

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 27

Paul's Voyage to Rome

Perhaps the very first comedy album I heard, certainly the first one I remember hearing, was Bill Cosby recounting the story of Noah. Cosby tells the story of Noah's initial ark conversation with God. Noah questions whether the voice he hears is really God, especially when the instruction is for Noah to build an ark!

God further instructs Noah to gather two of every animal to put in the ark, causing Noah again to ask, "Who is this really?" as if someone was pulling a practical joke on him. Noah wonders, "Am I on Candid Camera?" When God explains he is going to bring rain and flood the world, Noah still wonders what is going on.

As Noah is building the ark, Cosby imagined interchanges Noah must have had with his neighbors. In one conversation, when a neighbor fusses with Noah over the construction, the neighbor finally asks Noah just why he is building such a thing. Noah responded with the statement, "I can't tell you." When the neighbor pushes harder for an answer, Noah finally says, "I will give you hint. How long can you tread water?"

As I got older and learned to read scripture carefully, I realized that the story was not necessarily as related by Cosby. Still, I have never lost appreciation for the hint, "How long can you tread water?"

I suspect that any good Jewish boy growing up and studying the Torah would have great familiarity with the story of Noah and the ark. That story would stick with most anyone as they see how God used water to cleanse the world of evil and to separate Noah and his family out from those who were wicked. In this sense the apostle Peter used the Noah story as an illustration to explain how baptism separates and saves the believer from the wickedness of the world and its peoples.¹

We do not know what was on Paul's mind when he boarded the boat leaving Caesarea for Rome, but that boat was not only taking Paul to a place where he had long desired to minister, but it was taking him *from* his homeland where his countrymen had spent two years trying to take his life. In a sense, Paul's boat

¹ 1 Peter 3:20-22, "who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him."

venture was both a door to a future he longed for and an escape from a boatload of troubles! It is that part of Paul's life that we explore in this lesson.

PAUL SAILS FOR ROME

Luke gives us the account of Paul leaving Judea and heading to Rome in Acts 27. We should note at the outset that this is one of the "we" sections in Acts where it is apparent that Luke is joining Paul for the journey. Not only do we have Luke's inclusive language ("we"), but we also have Luke giving exacting directions and accounts, mentioning travel detail with great precision like we saw in the earlier "we" sections of Acts.²

Paul and some other prisoners were given to the care of a centurion named Julius who took them on a ship out of the harbor at Caesarea going first to Adramyttium. We should pause here and consider a map's layout of where Paul was and how he was to sail to Rome.



² This again shows us the precision of the history recorded in Acts. Luke writes much of Acts from firsthand knowledge. The rest of Luke's gospel and Acts's history was written from Luke's careful investigation. As Luke said, "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Lk 1:3-4). No doubt Luke spent the two years Paul was held in Caesarea researching and speaking to many firsthand sources about the facts that went into Luke and Acts.

Paul was taken “in a ship of Adramyttium” that was set to sail along the coast of Asia. This was the typical means of ship travel. In a day when navigation instruments were relatively crude (at least by today’s standards), when weather forecasting was even more speculative than today, and when even the sturdiest of vessels were still dangerous in the open sea, most water travel was done with land in sight.

Luke and Aristarchus accompanied Paul on the ship. Aristarchus had come with Paul several years back from his home church in Thessalonica to help bring the Greek churches’ contributions to the church in Jerusalem. We can assume that the centurion carried with him the papers that were prepared for Paul’s appeal, including the most recent write up where Agrippa and Festus had found no crime associated with Paul.

On the voyage, “Julius treated Paul kindly.” When the vessel reached Sidon, 69 miles north of Caesarea and the first stop Luke tells us about, Julius allowed Paul “to go to his friends and be cared for.” The word Luke uses for “cared for”³ is rare in the New Testament. It denotes some type of medical or physical help, telling us Paul may not have been in the best of health for this journey.

