

The emperor at the time Paul made his appeal was the infamous Nero (A.D. 54-68). It may seem odd that Paul would put his life in the hands of an emperor who would be known as a persecutor of Christians. However, we’ve seen that Paul needed to evade the grasp of the Jews in Jerusalem at almost any cost. Neither was he certain of a fair hearing before a governor who had declared him innocent but refused to let him go.

There was a faith issue involved also. Paul must have remembered the vision that spoke of his going to Rome. He may have realized that a sure way to get there and fulfill his calling to preach the gospel was to make his appeal to Caesar (23:11). Also, Nero had not yet become the sinister ruler of his later years. In the early years of his reign, Nero was under the influence of the Stoic philosopher Seneca and the prefect of the praetorian guard Afranius Burrus. They were considered the good years of Nero’s reign, and were even looked upon as something of a Golden Age.

Neither had Nero yet married Poppaea, who Josephus called “a religious woman” (*Antiquities* 20:195). She was a friend of the Jews, and might have been capable of influencing Nero to be disaffected toward a major Christian leader like Paul. It was only later, about A.D. 62, that imperial policy toward

the Christians became malicious. Seneca had retired by this time. Burrus was dead. Nero had divorced Octavia and married Poppaea. But none of this could have been foreseen around the time Paul appealed and went to Rome.

“There was little in the year 60 that would have warned regarding Nero’s later character and relations with Christianity during the last five years of his life” (Longenecker, 546). The great fire of Rome, something for which Nero apparently blamed the Christians of Rome, did not occur until A.D. 64.

When Paul appealed to Rome, Festus saw that his problem was solved. He conferred with his council about the matter, and then told Paul: “You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!” (25:12).

Almost certainly, the Jews were unhappy about this turn of events. But Festus could parry their objections by claiming his hands were tied. Paul was a Roman citizen, against whom no certain charges could be proved. It was the law. Paul had to be allowed to appeal to Caesar if he so requested.

### **King Agrippa (Acts 25:13)**

However, the charade was not yet over for Paul. As it turned out, a few days later King Agrippa and his wife Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to the new governor. They were spending some time there, and naturally, Festus discussed Paul’s case with them (25:13).

Marcus Julius Agrippa II (A.D. 27-100) was the son of Agrippa I (12:23), and the great-grandson of Herod the Great. He had been brought up at Rome in the court of Claudius and was a favorite of the emperor. The emperors Claudius and Nero had appointed Agrippa ruler of a number of kingdoms, lands and cities in the Holy Land. At the time of Paul’s trial, he was the king over various territories northeast of Galilee.

The emperor had given Agrippa the right to appoint the high priest and to be custodian of the temple’s treasury and priestly garments (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:213, 222, 103). This was because Agrippa was from an

Idumean-Jewish family and was knowledgeable of Jewish affairs. Politically, this moderated the power struggle between the Jewish leaders and the Roman political rulers in Judea. Since Agrippa was viewed by Rome as an authority on Jewish religious questions, it's not surprising that Festus discussed Paul's case with him. He hoped to get Agrippa's help in drafting a report to Rome regarding the issues involved.

### **Queen Bernice (Acts 25:13)**

Bernice was the sister of Agrippa II, and the sister of Drusilla. She had been married to her uncle, Herod king of Chalcis. At his death she came to live with her brother Agrippa, which caused rumors that they were having an incestuous relationship. At the close of the Jewish-Roman war, she became the mistress of the Roman general Titus, and for a time lived with him in Rome (before he became emperor). Bernice was once described as “a Jewish Cleopatra on a small scale.”

Both Agrippa II and Bernice tried to prevent the Jewish-Roman war, finally opting to take the part of Rome in the struggle. At one point, with considerable risk to her own life, she tried to prevent a terrible massacre of Jews by the governor Florus. (For further details on Bernice see Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:145-147; *Wars* 2:425-429; Juvenal, *Satires* 6.156-160; Tacitus, *The Histories* 2.2, 81; Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, “Titus” 7; Dio Cassius, *History of Rome* 56.18.)

### **King and Festus discuss the case (Acts 25:14-21)**

Because of King Agrippa's role in Judaism, he has been described as “the secular head of the Jewish faith” (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 388). Festus, knowing that Agrippa understood Judaism's faith and practice, was eager to get his views on Paul's case. Here were two rulers huddling together to try to sort out the details of Paul's case. The one was an expert on Judaism and the other on Roman culture. Now,



they would once again hear Paul's line of defense.

In the next chapter, Luke will narrate Paul's speech before King Agrippa and governor Festus. But before this, he described a private conversation between the two men, in which Festus admitted his consternation (25:14-21). How Luke knew what they discussed is not known.

In his explanation to Agrippa, Festus admitted that when Paul's accusers got up to speak, "They did not charge him with any crimes I had expected. Instead they had some fine points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive" (25:18-19). These were clearly not offenses punishable under Roman law.

The whole spate of accusations seemed baffling to Festus. Paul's discussion about the death and resurrection of Jesus had been even more incomprehensible to Festus. He was an outsider who understood nothing about the gospel—nor of the Jewish accusations. He admitted to Agrippa: "I was at a loss how to investigate such matters" (25:20). He hoped Agrippa could help him sort out the complexities of the case and aid him in drafting a letter about Paul to the emperor's court (25:26).

### **Agrippa to hear Paul (Acts 25:22)**

The case intrigued Agrippa, and he said to Festus, "I would like to hear this man myself" (25:22). Festus granted the king his wish, hoping no doubt for some clarification in the matter. The stage was set for Paul to witness to a both a governor and king at once, as Jesus said his disciples would (Matthew 10:18; Luke 21:12). This meeting with Herod Agrippa II has its parallel in Jesus' inquest before Herod Antipas (Luke 23:6-12). Both Jesus and Paul were tried before a Roman governor, and each witnessed to a Jewish king who was anxious to meet him.) (Agrippa here played the role taken by Antipas in Jesus' trial.)

### **Pomp and circumstance (Acts 25:23)**

Luke began to narrate what would be Paul's longest and final major speech. But before doing so, Luke explained how Agrippa and Bernice "came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city" (25:23). Paul's witness to the gospel would be heard by the most important political leaders of Caesarea and Judea.

Of all of Paul's defense speeches, Luke gave the most space to his defense before King Agrippa. The speech was tightly constructed and carefully thought out. Luke considered the speech as being very important to his message. It was Paul's crowning witness before the Jewish authorities and important Gentile dignitaries of the land.

This was not an official trial, nor even an inquiry. Paul had already appealed to Caesar and his wish had been granted by Festus. The informal hearing (if we might call it that) was held because of Agrippa's curiosity, and in order that he might help Festus construct his report to the emperor. It was also a spectacle and great theater. Agrippa and Bernice had entered the chamber with pomp and circumstance. The lesser dignitaries had marched in behind them. The star was Paul. At the center of a controversy that wouldn't quit, he had become a media event. Like the Athenians, everyone seemed curious about the new ideas he was expounding.

### **Not deserving of death (Acts 25:24-25)**

Before Paul was to give his defense, Festus made a general declaration of Paul's innocence to the assembled throng. He told them: "The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. I found he had done nothing deserving of death" (25:24-25). Lysias had already stated that Paul was innocent (23:29). For a second time, a Roman authority figure declared that Paul had committed no crime that deserved a death penalty. There would be

yet one more affirmation of Paul's innocence (26:31). Like Jesus (Luke 23:4, 15, 22), Paul would be exonerated three times by the Roman authority.

Festus made a second admission to the lords and ladies assembled to hear Paul. He said: "I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty [that is, the Emperor] about him [Paul]. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. For I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him" (25:26-27).

The irony of such a statement should not be lost. There was *no charge* against Paul of a civil nature. He had not committed a crime and should have been freed. Yet, he was incarcerated and will be sent to Rome to stand trial with no crime being charged to him. The truth of the matter is that he was a prisoner only because the Jews were able to intimidate the political authority who did not have the courage to free Paul.

The complication and prolongation of the trial of Paul arose from the fact that the charge was political—hence the procurators were reluctant to dismiss it out of hand—and yet the evidence was theological, hence the procurators were quite unable to understand it. Not surprisingly, Festus called in King Agrippa as an assessor, to help him to draft the explanation which had to be sent with the prisoner to Rome. (Sherwin-White, 51)

It's difficult to know what Agrippa could add to what Festus already knew. He had just admitted that there was no chargeable offense against Paul. The ostensible reason Festus was still holding Paul was that the prisoner had appealed to Rome. For a Roman governor to admit there was no definite charge to write Rome about, was an admission that Paul ought to have been freed in Caesarea. If there was no charge to send to Rome, then why send the man?

It may have been that Festus was hoping that Agrippa—with his expert knowledge of Jewish matters—would be able to find *something* with which Paul could be charged. Or if not, at least he could use the name of a local Jewish leader respected at Rome to underwrite the fact that there was no charge to send.

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# Acts 26

## **Agrippa opens the inquest (Acts 26:1)**

Though Luke described Paul's speech as a "defense," the occasion was a fact-finding investigation rather than a formal judicial inquiry (26:1). That is why Festus allowed Agrippa to preside at the meeting, for it was Agrippa who told Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself" (26:1).

Paul's speech before Agrippa covered the same ground as his previous defense before the Jews at the temple and later before Felix. The speech was personal and autobiographical. Paul began by asserting that he was a good Jew and had not violated Torah. He insisted that the Jews had accused him because he believed in the resurrection. Paul painted himself as the victim of factional squabbling over whether Jesus was the Messiah resurrected.

Paul spent considerable time recounting his conversion experience. His point was that he had not become a Christian on a whim. Dramatic events in his personal life had led to his change of viewpoint. Paul insisted that his new Christian faith was an outgrowth of his Jewish beliefs as a Pharisee. He claimed that the Christian faith was organically connected with Judaism.

We will see all these threads unfold as Paul speaks. This will be our last chance to hear Paul in depth. After this, Luke will give us only brief snippets of his conversation with shipmates (27:10, 21-25, 33), and a short synopsis of his disturbing meeting with Rome's Jews (28:17-28).

## **Acquainted with Jewish customs (Acts 26:2-5)**

Paul began by acknowledging that his audience, particularly Agrippa, was not antagonistic to him. Not only that, he said of Agrippa, "You are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies" (26:3). Paul was talking to someone who understood the unruly nature of the Jewish religious situation in Jerusalem and had an interest in its theology. Also, Agrippa

seemed somewhat impartial—since he did not rule Judea, he was insulated from political pressures from the high priests. Indeed, Agrippa had power over the high priest. Paul hoped such a person—one who was expert in the details of Jewish belief and practice—would grasp the fact that his Christian beliefs were the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes.