From Sidon, the winds were blowing such that the ship went around the western end of Cyprus and followed the coast of modern Turkey until they arrived at Myra. At the harbor in Myra, Julius requisitioned passage for Italy on “a ship of Alexandria.” The Alexandrian ships were those that carried grain to Rome.⁴ The ships were typically quite large and this one, Luke tells us, had 276 people onboard for the voyage.⁵

THE STORM

The weather was not favorable for this voyage and the route took a southerly bent under the southern coast of Crete. As the boat zigzagged off the south of Crete⁶ it neared a harbor named Fair Havens. As they neared Fair Havens, Paul spoke up

³ “This is the only New Testament occurrence of the word *epimeleia* (ἐπιμέλεια) only occurs here although Luke uses another form of it in Luke 10:34.

⁴ Bruce points out that, “Egypt was the chief granary of Rome, and the corn-trade [wheat] between Rome and Egypt was of the greatest importance.” F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans 1951) at 453.

⁵ One first-century Roman shipwreck discovered recently off the coast of Caesarea was about 147 feet long, roughly half a football field.

⁶ While most every map of Paul’s voyage draws a straight line between ports, the actual sailing was typically a zigzag trying to use whatever wind was available to move. Unless the wind was directly behind you, that meant zigzagging.

to the pilot and owner of the ship as well as the centurion. “Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives” (Acts 27:10).

Paul spoke here, not out of some inspiration from God, but out of his own experience and opinions as an experienced traveler.⁷ Ultimately Paul was proven right in his concerns, even though he was wrong on the issue of loss of life. Paul had reason to be concerned. As Luke tells us, “much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over” (Acts 27:9). Luke is referring to the Fast that was *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. If this was the year 59, as Bruce supposes, the fast fell around October 5 of that year.

This timing is significant because the oceans were closed to normal sea traffic over the winter. Rapske and others cite a late Roman military writer Flavius Vegetius writing that May 27 to September 14 was considered the safe time for sea travel. Sea travel was considered risky in the spring between March 10 and May 26 as well as in the fall between September 14 and November 11. The time, however, between November 11 and March 10 was so dangerous that the sea was basically closed, save for emergency travel.⁸

Rather than heed Paul’s advice, the centurion followed the thinking of the ship owner and pilot and they kept sailing past Fair Havens, planning to make the harbor on the western shore of Crete. Once a gentle south wind started, the ship hoisted anchor and began sailing west. As they skirted the southern coast of Crete headed to the western edge, the wind suddenly shifted and started blowing violently from the northeast.⁹ The new wind bore down from the coast and began

⁷ For years, many Pauline scholars considered Paul an inexperienced traveler; however, as time has produced more archaeological insight into Paul and into these passages, scholars have come to decide Paul was actually a very experienced traveler in his day. It would not be unusual for Paul to give advice on decisions like this. See Rapske, Brian, “Acts, Travel and Shipwreck” *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting* (Eerdmans 1994) Vol. 2 at 29 (ftnt 129)

⁸ See Rapske at 22ff; Bruce at 455.

⁹ Luke calls it a “tempestuous wind” using the Greek word *typhonikos* (τυφονικός) from which we derive the word “typhoon.” Bruce explains the adjective “refers to the whirling motion of the clouds and sea caused by the meeting of opposite currents of air” (Bruce at 458). A prefect of the Roman fleet who wrote at the time (named Pliny the Elder) explained a typhoon as “a whirling cloudburst. This brings down with it a portion of heat torn from a cloud, which it turns and whirls round, increasing its own downward velocity by its weight, and shifting from place to place with a rapid whirl; it is especially disastrous to navigators, as it twists round and shatters not only the yards, but the vessels themselves.... The same whirlwind when beaten back by its very impact snatches things up and carries them back with it to the sky, sucking them high aloft.” *Natural History* Book 2.49.131-132 (Loeb Classical Library 1938) translated by H. Rackham. Whether Luke is describing an actual water tornado with its accompanying storm or simply the storm that typically produces a water tornado is unclear. We are certain though that he is

to blow the ship away from the shore. The wind was strong, and the ship could not make any headway (even zigging or zagging!) against such a strong wind. The ship had no choice but to accept the wind and get carried away from Crete.