He pointed out that his way of life since childhood (both in Tarsus and Jerusalem) was well known among the Jews (26:4). “They have known me for a long time” (26:5). Paul was sufficiently prominent to have been a known quantity in Judea. We might say he was a bit of a religious celebrity in his time. He stressed his loyalty to Torah, saying, “I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee” (26:5). The term “Pharisee” described those who had bound themselves to live according to the law (Philippians 3:5). In applying the term to himself, Paul established his Jewish credentials before Agrippa.

Paul proclaimed the gospel *because*, not in spite of, his Jewish ancestry and culture. He characterized the Jewish and Christian hope as being inextricably linked. Paul wanted Agrippa to see a continuity between his Jewish upbringing and his Christianity.

### **On trial for “hope” (Acts 26:6-8)**

Paul again made the resurrection the real bone of contention between himself and his Jewish accusers (23:6; 24:15; 25:19). “It is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today,” he told Agrippa (26:6). The resurrection was the promise all Israel was “hoping to see fulfilled.” He hammered home the resurrection: “King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me” (26:8).

Paul pointed out that the resurrection was a Jewish hope. He implied that Christians—who have the same hope—are within the boundaries of what was accepted within first-century Judaism. Of course, the Christian view of the

resurrection was much more specific, as it centered on a glorified Jesus. All hope for a general resurrection hinged on the specific resurrection of Jesus. This was the real “hope” of which Paul spoke.

The word *hope* is a key term in Paul’s defence (23:6; 24:15; 26:6-; 28:20). It refers to the believing expectation that God will fulfil the promises and prophecies made in the Old Testament, and for Paul it refers specifically to the belief that these promises have been and will be fulfilled in Jesus. (Marshall, 392)

It was absurd, Paul was saying, that he should be persecuted for proclaiming the very hope in which the Jews believed! The Messiah had promised that he would free his people. God had honored Israel’s hope by sending Jesus as the Messiah and then raising him as the forerunner of the promise to raise all the righteous dead. This was the specific “hope” Paul had in mind.

At this point, Paul turned to the audience and made a plea for everyone to accept this “hope.” “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” he asked the assembly (26:8). The real issue was the resurrection of Jesus. To put it in the words of Festus, it was “about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive” (25:19). Paul had one particular instance of “raising” in mind—that of Jesus. It was one resurrection that had been authenticated and verified. For Paul, to disbelieve in the resurrection of Christ was to disbelieve in the general resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:12-19).

Paul’s point was that this belief [in a resurrection] had now been validated by God in his raising one man from the dead, demonstrating by this very fact that this one man was Israel’s long-expected deliverer, the one in whom the ancient hope was to be realized. (F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, revised edition, The New International Commentary on the Bible, page 463)

## **Opposed the name of Jesus (Acts 26:9-11)**

Paul admitted that he, ardent Pharisee that he was, had once denounced Jesus and denied his resurrection. Paul had persecuted people who claimed to have seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion.

Paul understood his opponents' frame of mind very well; he had once shared it himself. He himself, for all his belief in the resurrection of the dead at the last day, thought it incredible that God should have raised the crucified Jesus; and when the disciples insisted that he had indeed raised him, Paul treated them as charlatans and blasphemers. (Bruce, 464)

Paul told Agrippa: "On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them" (26:10). Luke previously told us Paul had been involved with Stephen's death (7:57-60). But now we learn that he was instrumental in the death of many Christians, something he would regret during his entire life (1 Corinthians 15:9; 1 Timothy 1:12-16). The phrase "I cast my vote against them" literally means "I cast my pebble against them." It was a metaphor with the meaning of giving one's approval to something. In what sense he gave "approval" is not clear.

Would Paul have been a member of that august body to have actually "voted against" Christians who had been brought before it? It is doubtful, not only on account of his probable age at the time, but also because of his apparently obscure origins. The Sanhedrin was an assembly of aristocrats, composed of men of mature years and influence. It is just possible, of course, that he had won a place in their ranks on sheer ability, but it is safer to assume that "voted against" means simply that he "approved." (David J. Williams, *Acts*, New International Biblical Commentary, page 417)

Some commentators believe that Paul was actually a member of the



Sanhedrin. Member or not, Paul was working hand-in-glove with the Sanhedrin. He was a sort of point man or *agent provocateur* for the council authorities in hunting down Christians (7:58; 8:1; 22:20). He went from one synagogue to another—including those in foreign cities—and punished Christian Jews, attempting to get them to blaspheme (that is, to deny Christ) (26:11).

Paul spoke as though quite a number of Christians had been put to death under the authority of the Sanhedrin. It is doubtful that the Romans had given the Jewish leaders unilateral permission to kill the Christians they had jailed. The executions were probably illegal executions, or trumped-up political charges about being a follower of a convicted revolutionary. The fact that the Jews got away with Stephen's murder implies they escaped detection and punishment in other executions. Or the authorities may have simply looked the other way.

### **Conversion experience (Acts 26:12-14)**

During a Christian-hunting journey to Damascus—with the authority and commission of the chief priests—a critical moment occurred in Paul's life (26:12). He came face to face with the risen Christ.

This is the third time that Paul's conversion has been recounted in Acts (9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18). The event was obviously important for Luke as well as Paul. But each of the three accounts was not an identical retelling. Each version included or deleted information—and each had its emphasis—so that it fit the audience and Luke's context. There is a general agreement between the accounts, and with Paul's own statement in Galatians 1. But there are differences in detail. For example, the present account made no mention of Ananias, nor of Paul's blindness and subsequent healing. Paul also did not mention his being taken to Damascus. [For a side-by-side comparison of the accounts, see [www.gci.org/acts/harmony](http://www.gci.org/acts/harmony).]

Paul did mention only here that the voice spoke in Aramaic, or literally “in the Hebrew language” (26:14). This is indicated by the Semitic form of his name in which the voice addressed him, “Saoul, Saoul...” The light Paul saw was described as having great intensity. It was “a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions” and everyone fell to the ground (26:13-14). The sheer brightness of the light and its occurrence at noon—the brightest part of the day—also added to the forcefulness with which Jesus confronted Paul. He was stopped dead in his tracks, as it were.

The light represented the presence of God and Christ. By its intensification, Paul was perhaps suggesting that the origin of his belief in Jesus was not based on whimsy. The Damascus road experience (with its overpowering light) could not be doubted. This was the risen Jesus talking to him, and there was no question about it.

### **Kick against the goads (Acts 26:14)**

This conversion account seemed to concentrate its attention on Jesus’ divine commission to Paul given through the voice he heard. Luke’s account accentuated the role of the voice by being the only one to report Jesus’ words to Paul: “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (26:14). A goad was a long-handled, pointed instrument used to urge stubborn oxen to move forward during plowing. A modern equivalent would be a cattle prod. This prosaic agricultural metaphor was well-known in the Greek world. The expression described opposition to deity. Howard Marshall points out its usage in Euripides’ *Bacchanals*: “Pentheus, the opponent of the cult of Dionysius, is warned: ‘You are a mortal, and he is a god. If I were you I would control my rage and sacrifice to him rather than kick against the pricks [goads]’” (794-795).

It was a proverbial saying, common in Greek and Latin,

indicating that no man can resist the will of the gods. The metaphor is that of the stubborn ox kicking back at the driver who is prodding it on in the direction he wants it to go. (Neil, 243)

An ox who kicks against the goad only invites more goading. The only way for the ox to avoid the irritant is to go forward, to do the master's bidding. The idea as expressed in Paul's speech seems to have been that God had been pushing Paul towards the truth, but that he had been resisting. That is not to say Paul had been suffering from an uneasy conscience over his persecution of Christians. There is no hint of this either in Acts or Paul's epistles. Paul claimed the opposite in Acts 23:1. Even to the last moment on the Damascus road, Paul was on his way to track down Christians, not find Christ.

In the words of F.F. Bruce, "The 'goads' against which he was now told it was fruitless for him to kick were not the prickings of a disturbed conscience, but the new forces which were now impelling him in the opposite direction" (466).

### **Appointed to witness (Acts 26:15-16)**

Over half of the conversion experience narrative in chapter 26 was taken up by a description of the commission Jesus gave to Paul. In this account, the commission was delivered directly to Paul by the risen Christ. Ananias was not referred to at all. It was Jesus who spoke to Paul, telling him to stand on his feet. He was then told that he had been appointed as a servant and witness of Christ (26:16). There are parallels with the commissioning of some of the Old Testament prophets. One is reminded of the commission of Ezekiel (2:1-8). He, too, was told to stand. Then he was informed that he would be sent as a prophet to a rebellious house of Israel.

But Paul was to be *rescued* from his own people, and then sent to the Gentiles. Paul said Jesus had told him: "I am sending you to them [the

Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (26:17-18).

Paul would receive protection from Jews and Gentiles to enable him to fulfill his witness. But he would not be spared suffering in the process (9:16). Paul would turn the Gentiles from darkness (sin and ignorance) to light (understanding and righteousness) (26:18). Paul’s description in Colossians 1:12-13 of the Gentiles as being rescued from “the dominion of darkness” and sharing in “the kingdom of light” is a close parallel. Paul used this metaphor of darkness and light to represent salvation in his own writings. Some examples are: Romans 2:19; 13:12; 2 Corinthians 4:6; 6:14; Ephesians 5:8; Colossians 1:12-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:5.

Moving people from darkness to light was a way of describing conversion (1 Peter 2:9). This involved turning away from sin and evil as well (Ephesians 2:2; Colossians 1:13). In the Bible, the unsaved are pictured as being spiritually blind. Salvation is pictured in terms of restoring spiritual sight to the blind (Isaiah 35:5; 42:6; cf. Matthew 9:30). The Suffering Servant, a reference to Jesus, was commissioned to “open eyes that are blind” (Isaiah 42:7). Jesus applied this commission to himself (Luke 4:16-21, quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2). Paul, as the servant of the Master, was to take the news of that salvation to Jews, and especially to Gentiles—to open blind eyes. Paul was called to continue Jesus’ ministry of conversion, a ministry of spiritual healing.

The turning of Gentiles “from the power of Satan to God” echoed another theme of Scripture. Satan’s kingdom (this world) is at war with God’s kingdom, and must be vanquished. The book of Revelation, for example, is a story of Satan “who leads the whole world astray” (12:9). He is vanquished by the returning Jesus and chained so that “the kingdom of the world” can

become the kingdom of Christ and God (11:15; 20:1-3).

### **Obedient to vision (Acts 26:19)**

Paul offered his experience on the Damascus road as a rationale for why he was preaching a message that angered the Jews. He was telling people about what he had seen, Jesus Christ, and following his commands, telling all people that he was the promised Savior. Paul said, “I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven” (26:19). Not being “disobedient” required that he preach to Gentiles everywhere.

Paul explained to Agrippa what he had been doing all these years. He gave a general summary of his missionary activity to the present. (Or rather, Luke put a summary in the book of Acts. Paul may have covered many more details when he was talking to Agrippa.) Paul’s work had occurred in: Damascus, Jerusalem, Judea and the Gentile world. This was similar to the commission given to the 12 apostles. They were to be witnesses of Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8).

Paul was not laying out a chronological summary of his missionary activity. There is no evidence in Acts that he witnessed throughout Judea after preaching in Damascus and Jerusalem, though Luke doesn’t necessary tell us everywhere Paul preached (9:20-30). Paul’s own letters say that he did not preach “in all Judea” in the early days of his conversion (Galatians 1:18-24). He traveled through Judea and into Jerusalem on several later occasions (11:30; 12:25; 15:3; 18:22; 21:7-16). He could have preached the gospel in Judea during these travels.

### **Repent and turn to God (Acts 26:20)**

During his witnessing to Christ, Paul preached that people “should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds” (26:20). We have here something of the basic substance of Paul’s message. True repentance involves a new view of oneself in which the need for a Savior to

do his work *within* is understood to be necessary. Thus, the stress in the apostles' preaching on the need to accept and put one's faith in Jesus and his saving power. There is a need to turn to God "based on knowledge" and accept "the righteousness that comes from God" instead of seeking a goodness based on our own merits (Romans 10:1-3; Philippians 3:9). Pagan Gentiles would also learn that they had been putting their faith in worthless idols, and they need to turn to the true God.

Following that, believers would begin living a life appropriate to conversion. They would be showing the fruits or evidences of the operation of the Holy Spirit in their lives (Galatians 5:22-25). In short, people do not make themselves acceptable in God's sight because they first decide to keep his law. God first converts people through the Spirit, and this leads them to base their lives on his will. Obedience is the result, and not the cause of salvation.

The proof of genuine repentance and turning to God is a certain kind of life. But these deeds are not merely the reaction of someone whose life is governed by a new series of laws; they are the result of a new *love*. (William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition, The Daily Study Bible Series, page 179)

### **Spoke what was prophesied (Acts 26:21-22)**

Paul insisted to King Agrippa that it was because of his preaching the gospel—particularly to Gentiles—that the Jews had seized him in the temple, and tried to kill him (26:21). It was only through God's protection that he had survived the plots against him. Thus, he was able to "stand here and testify to small and great alike" (26:22). Paul explained that he was teaching only what "the prophets and Moses said would happen." That is, he was attempting to prove through the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. This was Paul's mode of operation when confronting Jews with the gospel (17:2-3).

Paul said he was innocent of any wrong-doing to God or the Jews. He had only taught from the Scriptures—the Scriptures that faithful Jews called their own. Paul’s teaching about Jesus, in that sense, was just pointing out fulfilled prophecy. This is a central argument of Luke in both his Gospel and the book of Acts. The hope of Israel in its Savior was described in the Holy Scriptures and fulfilled in Jesus (Luke 24:25-27, 44; Acts 3:18-26; 10:42-43; 13:27).

### **The Christ to suffer (Acts 26:23)**

The prophets and Moses had prophesied of Jesus. In Paul’s words, they said “the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles” (26:22-23). We can go to the Servant Songs of Isaiah to find the idea of the Suffering Messiah (52:13-53:12, quoted in Acts 8:32). A number of the Psalms also speak of a Savior who would suffer (Psalm 2:1-2, quoted in Acts 4:25-26). If the writers of the Psalms (David in particular) are seen as types of a suffering Savior, then many of these contain prophetic material regarding Jesus.

The other question about Paul’s statement in 26:23 is: Which Hebrew Scriptures speak of a Savior who must first rise from the dead? There are some, though they are not prominent. Peter quoted one of these texts from Psalm 17:10 (Acts 2:25-28). Also Isaiah had said the Servant would “prolong his days” and “see the light of life” after his suffering (53:10-11).

The question also arises as to whether the Jews of Paul’s day ever thought of the Messiah in terms of suffering. The apostles seem to speak as though this was understood, at least in a hazy way. Paul does so here before Agrippa as well. Howard Marshall writes, “Paul as a Christian appears to presuppose the identification of the Messiah as the suffering Servant, but it is not certain whether this step had been taken by the Jews, and it may well be that they disputed it” (398).

It may be in doubt whether pre-Christian Judaism conceived of the

Messiah in terms of suffering, dying and being resurrected. The message of the apostles and Paul clearly went beyond the understanding of the Jews, for some of it came by revelation through Christ. The majority of Jews, whatever their view of the Messiah, did not believe this role had been fulfilled in Jesus.

Nonetheless, Paul insisted that God's purpose was pre-figured in Scripture, and that its prophetic nature could be seen in the inspired writings. That purpose (which Paul said was fulfilled in Jesus) was in harmony and continuity with the true faith of Israel. To accept the reality of Jesus, the resurrection and the Holy Spirit was to realize the true hope of Israel stated in the Scriptures (3:24-26). Jesus was a light to all people—Jew and Gentile. This had been prophesied in the Scriptures (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 60:3).

Luke told his readers early on in his Gospel that Jesus was a "light." The elderly and devout Simeon had taken the infant Jesus in his arms. Through the Holy Spirit, he prophesied that he would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel" (Luke 2:32, from Isaiah 49:6). Echoing Simeon's statement, Paul made preaching "a gospel of light" the programmatic prophecy of his own work (13:47).

### **"You are...insane" (Acts 26:24-27)**

Such thoughts "about a dead man named Jesus" were beyond the grasp of Festus. To him, Paul was speaking nonsense. He interrupted Paul's speech, saying, "You are out of your mind... Your great learning is driving you insane" (26:24). To a practical Roman governor, this Jewish messianism was crazy talk.

Paul countered that he wasn't insane. He insisted that what he was saying was "true and reasonable" (24:25). He referred to King Agrippa for support, as one who was familiar with these thoughts. Paul felt he could speak to Agrippa freely because of this. Besides, the controversy over the Christians



was widely known. The gospel had been proclaimed for three decades and the arguments pro and con about Jesus' death and resurrection would have been widely known and discussed.

Paul turned to the king and said, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do" (26:27). Paul's leading question had its point. The Jewish king who knows the Scriptures should accept Paul's case about Jesus, since it rests on the promises of the prophets. But Agrippa was like most Jews. He could accept the words of the prophets who spoke of a coming Messiah. That was a safe belief that did not require any immediate changes in what he did. But he did not believe they were fulfilled in Jesus; that was a dangerous belief that required personal changes.

### **"In such a short time" (Acts 26:28-29)**

The conversation had suddenly become uncomfortably personal for Agrippa. Paul had challenged him to accept his claims about Jesus since he believed the prophets. He had been logically boxed in by Paul's question, and he needed to get out it and still remain politically correct.

Agrippa turned and said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" (26:28). The King James Version translated Agrippa's reply to Paul in these words: "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." It is one of the most famous of biblical quotations, and many sermons have been preached on its words.

Unfortunately, it is almost certainly not what Agrippa said. The NIV's translation is probably more faithful to the king's thoughts. The Greek is difficult in this verse, and commentators translate it in various ways. But whatever Agrippa meant by his words, he was not almost ready to respond to Paul's "altar call." The king had been put into a quandary by Paul's challenge. He was embarrassed by his appeal, but could neither agree nor disagree with certain parts of Paul's question.

He could not admit that he did believe the prophets; on the other hand, he could not say that he did not believe them, for then his influence with the Jews and his standing with their religious leaders would be gone. So he turned Paul's appeal aside with a smile: "In short," he said, "you are trying to make me play the Christian"—for that seems to be the meaning of his words. He was not going to be maneuvered into anything like that! Bruce, 471)

Agrippa was not going to agree with Paul even a little bit. Otherwise he would be led into a logical box and would have no safe escape. So he parried Paul's question with his facetious remark.

If he confessed belief in the prophets, the obvious follow-up would be, "Surely then you accept that Jesus is the Messiah?" On the other hand, to deny that he believed in the prophets would be unthinkable for a loyal Jew. So he answers, "In a short time you think to make me a Christian!" The answer is light-hearted, but not ironic. It is Agrippa's attempt to get out of the logical trap in which he is in danger of being caught. (Marshall, 400)

To paraphrase, Agrippa was saying to Paul, "You think you can make me a Christian in this short time, don't you?" He side-stepped the question by giving one of his own. This then led Paul to parry back with his own retort. It was probably a play on Agrippa's quick remark. Paul said to him: "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" (26:29).

Paul would have liked all his listeners to become Christians, to become free of their spiritual chains. The situation was made more ironic by Paul's own manacles. After saying he wanted his listeners to become as he was, he must have raised his hands, and with a wry smile said, "...except for these chains" (26:29).

### **Mirror of Jesus' trip (Acts 26:30-32)**

Paul's light touch may have elicited smiles and laughter from the

audience; it was a good place to end the meeting. Festus, Agrippa, Bernice and some of the dignitaries sitting with them left the room for a discussion about Paul's fate. Luke summarized their conclusion in a sentence: "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment" (26:31). In the words of William Barclay, "The end of the matter is that a rather bewildered company cannot see any real reason why Paul should be tried in Rome or anywhere else" (180).

This is the third time that Roman authorities (now with a Jewish king present) concluded that Paul was innocent (23:29; 25:25). Jesus, like Paul, had also been declared innocent three times by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (Luke 23:4, 14, 22), with the Jewish leader Herod nodding in assent (23:5). For Luke, Paul's ministry and trials closely resembled those of his Master, Jesus.