For a while the ship's crew kept track of their location. They went "under the lee of a small island named Cauda" meaning they went by the island on the side that had some measure of protection from the wind. This was their first opportunity to secure the boat that was pulled along behind the ship.¹⁰ It also was a time when they "used supports to undergird the ship."¹¹ Luke was part of the team that helped secure the dinghy, "we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat" (Acts 27:16). As Bruce adds, "any landlubber could haul on a rope!"¹² The third action taken at this time was lowering the ship's "gear." Scholars are uncertain if this means dropping anchor to slow the movement of the ship or simply dropping sails or securing the ship against windy storms.

The storm did not abate over night and the next day the crew began throwing off the ship's cargo. On the third day the crew threw part of the ship's tackle overboard. For days and nights the storm continued. There were no navigable stars that could be seen, no references to land, and no real control of the ship. Luke wrote, "all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned" (Acts 27:20).

It was in this time of personal desperation for those on board that God sent a message through Paul. Before Paul told the crew of God's message, Paul added his own personal touch, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss!" Paul gently but plainly tells the crew, "I told you so!" Paul then gives his encouraging news that God had plans the weather would not thwart.

Paul gives the crew the word from God as delivered to him from an angel that very night, and he also gives them his own testimony that God is faithful to his word.

describing a violent storm! Alaskan fisherman and biblical scholar Weston Fields notes that, "At least in Alaska, the wind must be at least about 40 knots in order to lift up water off the surface and make a mini-typhoon. We call this a "williwaw." At 40 knots one gets about 12 foot waves, breaking on top and pretty difficult for an open boat. The winds in the storm in Acts were probably much higher."

¹⁰ This was the dinghy that would have been used to shuttle passengers back and forth to shore as well as to do basic work around the outside of the ship.

¹¹ This was a practice of taking rope and wrapping it under the ship's hull and tying it off, then using rope across the deck to tie the opposite sides of the hull tight so the ship had extra strength. This measure was necessary in a grain ship because the grain in the ship's hold, if sufficiently wet, would expand to twice its normal size, breaking apart the ship. See Rapske at 35.

¹² Bruce at 459.

But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, “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.” So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me (Acts 27:22-25).

Paul did let them know the boat would need to run aground on a sandbar at some point.

The storm continued to hurl the boat across the water for fourteen days. Sometime deep in that fourteenth night some of the sailors suspect land was getting nearer. Dropping a weight with a rope attached, the sailors determined that the water was only about 120 feet deep. A short time later a second effort showed water getting shallower, only about 76 feet deep. The crew dropped four anchors from the back (stern) of the ship to slow down progress out of fear the ship might falter on rocks as it got closer to shore. A number of sailors then stated a need to drop anchors from the front (bow) of the ship. These sailors were getting into the dinghy to do so, but Luke knew the men were actually looking to use the dinghy to abandon ship and head for shore.

Paul went to the centurion and his soldiers and told them what the sailors were really up to. Paul added, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved!” Unlike Paul’s advice that two weeks earlier had gone unheeded, this time the men had no second thoughts! They immediately cut away the ropes holding the dinghy and let it float off before the sailors could abandon ship.

As dawn came, Paul told the people on board to eat! Evidently out of fear or seasickness no one had really eaten for the two weeks of the storm. Paul again committed to the people that “not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.” Paul then took the lead by taking bread, thanking God for it out loud before everyone and eating. Others on the boat then followed suit.

THE SHIPWRECK

After eating, the crew began to lighten the ship by throwing off the rest of the wheat so it could run further inland before running aground. As the day broke, the men saw an island with a beach in a bay. Figuring they might be able to run the ship aground fairly close to the beach, they cut loose the anchors, let the rudders free, and hoisted the sail to get wind support. As they went in toward the beach, they struck a reef and ran the boat aground earlier. The bow was stuck on the reef and the waves were destroying the stern of the ship.