We cannot read this account of Paul standing before these sophisticated representatives of the Roman legal system without hearing echoes of Jesus' trial and passion. Both Jesus and Paul go to Jerusalem ready to suffer and die in obedience to the will of God (cf. 19:21; Luke 9:51). Both appear before the Sanhedrin and a Roman procurator and governor. In both cases their fellow Jews cry "Away with him!" (21:36; Luke 23:18). Both were beaten and were at several times declared to be innocent (verse 31; 23:29; Luke 22:63; 23:4, 14-15, 22). (Willimon, (182)

But there were also differences between Jesus' and Paul's experience. Jesus' death at Jerusalem was narrated in gruesome detail. Paul did not die at Jerusalem, nor would he die at the end of Acts in Rome. But to Rome Paul would go. After the Roman governor had declared Paul innocent, he could have released Paul. But it was not politically expedient to do so, and since he had appealed to the emperor, it was deemed appropriate to send him to Rome. As Agrippa told Festus: "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar" (26:32).

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# **Paul Sails for Rome**

## **Acts 27:1-28:15**

### **Luke as eyewitness (Acts 27:1)**

Sometime after Paul's meeting with Agrippa, Festus made arrangements for Paul to be taken to Rome. Luke wrote: "When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius" (27:1). Luke resumed the "we" narrative section, which he had broken off when Paul and the delegation met with James in Jerusalem (21:18). The present "we" section continues until Paul reaches Rome (28:16). This is the longest of the four "we" panels. (To review them, they were: 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16.)

Luke apparently was with Paul during the entire eventful journey. As we shall see from the vivid details he provided, the narrative of Paul's sea voyage was an eyewitness report. Luke described eastern Mediterranean ports-of-call, wind directions, and mentioned places of safety and danger for ships. As far as historians are able to verify, all of Luke's nautical details are as they should be.

Luke's account of Paul's voyage to Rome stands out as one of the most vivid pieces of descriptive writing in the whole Bible. Its details regarding first-century seamanship are so precise and its portrayal of conditions on the eastern Mediterranean so accurate... that even the most skeptical have conceded that it probably rests on a journal of some such voyage as Luke describes. (Longenecker, (556)

In support of the accuracy of Luke's account, commentators often refer to the classic study of Paul's final sea voyage by James Smith (1782-1867). Smith was an experienced yachtsman and a classical scholar. From ancient sources, Smith had carefully studied the geography, weather conditions and

navigational practice of Paul's time. Smith was also intimately acquainted with the eastern Mediterranean Sea. With 30 years' experience in yachting behind him, he spent the winter of 1844-5 on Malta. From there he investigated the sailing conditions in the areas mentioned in Luke's account.

In 1848 Smith published his book *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*. The book remains the classic study of Paul's last journey by sea. Smith concluded that the voyage was a true account of real events, written by an eyewitness. Smith himself said of Luke's description of the voyage: "No man not a sailor could have written a narrative of a sea voyage so consistent in all its parts, unless from observation."

### **"We put out to sea" (Acts 27:1-2)**

Paul was under the charge of Julius, a centurion of the Imperial Regiment, or the "Augustan Cohort." David Williams writes, "This has been identified as the Cohors I Augusta, a regiment of auxiliaries attested by inscriptions to have been in Syria after A.D. 6 and in Batanea (Bashan, east of Galilee) in the time of Herod Agrippa II (ca. A.D. 50-100). A detachment of the cohort may have been stationed at Caesarea" (427).

Luke, continuing to speak in terms of "we," said the prisoners and crew boarded a ship from Adramyttium "about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea" (27:2). Paul's dangerous adventure was about to begin. Presumably, the party boarded the ship at Caesarea, though Luke didn't mention this. The coast-hugging vessel they were on had its home port at Adramyttium, a seaport of Mysia on the northwest coast of Asia Minor, opposite the island of Lesbos.

The ship probably moved in daily legs from one coastal port to another. This seemed to be the way coastal ships scheduled their journeys. We've seen this type of hop-and-skip sailing before in Acts (20:13-16; 21:1-3). It must have been difficult to make precise travel arrangements in this catch-as-can

environment; much depended on the wind and weather.

Luke mentioned that Aristarchus, a disciple from Thessalonica, was with Paul's party as it began its voyage (27:2). Perhaps Luke and Aristarchus were Paul's physician and servant, respectively. Luke had already identified Aristarchus as a Macedonian (19:29). He was a Thessalonian member of the delegation bringing the relief fund to Jerusalem (20:4). Colossians 4:10 describes Aristarchus as Paul's "fellow prisoner." Both in this epistle and in Philemon he is listed as one who is sending his greetings. If these two letters were written during Paul's Roman imprisonment, it suggests Aristarchus travelled with Paul all the way to Rome.

### **Kindness to Paul (Acts 27:3)**

The first stop for the merchant vessel was Sidon, the ancient Phoenician port about 70 miles from Caesarea. No doubt some time was required for loading or unloading cargo. In the meantime, "in kindness," Julius allowed Paul to visit the disciples at Sidon "so they might provide for his needs" (27:3). As did the other centurions in Luke's account (Luke 7:1-10; 23:47; Acts 10:1-7), Julius received a favorable portrayal. (See also verses 31-32, 43.)

The church at Sidon probably began shortly after Stephen's death (11:19). Paul had visited the churches in the area at least twice, and probably knew many of the disciples in Sidon (15:3; 21:4, 7). Luke called the disciples "his friends," or more literally, "the friends." Interestingly, John sometimes referred to Christians as "the Friends" (3 John 15). This may have been a title Christians sometimes used to define themselves, after Jesus' example (John 15:14-15). We don't exactly know what the church at Sidon provided for Paul. Presumably it was money to help defray the expenses of the trip to Rome, or even winter clothes.

### **Trouble brewing (Acts 27:4-8)**

Paul's ship left Sidon and sailed northwest toward Cyprus. It hugged the protective east coast of the island, which Luke called "the lee of Cyprus" (27:4). Contrary winds were becoming a problem, and the land mass offered some protection from the gales. The ship struggled across the open sea, and then crept along the Cilician and Pamphylian coast until it came to Myra in Lycia (27:5).

This ship would then be proceeding around the southwest coast of Asia Minor and north into the Aegean. The centurion therefore had to book passage on another ship, one bound for Italy. After making inquiries, he found an "Alexandrian ship" that met his needs (27:6). Luke didn't mention what kind of ship this was, but he did say its cargo contained grain (27:38). Since the vessel was heading from Egypt to Italy, commentators surmise that it may have belonged to a fleet of imperial grain carriers.

Keeping sufficient grain moving from Alexandria to Italy was extremely important to Rome's political stability. Suetonius described how the emperor Claudius was cursed and pelted in the Forum after a series of droughts had caused a scarcity of grain. "As a result he took all possible steps to import grain, *even during the winter months*—insuring merchants against the loss of their ships in stormy weather" (*The Twelve Caesars*, "Claudius" 18).

Apparently, this was one of the grain carriers making a winter run. Its owners would have made a handsome profit on their cargo—or collected insurance for loss, as this ship would eventually have to do. (In the second century, Lucian of Samosata in *The Ship* narrated the voyage of a Sidonian grain ship whose trip remarkably paralleled Paul's.)

The grain ship with Paul and company on board left Myra, but a buffeting wind slowed its progress. It finally reached Cnidus, the last port of call on Asia Minor before ships had to sail across the Aegean to the Greek mainland (27:7). The ship left Cnidus but was knocked off its intended course. It then



“sailed to the lee of Crete” (a 160-mile-long island southeast of Greece) and arrived at the island’s eastern port of Salmone (27:7). Then the ship struggled halfway along the south coast of the island, finally making port at Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea (27:8).

Fair Havens is the modern Limeonas Kalous (which means “Good Harbors”). The winds that blew into the open bay during the winter made it a dangerous place for ships to anchor.

### **Sailing was dangerous (Acts 27:9)**

Luke explained why the eastern Mediterranean was so stormy: “Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement” (27:9). Navigation in this part of the Mediterranean was deemed dangerous after September 14, and impossible after November 11. Vegetius (*On Military Affairs* 4.39) and Hesiod (*Works and Days* 619) are cited as authorities.

Festus is thought to have arrived in Judea in the early summer of the year in which he took office, perhaps A.D. 59. He would have heard Paul’s case soon thereafter. After deciding to send Paul to Rome, he was put on board ship perhaps in autumn of that year. The ship may have left Caesarea before the beginning of the storm season. But sailing became unexpectedly difficult. Due to the slow going, much time had been lost, and now the storm season was in full swing. There seemed little hope of reaching Italy before winter.

When the ship arrived in Fair Havens it was already the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), which fell on the 10th day of the lunar month Tishri (in the Hebrew calendar). Since months in the Jewish calendar were based on the moon, with each month beginning at the new moon, the position of the months varied vis a vis the seasons from year to year. Depending on the year, Atonement fell roughly between the latter part of September and the first part of October. In A.D. 59, Atonement fell on October 5. Since the Day

was over, it was likely mid-October when Paul's ship arrived at Fair Havens.

### **Paul gave a warning (Acts 27:10-12)**

The weather was terrible, and sailing out of Fair Havens seemed an unwise course of action to Paul. He warned the captain and owner against leaving the harbor. "Men," he said, "I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our lives also" (27:10). Paul was a seasoned traveler. He had experienced dangers at sea, so he knew something about the treacherous waters of the Mediterranean. Three times he had been shipwrecked (2 Corinthians 11:23-25). He must have felt that his opinion on the situation had merit.

The pilot ("captain") and ship's owner, along with the centurion, discussed the situation. After weighing their options, they decided not to winter in Fair Havens (27:11). Their goal was to winter in the larger and safer Cretan port of Phoenix, about 40 miles west (27:12). They had apparently abandoned any plans of reaching Rome before spring.

### **Unexpected gale strikes (Acts 27:13-15)**

The ship's officers were waiting to sail as soon as the wind changed in their favor. Soon the storm seemed to have abated and a gentle south wind began to blow (27:13). This is what everyone was waiting for, and the crew hastily hoisted the anchor and began to sail along the south shore of Crete.

But the ship never reached Phoenix. Without warning, the wind changed again. Luke tells us that a wind of hurricane force, called a "Northeaster," swept down over the mountains of Crete (27:14). The ship was helpless in the open waters. It couldn't keep its forward course and was driven southward away from land by the violent storm.

No sooner had they rounded the cape and entered the gulf than they were caught in a hurricane coming from Mount Ida to the north. Sailors called this wind the Euroquilo (Greek, *Eurakylon*) —a hybrid word from the Greek *euros* meaning "east wind" and

the Latin *aquilo* meaning “north wind”—so ‘Northeaster’ (NIV).  
Before it they were helpless. (Longenecker, 560)

### **Fighting the storm (Acts 27:16-19)**

The ship was driven towards the sheltered side of the small island of Cauda (modern Gozzo), about 23 miles (37 kilometers) southwest of Crete. In the relative calm, the crew struggled to make the lifeboat secure (27:16). Normally, the ship’s lifeboat was tied to the stern and towed through the water. However, in a large storm the dinghy might be cut loose from the ship and become lost. Or it the waves could batter it against the larger ship. To prevent this, the crew and passengers hoisted the lifeboat aboard the ship, and made it secure (27:16-17).

The crew “passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together” (27:17). Apparently, ancient vessels had cables that could be used to create a corset for their hulls, to keep them together during violent storms at sea. It’s not clear exactly what “passing ropes under the ships” meant, as it could refer to at least three different procedures. First, ropes could be passed under a ship and then be secured above deck to reinforce the hull. Second, ropes could be tied above a ship’s hull (either internally or externally) to achieve the same purpose. Third, ropes could be used to tie the stem and stern together lest the buffeting sea should break the ship’s back.

The crew feared that the ship could be driven to the southwest. If it were, it would eventually end up on “the sandbars of Syrtis” (27:17). This was the Greek name for an area of shallows in the Gulf of Sidra, on the coast of North Africa. The Syrtis was the “Bermuda Triangle” of its day. It is well documented in ancient writings (Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 5:8-11; Pliny, *Natural History* 5:26). Josephus called it “a place terrible to such as barely hear it described” (*Wars* 2:381).

To help prevent them from being driven onto the Syrtis, the crew

“lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along” (27:17). The meaning of “sea anchor” is uncertain. The Greek is more like “the gear” or “the equipment.” One suggestion is that Luke meant they lowered the mainyard which held the mainsail. But the storm continued to batter the helpless ship, and drove it beyond the shelter of Cauda. In order to lighten the ship, some of the cargo was jettisoned the next day (27:18). The following day the ship’s tackle or gear—perhaps the heavy mainsail and yard—was pushed overboard (27:19).

### **“Keep up courage” (Acts 27:20-26)**

The ship’s situation looked bleak. The storm had blotted out the sun by day and stars by night. Since these were the two compasses of the time, the navigator could not calculate the ship’s whereabouts or plot its course. (The ancients had neither sextant nor compass.) The ship was drifting helplessly and the crew was unable to ascertain whether they were heading for land, rocks or shoals. The ship must also have been leaking and threatening to break up. No wonder Luke wrote, “We finally gave up all hope of being saved” (27:20).

That’s when Paul got up and, in effect, told the crew, “I told you so.” He insisted they could have spared themselves the damage to the ship and loss of equipment and cargo—as well as being threatened with death in the sea. But he also encouraged them. “Not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed,” he said (27:22). Paul could be confident in such a hopeless situation because he had received another vision from God.

“Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and to whom I serve stood beside me,” said Paul. The angel told Paul: “Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you” (27:23-24). In a time of great crisis, Paul again received a comforting message—which he passed on to crew and passengers.

The angelic message confirmed an earlier vision that he would reach Rome (23:11).

Paul told everyone to keep up their courage, and that he had faith in God that things would turn out exactly as he had been told in the vision (27:25). However, the ship would not get safely to port. “We must run aground on some island,” said Paul (27:26).

### **Driven across the Adriatic (Acts 27:27-29)**

For two weeks (since either Fair Havens or Cauda), the ship had been driven across the central Mediterranean, then called the “the Adria” (or Adriatic Sea). Today, it is the name of the sea between Italy and the Balkans. In ancient times, the Adriatic was applied to a much larger area of water. About midnight, the sailors began to sense that they were approaching land. They couldn’t see anything, of course. Perhaps by this time the storm had abated somewhat.

The sailors’ suspicions were confirmed when they took soundings. These were probably lines weighted with lead, which were tossed overboard and fed out until the lead hit bottom. The first time the line was fed into the water it measured the water depth as being 120 feet deep (20 fathoms). A short time later, the line was fed out a second time, and it indicated a water depth of only 90 feet (15 fathoms) (27:28). This indicated that the boat was approaching land. The sailors had no idea where they were. They feared that the ship might be broken up on a rocky shore or find itself stranded on an offshore shoal.

The crew decided to keep the ship where it was for the night. Luke says “they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight” (27:29). They hoped the anchors would serve as a brake. When daylight came, they might be able to ascertain what kind of situation they were facing.

### **Lifeboat cut away (Acts 27:30-34)**

The sailors panicked, and tried to leave the ship, hoping to save their lives. They pretended they were going to lower some anchors from the ship's bow. Their real goal was to lower the lifeboat into the water in order to escape (27:30). The sailors' action would have endangered their own lives, and made it even more unlikely that the passengers could get to shore. Someone discovered their plan (perhaps Paul) and told the centurion.

Paul became the center of action by telling the centurion, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved" (27:31). This time the centurion heeded Paul's advice and cut the ropes that held the lifeboat, letting it fall into the sea (27:32).

At the same time, Paul recommended that everyone have something to eat. "I urge you to take some food," said Paul to everyone. "You need it to survive" (27:34). Luke told us earlier that the crew had "gone a long time without food," perhaps since being caught in the storm off Crete (27:21). Now we learn that the sailors had not eaten in two weeks. Luke didn't tell us why they had not eaten. Nor is it clear whether he meant they had missed all regular meals or if they had eaten absolutely nothing.

The crew was probably sea-sick from living on a storm-tossed vessel, and their appetite was gone. Cooking may have become impossible as well.

David Williams writes, "In ships of that day there were no tables spread or waiters to carry the food. Anyone who wanted to eat had to fetch the food from the galley himself. Thus Paul may have meant that they had not gone for their regular rations—either having lost the heart or the stomach for eating or because the galley could not function during the storm" (439).

Perhaps there were elements of religious superstition involved in the sailors not eating. That is, they may have been fasting to beseech the gods to save them from the storm. This possibility is seen by what Paul did next.

**Not lose a hair (Acts 27:34-37)**

Paul told the crew and passengers, “Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head” (27:34). This was a proverbial saying that God would save everyone from death (1 Samuel 14:45; 2 Samuel 14:11). Jesus had used this saying to encourage his disciples that God would save them (Matthew 10:30; Luke 21:18). Here, Paul assured the crew and passengers, in the name of the God of Israel, that their lives would be spared.

Paul took some bread and gave thanks to the one true God for saving them from the storm (though they had as yet not made it to land). Paul broke the bread and began to eat. “They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves” (27:36). It is as though up to this moment everyone feared being lost—and were hoping their gods would save them. But Paul’s words quieted them and they believed they would be saved—but by the God whom Paul worshiped. As Marshall puts it, “Paul is in effect telling them that their prayers have been answered, and there is no need to fast any longer” (413).

Some commentators suggest that Paul’s action of breaking the bread meant that he was offering the Lord’s Supper (the eucharist). Marshall says:

The description resembles that of the procedure of Jesus when feeding the multitudes (Luke 9:16), celebrating the Last Supper (Luke 22:19), and sitting at table with the disciples journeying to Emmaus (Luke 24:30). It is, therefore, not surprising that many commentators have seen in the present incident a celebration of the Lord’s Supper, or as Luke calls it, the Breaking of Bread. (413)

Paul’s offering the bread was more than a simple “saying of grace.” The circumstances were too extraordinary for that. But to make of this event a true eucharist seems to be going too far. (No mention is made of Paul taking wine and offering it, as Jesus did during Passover.) Everyone was eating a simple meal after fasting; the procedure was similar for all meals. In that context—of the crew being saved from drowning—Paul was presenting God as one who saves us from all our trials, including death.

No doubt the few Christians on board (Paul, Luke and perhaps Aristarchus), would have understood the deeper significance of Paul's prayer. God is our Savior who sees us through the trials of life—and is the one who gives us eternal life. To the Christians, being saved from the storm-tossed ship demonstrated the presence of God and Jesus, and this was certainly a time to thank him for his salvation.

Luke portrayed Paul as a man who was in touch with God. He was practical, cool under pressure and exuded a positive faith that got the attention of even salty and pagan sailors. Paul predicted the future safety of the crew and passengers, and that prediction had come true. When the disciples were threatened with death on the stormy Sea of Galilee, Jesus came to them and said in his own name, "Be of good courage, it is I" (Matthew 14:27). Now, Paul rallied others to courage with a prediction of safety in God's name (27:22-25, 34-36). (He didn't seem to mention Jesus' name to these pagan sailors, prisoners and soldiers.)

### **Preparing to beach (Acts 27:38-40)**

After eating, the crew and passengers began to prepare to abandon the ship. They threw the cargo overboard to make the ship ride higher in the water. This, they hoped, would make it run ashore further up the beach. Some of the cargo had been jettisoned previously (27:18), but the rest apparently had been kept on the ship. It may have served as ballast to keep the ship low in the water, a protection against being capsized. If it was grain, then it was a valuable commodity to Rome, and perhaps the crew had tried to save it. Or the crew may have simply been unable to get to the main hatches during the storm.

When daylight came, the crew saw the land but didn't recognize it. Luke would shortly tell his readers they had arrived at the island of Malta (28:1). What the sailors did see was a bay with a sandy beach, at which point they



hoped to run the ship aground (27:39). They had no more use for the anchors, so they dropped them into the sea. The crew released the ropes that held the steering paddles (which served as rudders), apparently to allow the ship to be maneuvered more easily. Finally, the sailors hoisted a small sail. It caught the breeze and the ship began to move towards the shore (27:40).

### **Stuck in a sandbar (Acts 27:41)**

The unexpected happened as the ship entered the bay. The sailors hadn't noticed they were heading into something like a reef or shoal. The ship ran aground and the bow was stuck in the sand. Meanwhile the surf was pounding so hard against the ship that the stern was breaking up. The Greek which the NIV translates "struck a shoal" is literally "having fallen into or lighted upon a place between two seas" (27:41). William Neil suggests that it "could be a submerged spit of land lying between two stretches of deeper water" (253). The traditional site of where this occurred is called St. Paul's Bay on the northeast coast of Malta. It is about 8 miles (13 kilometers) northwest of Valletta, the capital of Malta. Even today, at the entry to the bay there is a shoal that may be the one on which the vessel ran aground.

The ship had travelled about 475 nautical miles from Fair Havens. And the ship had moved in the right direction—toward Rome! It had reached Malta—almost. But now the ship was mired offshore, and it was breaking up.