The immediate reaction of the soldiers was to kill the prisoners so there would be no escaping. Julius the centurion kept the soldiers from doing so “wishing to save Paul” (Acts 27:43). Under the centurion’s orders, those who could swim were ordered into the water.¹³ Those who could not, took planks or parts of the ship that floated and went into the water. “And so it was that all were brought safely to land” on the island of Malta, just off the boot of Italy.

PAUL IN MALTA

Paul spent the winter months there waiting for sea travel to reopen for the spring. Luke wrote of this in the final chapter of his two-volume history of Christ and his church (Acts 28).

Paul and the other 275 people on the ship made it safely to shore after the ship broke up on a reef off the island of Malta. When they first made land, they had no clue where they were, but the inhabitants told them the island’s name. These native people, Luke noted, were unusually kind to the seafarers, building a fire to help with the bitter winter cold and rain.

We should pause here and note that while the ESV translates the passages in Acts 28:2 and 28:4 as “native people,” other versions use different terms. The NIV calls them “islanders.” The King James calls them “barbarous people” or “barbarians” as does the American Standard Version. Luke does in fact use the Greek word *barbaroi* (βάρβαροι) from which we derive the English word “barbarian.” But in the Greek sense, that word simply means that the people were not Greek speakers. To the Greek ear, those who did not speak Greek made sounds equivalent to murmurings of “*bar bar bar bar*” and in that sense termed non-Greek speakers barbarians.¹⁴

Bruce and others note that the Maltese were native speakers of a Phoenician dialect. This would be a Semitic tongue that Paul would have likely been able to communicate with fairly well.¹⁵

Paul, in his typical helping fashion, went about collecting wood for the fire. As Bruce said, “Paul can make himself useful in small matters as well as great.”¹⁶

¹³ Rapske notes the “readied and controlled manner” in which the ship was ultimately run aground, “passengers would have had some time to prepare themselves and secure any personal belongings against loss or destruction.” Rapske at 34.

¹⁴ For a good set of references to the usage of *barbaroi*, see the note on this text on page 538 of Robertson, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Eerdmans 1956) Vol. 2.

¹⁵ See e.g., F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament; The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans 1988) revised ed. at 496.

When Paul picked up a bundle of sticks and placed them on the fire, a “viper” came out of the sticks and bit onto Paul’s hand. The locals saw the viper hanging from Paul’s hand and considered it an omen. They thought it meant that Paul was a murderer who had somehow managed to escape the justice of the sea. Justice would not be thwarted, and they believed the viper was sent to bring Paul to his proper end.

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

The chief of the island was a man named Publius. He went out of his way to receive Paul, Luke, and others and entertain them for three days. There was no real purpose Luke gives us for this beyond the man’s hospitable nature. It turned out a very smart thing, however, as Publius’s father was sick with a fever and dysentery. Paul went to the father, prayed over him, laid hands on him, and healed him!

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

THE FINAL LEG TO ROME

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

Luke gives us a clear account of how the voyage finished. They went to Syracuse on Sicily where they harbored three days. From there, they sailed to Rhegium then on to Puteoli, both coastal towns of Italy.¹⁷

¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles – The Greek Text With Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans 1951) at 470.

¹⁷ The harbor of Puteoli is the modern bay of Naples. Puteoli was an ancient town in the province of Naples, about 170 miles from Rome. The town is today called Pozzuoli.

In Puteoli, there were other Christians who welcomed Paul, Luke, and Aristarchus. For seven days, the church in Puteoli hosted the travelers.¹⁸ Somehow during this stay, the church at Rome was alerted that Paul was close by and on his way. We should remember here that this is the very church that had received the longest letter Paul had ever written (at least that we know of), Romans. The letter that contained such deep and profound material was written to this church and we can assume that they had poured over the letter repeatedly. This is the church to which Paul had written, “I hope to see you” (Rom. 15:24). There is no question the level of excitement in the church was great.