### **Kill the prisoners (Acts 27:42-43)**

Apparently it appeared to the soldiers that the prisoners were going to jump ship, try to get to shore, and escape. As mentioned previously (12:19; 16:27), military regulations stipulated that guards who let their prisoners escape could suffer the penalties their prisoners would have suffered. The soldiers were ready to kill the prisoners to prevent their escape. But the centurion stopped them because, according to Luke, he "wanted to spare Paul's life" (27:43). Why he should want to save Paul is not explained.

We can probably surmise that after all that had transpired—with Paul assuring everyone in God’s name that they would be spared—the centurion must have felt Paul was in some way a special person. The Chaldean king Nebuchadnezzar in his limited understanding of God recognized that “the spirit of the holy gods” was in Daniel (4:8, 9, 18). In the same way, the pagan centurion Julius must have seen Paul as one who was in touch with deity.

Thus, Paul and the prisoners were saved. Julius freed the prisoners from any shackles and ordered those on board who could swim to jump into the water and make for land (27:43). The non-swimmers were to use any piece of the broken ship they could find and ride it into the beach. “In this way,” wrote Luke, “everyone reached land safely (27:43). As Paul had said, God was going to bring each person on board the ship to safety (27:24).

Luke filled chapter 27 with detail upon detail of the perilous trip to Rome. Why did he take the time and space to give his readers a blow-by-blow description, when he often skipped over years of Paul’s life with nary a detail? A ship lost at sea and shipwreck made fascinating reading, particularly for those who lived around the waters of the Mediterranean. Stories of dangerous sea voyages with storms and shipwrecks were a staple of ancient literature.

Luke’s story is not fiction but a true happening. He told it in order to show how and why Paul got to Rome. Despite every adversity and hardship from prison to shipwreck, God guided him so he could preach the gospel in the capital of the empire. But Paul did not get to Rome because he wanted to. On his own, he would have either died from an assassin’s sword in Jerusalem, languished in prison, or died at sea. But God guided Paul *through* the trials and dangers he faced, not by stopping them. Things did not go well in Jerusalem and Paul was almost killed. There was no miraculous prison intervention by God in Jerusalem or Caesarea (as there had been in Philippi).

No converts were made in either city by Paul's preaching. Neither did God silence the storm or save the ship.

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## Acts 28

### Safety on Malta (Acts 28:1-2)

Everyone either swam to the island or rode in on debris, and safely reached shore (27:43-44). After a harrowing journey, the passengers and crew could enjoy the safe haven of their landing site, the island of Malta. The Maltese rallied around the victims of this ship disaster much as people lend a hand to those suffering from disasters everywhere. In the words of Luke, they showed an “unusual kindness” (28:2).

Malta is a small island, about 18 miles (29 kilometers) long and 8 miles wide. It is about 60 miles (97 kilometers) south of Sicily. The Romans had captured the island in 218 B.C., at the beginning of the Second Punic War with Carthage. In the Phoenician language, Malta was called *melita*, meaning “a place of refuge.” For the 276 beleaguered crew and passengers of the doomed ship, it was certainly that and more.

The natives of Malta were primarily of Phoenician ancestry. They would have been regarded by Greeks and Romans as “foreigners,” or people who spoke a foreign language. Luke called the people there *hoi barbaroi*, in Greek, “the barbarians,” which the NIV translates as “the islanders” (28:2). Luke betrayed his Hellenistic culture and outlook by thinking of the Maltese as foreigners or “barbarians.” However, it was not necessarily a derogatory label. It merely identified those who didn’t speak Greek or those who were considered foreign or alien (Herodotus, *Persian Wars* 2:57). Paul himself labeled non-Greeks as “barbarians,” though in a neutral sense (Romans 1:14; Colossians 3:11).

### A viper strikes Paul (Acts 28:3-6)

It was cold and raining on Malta, and the survivors began to gather brush and wood to build a fire. Paul pitched in as well. But as he was gathering

firewood, he disturbed a snake, which clamped its jaws on his hand (28:3). When the natives who had gathered at the beach saw the snake hanging from Paul's hand, they said, "This man must be a murderer, for though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live" (28:4). These islanders were superstitious, so they assumed that divine vengeance had caught up with Paul.

However, to their amazement, Paul shook the snake off into the fire and was unharmed (28:5). He seemed quite unconcerned about it, knowing he was under God's care (Psalm 91:13; Luke 10:19, with Mark 16:18). Paul was a divinely protected person, and Luke wanted his readers to focus on this point. That is why he told the tale in such vivid detail. Paul, the servant of Jesus, was coming in the same spirit and power as his Master. He proclaimed God's kingdom, and in the process was victorious over all, including the forces of nature.

The natives began to get some sense of Paul's divine "connection." At first they were merely stunned by Paul not dropping over dead. Then their attitude toward him changed. "After waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god," Luke wrote (28:6). We're reminded of a similar situation Paul experienced at Lystra, but in reverse. When Paul healed a crippled man, the pagan Lystrans thought he was a god (14:8-12). But it wasn't long before they were influenced to change their minds and to think of him as a charlatan (14:19).

### **Publius, the chief official (Acts 28:7-10)**

The scene in Acts switched from the beach to a situation at the home of a man named Publius. Luke called him "the chief official of the island," which in Greek meant "the first man of the island" (28:7). This was probably an official title. The Romans had established a Roman governor on the island who had a title of *primus omnium*, or "chief man." Since Publius was called

the “first” or chief man of the island, he was almost certainly the governor of Malta.

Publius welcomed the survivors to his estate, in which they were housed for three days (28:7). During this time he would have made arrangements for them to find suitable winter lodgings elsewhere on the island.

Of all the incidents that must have occurred during Paul’s three-months stay on Malta, Luke described only one dramatic situation. In this case, Luke showcased Paul’s ability to heal the sick, which again showed that Paul came in the spirit and power of Jesus. It all began with the father of Publius, who was sick in bed suffering from fever and dysentery (28:8).

The malady the father of Publius was suffering from may have been Malta fever, which was long common in Malta, Gibraltar, and other Mediterranean locales. In 1887 its cause, the microorganism *Mirococcus melitensis*, was discovered and traced to the milk of Maltese goats. A vaccine for its treatment has been developed. (Longenecker, 565)

Whatever his malady, Paul went to Publius’ father, prayed and placed his hands on him—and he was healed (28:8). When the islanders saw what happened, “the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured” (28:9). Paul’s presence on the island proved a wonderful blessing to the Maltese. They responded with kindness to the survivors. “They honored us in many ways and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed” (28:10).

Beginning with Paul’s safe landing at Malta and during his three months on the island, God had demonstrated his power through Paul in a direct way. After suffering privations of various sorts for well over two years, Paul’s life was changing for the better.

It seems that Paul may have looked on his stay in Malta as a high point in his ministry—a time of blessing when God worked in marvelous ways, despite the shipwreck and his being still a

prisoner. God seems, through the experiences at Malta, to have been refreshing Paul's spirit after the two relatively bleak years at Caesarea and the disastrous time at sea and preparing him for his witness in Rome. (Longenecker, 565)

### **After three months (Acts 28:11)**

Luke ended his narrative of events on Malta by saying, "After three months we put out to sea..." (28:11). (Note the use of "we," indicating Luke was still with Paul on the final trip to Rome.) Pliny the Elder noted that, at least officially, navigation on the Mediterranean began each spring on February 8. This was when the westerly winds began to blow (*Natural History* 2.122). However, Vegetius wrote that March 10 was the beginning of the sailing period (*De Re Militari* 4.39). Commentators feel Vegetius was referring to sailing on the high seas, not to coastal shipping, and that there was no contradiction between his statement and that of Pliny.

In any case, these would not have been hard and fast dates for the beginning of the sailing period. Weather conditions from year to year are not identical. November, December and January were certainly non-sailing months, except for those willing to take extreme risks. But September, October and February seemed to be transition months during which sailing had to be undertaken with care. So it was probably sometime in mid-February that Paul boarded a ship at Malta for the final leg of his voyage to Rome. (This means Paul would have left Fair Havens around mid-October in the previous year.)

Paul and Luke boarded another Alexandrian ship (presumably also a grain carrier) with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux (28:11). The vessel had wintered on Malta itself. The twins were the sons of Zeus, whom he had transformed into gods represented by the constellation Gemini. They were considered by sailors as patron "saints" of navigation and a sign of good

fortune. For the purposes of Luke's narrative, mentioning the figurehead seemed to be an irrelevant detail. But it again demonstrated that the author was giving us an eyewitness report. Luke was not speaking from hearsay, but knew from experience the things he described.

### **On to Italy (Acts 28:12-13)**

After sailing from Malta, the ship reached the important port of Syracuse, on the east coast of Sicily (28:12). (Sicily was about 90 miles or 145 kilometers from Malta.) Though originally a Greek city, Syracuse had been ruled by Rome since the Second Punic War, in 212 B.C. The next stop was Rhegium, the modern Reggio di Calabria. It was an important harbor on Italy's "toe," and was on the Italian side of the Strait of Messina.

The next day, riding a favorable wind, the ship set out to sea again. In two days the ship travelled roughly 200 miles up the western coast of Italy to Puteoli, the modern Pozzuoli, in the Bay of Naples. Puteoli was perhaps the most important port of southern Italy (Strabo, *Geography* 5, 4, 6). It competed with Ostia, the newer port of Rome at the mouth of the Tiber. Apparently, in Paul's day the cargo went to Ostia, but passengers disembarked at Puteoli. Travelers could go from Puteoli to Capua, where they would pick up the Via Appia to Rome.

### **Meeting other believers (Acts 28:14)**

There was already a church at Puteoli. "There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them" (28:14). He apparently meant Christian disciples (1:16; 6:3; 9:30; 11:1; 12:17; 15:1, 32; 16:40). Just how he found them we do not know. Paul had not evangelized in Italy, but Christians were here before Paul arrived. We don't know how the gospel got to this area.

Surprisingly, Paul was allowed to go into the city and stay for an entire week. Whether he was guarded during this time, Luke didn't say. Julius may



have found it advantageous to stay here a week. Thus, the prisoners would have to remain in Puteoli with him. Besides, Julius had already allowed Paul to stop off at Sidon to receive help from the church (27:3). Given the events of the last few months, he may have trusted Paul not to bolt or try to escape from custody.