Luke tells us that on hearing of Paul and the others nearby, Christians from the Roman church “came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us” (Acts 28:15).¹⁹ One must suspect that Aquila and Priscilla, Paul’s companions in the mission fields of Corinth and Ephesus were likely among the first to come greet Paul the prisoner! The term Luke uses that is translated “to meet us” (*apantesin humin* - ἀπάντησις ἡμῖν) is a “technical term for the official welcome of a newly arrived dignitary by a deputation which went out from the city to greet him and to escort him there.”²⁰ In other words, the church treated Paul’s arrival as the city would treat the arrival of a great official. They rolled out the red carpet, in modern parlance!

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

Luke tells us that after being in Rome three days, Paul called the local leaders of the Jews to his house. Paul told these leaders that he had violated neither the Jewish people nor the customs of their fathers, yet was still delivered as a prisoner by the leadership in Jerusalem. Paul explained that the Romans had wanted to release him because after trying his case they found him innocent. But because the Jews objected to releasing Paul, Paul made an appeal to Caesar bringing him as a prisoner to Rome.

¹⁸ While we do not know the origins of the Church in Puteoli, scholars are not surprised that the church would have a presence at this time. Puteoli had a large Jewish presence in Italy. Josephus writes of the Jewish presence there as early as 4 BC (calling the town “Dicearchia” rather than Puteoli). See *Jewish Antiquities*, 17.12.1 and *The Jewish War*, 2.7.1.

¹⁹ These locations were 33 and 43 miles respectively from Rome. From here, Paul would have traveled the famous Appian Way; a road built over 300 years before Paul that led from Rome to the south. A portion of the ancient road can still be traveled today.

²⁰ Bruce *Greek* at 475.

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

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

Luke then closed his histories noting that Paul stayed in Rome two years “at his own expense” letting us know that Paul was paying for his own housing and continued for those two years to have a good bit of liberty. Paul was, as God had promised, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31). With that, Luke brings Acts to an end.²¹

We can go outside Acts to see a bit more about Paul in Rome. In several of the letters he wrote during that two-year period, Paul sets out a few other pertinent facts. First, as we will see when we study Colossians and Philemon, Luke stayed on with Paul as a co-worker for at least a while in Rome.²² Second, we will see in Philippians that Paul saw his imprisonment in Rome as something that God was using to further his mission. Paul wrote the Philippians:

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

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

²¹ Many scholars hold that Luke’s abrupt ending of his histories likely stems from the date of composition. Luke ended his history at this point because this was the time he was finished writing! See, e.g., Bruce Greek commentary at 481; J. McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Baker Academic 2003) at 251. Other scholars believe that Luke intended a third volume. See, e.g., Robertson, *The Expositor’s Greek New Testament* at 553.

²² Some scholars believe the prison epistles were written during a different imprisonment, for example, that in Caesarea.

PAUL AFTER ROME

What happened to Paul and his appeal? Did this become the death of Paul?

We know that none of the Roman authorities that had already heard the case against Paul could find any reason to convict him. As Paul told the Jews in Rome, “When they examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case” (Acts 28:18). King Agrippa and the governor Festus, the last to hear Paul’s case had even discussed that Paul “could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar” (Acts 26:32). Most scholars suspect, then, that Paul was ultimately released from his Roman time in chains, as Paul himself had anticipated.²³ We can remember that in writing from prison, Paul told multiple audiences that he expected to be released and come to visit them.²⁴

Acts closes, however, without telling us what happened. The final verses record that, “He lived there [Rome] two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31). Why does Luke not give us any more information? Scholars differ in answering this. I agree with the early church historian Eusebius (c. 260 – 341) who wrote some two hundred fifty years later that,

“Luke probably wrote the Acts of the Apostles at that time, carrying down his narrative until the time he was with Paul. We have said this to show that Paul’s martyrdom was not accomplished during the sojourn in Rome which Luke describes.”²⁵

One can cobble together a bit of Paul’s life by reading the three “Pastoral Epistles” (1, 2 Timothy, and Titus). This suggests that around 62, consistent with church history, Paul was in fact released. By carefully reading the letters Paul wrote after his release (1 Timothy and Titus), we are able to construct a tentative itinerary Paul followed as he went through Crete, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece.