Paul was no ordinary prisoner, far less a common criminal who would take the first opportunity to escape; moreover, throughout the voyage the centurion had good cause to be grateful for Paul's sound judgment and co-operation. He could thus safely leave this particular captive lightly guarded if he had himself to be off on other business for a week. (Neil, 256)

### **Arrival in Rome (Acts 28:14)**

Even though Paul was still in Puteoli, 140 miles from Rome, Luke wrote, in almost over-anxious words: "...And so we came to Rome" (28:14). Luke was moving his story along very rapidly since Paul left Malta. Perhaps Luke was eager to get to the finale—Paul's work in Rome. He is announcing the conclusion before he has narrated the story! (The statement would have been more appropriate at the beginning of verse 16.)

Behind all of Luke's reasons for writing his work was to tell how and why Paul came to Rome. The statement "so we came to Rome" marks the achievement of Paul's earlier desire (19:21) and the fulfillment of prophecy (23:11; 27:24).

The simple statement at the end of verse 14, and so we came to Rome, not only makes the conclusion of the travel narrative, but is effectively the climax of the whole book...All the remaining verses of the book may be regarded in this light, as simply rounding off the statement of verse 14 by showing how the gospel was preached in Rome as it had been at first "in Jerusalem." (Williams, 447)

Luke actually had one more incident to relate before getting Paul to

Rome. He wanted to tell readers that the church at Rome had heard about Paul's coming, and sent delegates to meet him. Perhaps that is why he needed to introduce Rome prematurely—so he could tell us that the believers there had heard about his arrival.

### **They had heard (Acts 28:15)**

Apparently, two delegations of Christians from the church at Rome went to meet Paul (28:15). They had heard of his arrival during his week-long stay in Puteoli. A number of Christians set out from the Rome, traveling south along the Appian Way to meet Paul and escort him to the capital city. This made it something of a triumphal entrance into Rome for Paul.

In Paul's day, the normal route to Rome was to sail to Puteoli. The traveler would then use existing roadways to reach Capua, some 20 miles (32 kilometers) from Puteoli. At Capua, the traveler connected with the famed Via Appia, built in 312 B.C., named after Appius Claudius, who began its construction. The distance from Capua to Rome was 120 miles (193 kilometers), and the journey took five to six days.

One delegation from Rome got as far as the Forum of Appius (28:15). It was a market town and a traveler's resting place about 40 miles south of Rome. The satirist Horace referred to it, as one translation has it, as a place "full of sailors and wicked tavern-keepers" (*Satire* 1, 5, 3-4). A second group from the church at Rome traveled as far as Tres Tabernae ("the Three Taverns"). This town was another halting place, about 30 miles from Rome. (In Latin, a *taberna* is any kind of shop, including an inn, not simply a tavern.)

### **Paul gave thanks (Acts 28:15)**

Communities of disciples had already been established at Rome before Paul's arrival (see also Romans 1:8, 15; 16:3-16). Earlier, we saw that Priscilla and Aquila had come from Rome. Presumably they had been

converted in Rome before they moved to Corinth (18:2). Much earlier than this, at the first Pentecost, Jews from Rome had heard Peter preach (2:10). Some of these people had been baptized and probably returned to Rome to spread the faith.

When Paul saw the disciples, Luke said he “thanked God and was encouraged” (28:15). One wonders why he was encouraged. Paul had just come through some terrible ordeals with faith and courage. He knew that God was with him and that he was going to Rome to witness to Christ. About what, then, was Paul thankful and encouraged? Perhaps he had some doubt about how he was going to be received by the church members. Elsewhere Paul had a number of difficulties with conservative Jewish disciples dividing the church and distorting the gospel. The churches in Galatia were a good example.

Paul had long nourished a desire to visit Rome. He had written to the church here, perhaps some three years earlier, preparing them for his intended visit (Romans 1:9-13; 15:22-32). Paul wanted to come to the Roman church with joy, so that together they could all have their faith refreshed. Perhaps Paul felt a bit anxious about how well the meeting might go.

In any case, Paul’s gratitude for the enthusiastic support of the two Christian delegations was important enough for Luke to make special mention of it. His reference is all the more striking in that this is the only reference to the church in Rome! After Paul’s triumphal greetings by the delegates, nothing further was heard of the church in Italy. Luke ended his account with an extensive narration of a single episode in which Paul met with the unconverted Jews of Rome.

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# **Paul at Rome**

## **Acts 28:16-30**

### **“When we got to Rome” (Acts 28:16)**

Paul had arrived in the capital city of the Empire, which Luke acknowledged with another “we” statement: “When we got to Rome...” (28:16). This is the end of the last “we” section in the book. Though Luke and Aristarchus (even earlier) disappear from the account, it’s possible that they remained with Paul through his prison days at Rome (Colossians 4:10-14 and Philemon 23-24). Paul had many visitors during those two years, including Timothy, Tychicus, Epaphroditus and Mark. Luke was with Paul near the end of his life (2 Timothy 4:11).

Luke now turned his complete attention to Paul. Paul’s wish and God’s purpose for him to come to Rome were finding their fulfillment. Thus, Luke portrayed Paul as entering Rome in triumph, tempered by the fact that he was here only by the grace and protection of God.

Rome was the greatest city in the world in Paul’s day (Acts 28:16). An inscription discovered at Rome’s seaport of Ostia in 1941 gives the population of the capital as 4,100,000 in A.D. 14. This is more than three times the usual estimate. Whatever its size, it’s clear that Rome was an immense city. As the capital of the Roman Empire, it was the most important and influential city in the Mediterranean area, and we might say the world.

### **Paul lived by himself (Acts 28:16)**

Once Paul was processed, he “was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him” (28:16). Paul was not kept in the *Castra Praetoria*, the camp or barracks of the Praetorians. He received permission to stay in his own rented house (28:30), or as some commentators translate the phrase—“at

his own expense.” As a result of having a source of income (Philippians 2:25; 4:18) he was able to pay for his own lodging.

Thus, Paul enjoyed a measure of freedom, being under what we might call “house arrest.” Though he lived like a private citizen, he was not completely free. A soldier to whom he was perhaps lightly chained guarded him around the clock. In letters thought to have been written during his imprisonment, Paul repeatedly spoke of being in bonds or chains (Philippians 1:7, 13-14; Colossians 4:3, 18; Ephesians 6:20; Philemon 13). He was probably speaking in real, not purely metaphorical terms about his “chains.” Luke’s account corroborates what the epistles say. Luke has him speaking of being “bound with this chain” during his imprisonment (Acts 28:20), in Greek *halusis*. The *halusis* was a short length of chain by which the wrist of a prisoner was bound to the wrist of the soldier guarding him.

During his imprisonment, Paul apparently had opportunity to preach the gospel to the highest levels at the government of Rome. In a letter written to the Philippians, often regarded as having been written from his Roman imprisonment, Paul wrote: “All God’s people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household” (Philippians 4:22).

Caesar’s household was the regular phrase for what we would call the Imperial Civil Service; it had members all over the world. The palace officials, the secretaries, the people who had charge of the imperial revenues, those who were responsible for the day-to-day administration of the empire, all these were Caesar’s household. It is of the greatest interest to note that even as early as this Christianity had penetrated into the very centre of the Roman government. (William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, revised edition, page 87)

In Philippians Paul also wrote: “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone

else that I am in chains for Christ” (1:12-13). The palace guard was the *praetorium*, the Praetorian Guard, or the Imperial Guard of Rome. The Guard was composed of the best troops, perhaps 10,000 strong. By Paul’s time they were the Emperor’s private bodyguard. Eventually the Praetorian Guard became king-makers, for it was their nominee who was made Emperor.

Paul said it was the Praetorian Guard soldiers who had heard the gospel. That may indicate the soldiers guarding him—perhaps chained to him—may have come from that unit. They would have heard Paul discussing the good news of Christ to others. There was probably a steady rotation of guards so that over two years, many of the Imperial Guard would have heard the good news and become acquainted with Paul. “His imprisonment had opened the way for preaching the gospel to the finest regiment in the Roman army,” wrote William Barclay (*ibid.*, 22).

### **Leaders of the Jews (Acts 28:17)**

Luke said nothing about Paul’s preaching or influence with Caesar’s household, the Praetorian Guard—or even with the average Gentile citizen of Rome. Throughout the rest of chapter 28, Luke reported only on Paul’s dealings with the unconverted Jews of Rome, and that in a single scene. He described an event that occurred three days after Paul arrived in Rome.

He called together the leading Jews to defend himself and to explain his position on preaching the gospel. Paul also wanted to know what they had heard from Jerusalem about him and to find out what their attitude was toward him.

### **Paul’s defense (Acts 28:17-20)**

Paul began by asserting, “Although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans” (28:17). Paul again declared that he was a good Jew, and had been faithful to the Jewish traditions (22:3; 23:6; 24:14-

16; 26:4-8). Paul went on to say that after the Roman authorities examined him, they judged he was not guilty of any crime. Since the Jewish leaders objected to his release, he had no alternative but to appeal to Caesar (28:19).

Paul wanted to assure the Jewish leaders that he wasn't in Rome to present charges, but merely to defend himself (28:19). He was here to have himself cleared of all charges, not to make accusations against the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem. The reason he was in chains was "because of the hope of Israel"—that is, the resurrection (28:20). This echoes Paul's defense before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (23:6). Paul insisted that he had run afoul of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (most of whom were Sadducees) because of telling people about the promise made to the patriarchs regarding the resurrection of the dead. Paul maintained that this hope had been realized in Jesus.

As it was, it was his devotion to Israel's ancestral hope that had cost him his freedom and brought him under guard to Rome. In Rome, as in Judaea, he emphasizes that the resurrection message which he proclaims, far from undermining the religion of Israel, is its divinely appointed fulfillment. (Bruce, 505)

Marshall writes, "What was at issue in his trial, as he had insisted all along, was the true nature of the hope of Israel in the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection. It was, in other words, for being a loyal Jew, as he saw it, that Paul was wearing a Roman fetter" (423)

### **No letters received (Acts 28:21)**

The Jews responded to Paul's defense: "We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you," they said, "and none of our people who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you" (28:21). However, it's difficult to believe that no one coming from Jerusalem had any harsh words for Paul, and had failed to report on Paul's case (now well over

two years old).

The response was diplomatic. The Jews in Rome were in too precarious a position to pick a fight with Paul or Rome's Christians. The Jews had returned en masse only a few years earlier when the emperor Claudius died, and after being banished from the city. The Jews were not in a position to condemn Paul, and they didn't want to get involved in a controversy over which they might be expelled again.

There is another and less complicated answer to the Jews' reaction to Paul. Perhaps a delegation with official letters had not yet arrived from Jerusalem, due to the same weather that had delayed Paul. And the Sanhedrin may have decided against proceeding with the matter, once Paul was dispatched to Rome. The council may have felt that Paul would be no trouble to them in Jerusalem, and there was no need to follow up. They saw that he had been judged not guilty of any crime on more than one occasion and they may have felt that it was hopeless pursuing the matter in Rome.

It is far from certain that the Sanhedrin had any intention of proceeding with the matter. They had been singularly unsuccessful in prosecuting Paul before Felix and Festus, and Festus and Agrippa had actually pronounced him innocent of any crime. The prospect of gaining a conviction in Rome was not good, and the Roman authorities sometimes dealt harshly with accusers who failed to substantiate their case. Nor could the Sanhedrin have reasonably expected the Jews of Rome to take up their cause, since their own position was a precarious one. (Williams, 452)

### **Against this sect (Acts 28:22)**

The Jews did admit that the Christian movement was being described in less than complimentary terms. "We want to hear what your views are," they told Paul, "for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect" (28:22). The Jews must have been familiar with the Christian movement in



Rome. It had probably come there soon after the first Pentecost. Jews from Rome, attending the festival, had become converted (2:10). No doubt many of them returned to Rome to spread the faith. By the late 40s the Jews were so incensed about the growing Christian community that they were rioting in protest. The emperor Claudius was forced to issue an order banning Jews from Rome (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, “Claudius” 25:4; Acts 18:2).

In Paul’s case, the Jewish leaders presented themselves as neutral bystanders. Yes, they had heard about the “sect of the Nazarenes,” but they wanted to hear Paul’s explanation of what it was about. The leaders appeared to be evasive, not wanting to really commit themselves and reveal their attitude. “People everywhere” may have been talking against the Christians, but they were waiting to hear Paul’s views.

### **Kingdom of God (Acts 28:23)**

In a second, more official meeting, an even larger contingent of Jewish leaders met with Paul at the house he was staying (28:23). It would be an all-day encounter. Paul used the opportunity to preach the gospel, in his usual manner. Luke said: “He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus” (28:23).

Paul spent the day explaining how the Holy Scriptures pointed to Christ. He hoped to prove to the assembly of Jews that Jesus had fulfilled Holy Writ and that he was the Messiah who was King of the kingdom they were expecting. Luke didn’t relate specifically what Paul said to the Jewish delegation. But we already know what it must have been, from his earlier speeches, as at Pisidian Antioch (13:17-41).

In this final chapter, Luke emphasized something he seldom mentioned in Acts. Paul, in his preaching, explained the meaning of *the kingdom of God* (28:23). Luke had begun Jesus’ ministry with his assertion, “I must proclaim

the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent” (Luke 4:43). Paul, the disciple and witness, was like his Master who carried on the work begun by Jesus. From the beginning of his account to the end, Luke told his readers that the gospel included an understanding of the true nature of God’s kingdom.

### **The final condemnation (Acts 28:24-27)**

Some of the Jews were convinced by Paul’s message, but others refused to believe him. In disagreement with each other—and confused about Paul’s message—the Jewish elders began to leave. As in virtually every city Paul preached in, the bulk of the Jews rejected the message of salvation in Jesus. Though some seemed at least superficially persuaded, Luke gave no indication that they were sufficiently moved to repent and seek baptism. Nor does it appear that they returned at a later date for further instruction.

As the Jewish elders of Rome began to leave, Paul lashed out with a searing rebuke from the prophet Isaiah (6:9-10). He said the Holy Spirit had spoken the truth to their forefathers—and his words applied to them: “Go to this people and say, ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving...’” (28:26). Paul was here pictured by Luke as one of the Old Testament prophets who spoke out against his people. Jesus had already used these words of Isaiah to describe the Jewish response to his message, and all the gospel writers including John had written of it (Matthew 13:13-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:39-40). The scripture from Isaiah is thought to have been widely used in the early Christian church as a text explaining the Jewish rejection of the gospel.

With such words from Isaiah, Paul cited the Jews’ spurning of his gospel message as a fulfillment of prophecy. The rejection was to be expected, because it had been spoken of ahead of time. Williams writes, “The fact that Paul appears to have addressed his final remarks to them all suggests that

none of them had as yet been persuaded to the point of believing that Jesus was the Messiah” (453).

In Luke’s view, the rejection in Rome was the definitive one. As the Jews turned their backs on Paul, refusing his message and perhaps irritated at his prophetic condemnation, he stressed his role as the apostle to the Gentiles. “I want you to know,” he must have shouted to the departing Jews, “that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” (28:28). Paul had already announced a turning to the Gentiles, once in Pisidian Antioch (13:46), and again at Corinth (18:6). This time Paul announced his turning to the Gentiles with a note of finality.

### **For two years (Acts 28:30)**

For the next two years Paul stayed in Rome “in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him” (28:30). Luke gave us no details about what happened during those two years. Neither did he tell us what Paul’s fate was *after* that period of time ended. Many commentators think that Paul wrote the New Testament letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon during these two years. These letters (the so-called “Prison Epistles”) are among the most hopeful and encouraging he wrote. Their upbeat and encouraging message contrasts markedly with Paul’s physical condition.

From his letters we get a picture of a joyful Paul striding around some small room in Rome, perhaps in the presence of—or even chained to—a Roman soldier. He isn’t downcast, but very upbeat about the Christian life, no matter what the circumstance. Paul begins dictating a profoundly positive letter, expressing his thoughts:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and

about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace. (Colossians 1:3-6)

From the letters, we also get Paul’s positive feeling that he anticipated standing before Caesar’s court—and that he expected to be released (Philippians 1:19-26; Philemon 22). Whether his intuition was correct we do not know. Some commentators argue that Paul was executed after his two-year house arrest. For Luke to have written about Paul’s death at the end of his book would have diminished from his triumphant conclusion. Others feel that Paul was released because his prosecutors failed to present charges within the prescribed statutory time period. (Perhaps it took two years for Paul’s case to work its way through the congested court docket.) But there is nothing certain about any of these ideas. The truth is that we don’t know what happened to Paul.

Luke knew whether Paul had been released, transferred to a prison or martyred after the two years were over. Theophilus, to whom Acts was dedicated, must also have known, and so did the church that heard the book read. Why did Luke end where he did—if that is where he ended? We can be sure, being such an incisive writer and thinker, that his ending was not accidental or due to clumsiness. Perhaps it was, as mentioned previously, to end on a triumphant note.

It is through attention to Luke’s overall narrative interests that we are best able to appreciate this ending not as the result of historical happenstance or editorial ineptitude, but as a deliberately and effectively crafted conclusion to a substantial apologetic argument. (Williams, 475)

Richard Longenecker feels Luke ended his work precisely where he

should have: “Luke’s instinct in closing his great work as he did was completely right. In seeming to leave his book unfinished, he was implying that the apostolic proclamation of the gospel in the first century began a story that will continue until the consummation of the kingdom in Christ (Acts 1:11)” (573)

It’s possible that Luke may have planned to write a third volume of his story of the gospel. Or—and this is pure speculation—he did write about what happened to Paul and why, and later editors removed it from the book because it reinforced the idea that the Christians were following people condemned by Rome. No one knows whether any of these conclusions are true, and we must be satisfied with the ending that has come down to us.

### **With no hindrance (Acts 28:31)**

In any case, the story that we have ends on a triumphant note. Luke said of Paul’s work in the book’s final verse: “He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” (28:31). This was Luke’s final summary, and the end of his sixth panel (19:21-28:31). (The other five summary statements were: 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20.) In some ways, Luke’s final statement summarized his most important apologetic point. The fact that Paul could preach without hindrance while under the careful eye of the Roman military indicated that Rome (and this meant Nero) was still tolerant toward Christianity. This is a point Luke made throughout Acts, and he emphasized it here at the close of his book.

It is unlikely, Luke implies, that if the gospel were illegal and subversive propaganda, it could have been proclaimed for two years at the heart of the empire by a Roman citizen who had appealed to Caesar and was waiting under guard for his case to be heard. The authorities must have known what he was doing all that time, yet no obstacle was put in his way. (Bruce, 511)

The book of Acts had begun at Jerusalem with the programmatic prophecy about the spread of the gospel message by the apostles (1:8). It ended here in Rome, with the prophetic figure of Paul, having been guided by God to bring the message to the nerve center of the Empire. William Barclay, in his commentary on Acts, caught the spirit of Luke's work and its conclusion—and it is a good place to end the commentary:

And so the Book of Acts comes to an end with a shout of triumph....Now the tale is finished; the story that began in Jerusalem rather more than thirty years ago has finished in Rome. It is nothing less than a miracle of God. The church which at the beginning of Acts could be numbered in scores cannot now be numbered in tens of thousands. The story of the crucified man of Nazareth has swept across the world in its conquering course until now without interference it is being preached in Rome, the capital of the world. The gospel has reached the centre of the world and is being freely proclaimed—and Luke's task is at an end. ("The Acts of the Apostles," 193)

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## About the Author

Paul Kroll worked for Grace Communion International for many years, writing hundreds of articles for our magazines. He is now retired. He wrote this material in the mid 1990s. We have updated it with the most recent version of the NIV for this e-book in 2012. The book was edited by Michael Morrison, who received a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2006. He is Dean of Faculty and instructor in New Testament for [Grace Communion Seminary](http://www.gracecommunionseminary.org).

### Speaking of Life...

Dr. Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International, comments in a video blog each week, giving a biblical perspective on how we live in the light of God's love. Most programs are about three minutes long – available in video, audio, and text. Go to [www.speakingoflife.org](http://www.speakingoflife.org).

### You're Included...

Dr. J. Michael Fezell talks to leading Trinitarian theologians about the good news that God loves you, wants you, and includes you in Jesus Christ. Most programs are about 28 minutes long. Our guests have included:

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Douglas A. Campbell, Duke Divinity School  
Elmer Colyer, U. of Dubuque Theological Seminary  
Gordon Fee, Regent College  
Trevor Hart, University of St. Andrews  
George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary  
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Paul Molnar, St. John's University  
Cherith Fee Nordling, Antioch Leadership Network  
Andrew Root, Luther Seminary

Alan Torrance, University of St. Andrews

Robert T. Walker, Edinburgh University

N.T. Wright, University of St. Andrews

William P. Young, author of *The Shack*

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