²³ It is also worth noting, and not without mentioning God’s providence, that the Caesar at this time was Nero. Nero’s court advisor, who would likely oversee Paul’s appeal, was Seneca, brother of Gallio, proconsul of Achaia. This is the same Gallio that had already examined Paul after Jews had brought basically the same charges against him in Corinth, proclaiming, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things” (Acts 18:14-15). No doubt Paul would have informed Seneca of his brother’s prior ruling!

²⁴ See Phil. 1:19, 25; Phile. 1:22.

²⁵ Eusebius, *Church History* 2.22.6

We have a good basis in history for believing that Paul's missionary zeal took him as far as Spain during this time. Clement, a leader of the church in Rome, wrote a letter to the Corinthian church about 30 years later (95 A.D.). In this letter, Clement references Paul's death and speaks of Paul "teaching righteousness throughout the whole world" and specifically reaching "the limits of the west" (1 Clement 5:1-7). Many scholars see this as a reference to Spain. (Paul had certainly indicated in Romans 15:24 and 28 a desire and intent to go to Spain.)

At some point we suspect to be around 65 – 67, Paul was again arrested and imprisoned in Rome. Caesar Nero and the government's position on Christianity changed somewhat during the interim between these imprisonments. On the night of July 18/19 in the year 64, a five-day fire broke out in Rome that destroyed 20 percent of Rome and severely damaged half of the city. We read in the historian Tacitus of not only the fire, but also of Nero's reaction.²⁶

Tacitus explains that the rumors around Rome were that Nero had henchmen set the fire in order to have the excuse for rebuilding Rome to suit his personal taste. In an effort to squelch these rumors, Nero "substituted as culprits" Christians. Tacitus said,

But all human efforts...did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

Another historian of Rome named Suetonius doesn't provide information linking

²⁶ Tacitus was born around 56 A.D. and wrote his *Annals* of Roman history around 100 A.D. Chapter 15 contains his account of the fire.

persecution to the fire, but he does specify that, “punishment was inflicted by Nero on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition” (*Life of Nero* 16:2).

So, it was a different Rome with a different attitude when Paul was arrested again and writing to Timothy in 2 Timothy. The first Roman imprisonment we have studied from Acts was one where Paul was under house arrest. Paul was free to preach, receive visitors, and converse freely about his faith, even converting some of Caesar’s guards. Furthermore, the basis for Paul’s first imprisonment was trumped up on charges that would have seemed silly to Emperor Nero. By the second imprisonment, however, Christians were singled out for the most atrocious persecution and deaths merely because of their faith. They were the emperor’s scapegoats and the imprisonment would be a far cry different. We will read in 2 Timothy that, unlike his earlier imprisonment writings, Paul held no pretense or belief that he would get released. Paul knew his end was near.²⁷

How did Paul die? Scripture does not tell us, but we have a good bit of reliable church history that tells of his death. Writing in 96, Clement of Rome referenced Paul as one of the men of “holy life” who was persecuted and died during the reign of Nero.²⁸ This is borne out by several other post-New Testament writers, including Origen (mid 240’s) and Eusebius (300’s).²⁹

While history is solid on Paul’s martyrdom in Rome, there is a bit less certainty on where he was executed. The Roman pastor Gaius wrote a little over a hundred years later that Paul and Peter were both executed on the *Ostian Way* at a location that was marked by monuments. Some believe that this location was merely

²⁷ Many passages show Paul’s thoughts in this regard. Paul wrote of “the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus” in 1:1. In 1:10 he contrasted the “life and immortality” Christ brought to the “death” Christ abolished. In 2:11 he references that “if we have died with him, we will also live with him.” Paul makes multiple references to those who had already passed on, both his relatives (1:3) and Timothy’s (1:5). Paul wrote of the coming day of Christ’ return and judgment (“I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me” 1:12; “Christ Jesus. Who is to judge the living and the dead” 4:1; “the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day” 4:6-8; and “The Lord will ... bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom” 4:18).

²⁸ 1 Clement 6:1 is interpreted by most every scholar to refer to the persecutions under Nero.

²⁹ Eusebius was the first after Luke to diligently research and write a history of the church. His Ecclesiastical History (3:1) referenced Paul’s death. (“Paul, spreading the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum and finally suffering martyrdom at Rome under Nero.”) Eusebius was an exhaustive researcher who wrote a fairly reliable history.

Paul's burial location, not his actual execution site.

Also written a hundred years after his death was an early church work called *The Acts of Paul*.³⁰ Some of the history in this work is clearly embellished. Most scholars, however, accept the accuracy of the account of Paul's death by beheading as contained in the book.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "*But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land*" (Acts 27:14).

One issue that has plagued scholars is the incredible detail Luke provides in this narrative. Bruce called it "one of the most vivid pieces of descriptive narrative in the whole of Acts, or indeed in the whole New Testament." Bruce then cites H. J. Holtzmann as saying it is "one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship."³¹ Why does this become an issue for scholars? Because one must ask why Luke bothers to go into this level of detail. Luke will set out years of activity in a matter of a few words, yet here he chooses to spend verse after verse recounting in detail the naval voyage and storm.

There are a number of reasons Luke may have done so. First, we have already seen Luke always provides more details for those parts of Paul's journeys where Luke is actually there (the "we" sections). Further scholars note that there was almost a Greek literary art in describing sea voyages

³⁰ According to the early church writer Tertullian, an elder in a church in Turkey wrote the "history" in honor of Paul but lost his office once his work was determined unauthentic. This work, dated around AD 160 recorded that Paul was brought before Nero when the Christians were being killed in masse. Nero noted that the other Christian prisoners treated Paul deferentially; so Nero determined that Paul was a leader among them. Nero orders Paul beheaded. The Acts of Paul reports, "Then Paul stood with his face to the east and lifted up his hands unto heaven and prayed a long time, and in his prayer he conversed in the Hebrew tongue with the fathers, and then stretched forth his neck without speaking." The Acts then record that the executioner "struck off his head." *Acts of Paul* X.V (Oxford 1924) trans. M. R. James.

³¹ Bruce at 450. For a fuller understanding of the dead on accuracy of Luke's account from a seafarer perspective see the write up in *Biblical Archaeologist* Vol. 53 No. 1 (March 1990).

from the time of Homer's *Odyssey* forward, over 600 years earlier.³² These scholars urge us to see that Luke is following this mariner narrative craft.

But there is another reason scholars offer, which serves as our first point for home. In scripture, in secular literature at the time, and even in contemporary times, human life has been compared to stormy sea voyages. While we must tread lightly when making such allegorical usage of scripture, we may do so where our insight is bolstered by the plain weight of clear scripture.

So we ask in our first point for home, is there a storm in your life? One of typhoon nature? Are you whipped about by winds until you have lost your bearing? Do things feel totally out of control? Try as hard as you can, do your efforts still seem to come woefully short? Have your past decisions led to troubles that should have been avoided? Have you ignored good counsel to your own peril? Is your life on a collision course that could leave you drowning without rescue? If so, take heart. There is a God worthy of our worship. This God stands waiting to take control. Trusting God, doing what he says, living in faith to his word, brings comfort, security, and ultimate rescue. So take what the storm brings, but also take food, give thanks, eat, and know that God will bring about his plans and purposes. No Christian is ever alone. As Paul had already written the Romans, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom. 8:28).

2. "*No doubt this man is a murderer'... They changed their minds and said he was a god*" (Acts 28:6).

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

Remember Peter in Matthew 16? It was the one chapter where in one breath he proclaims Jesus the Son of God, to which Jesus responds,

³² Luke even uses some Homeric language and allusions as he wrote the account. Referencing one example in particular, Bruce asks, "Must we not accept it for a certainty that Luke, the Physician of Antioch, had gone through his Homer?" Bruce at 467.

“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 16:17). Same Peter, same Jesus – six verses later, Peter rebuked Jesus saying he should surely never go to Jerusalem and be killed, Jesus tells Peter, “Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me” (Mt 16:23).

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

3. *“And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us”* (Acts 28:15).

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

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

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

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