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# PAUL

## From His Arrest to His Imprisonment

BY GERALD L.  
STEVENS

**B**Y WRITING ACTS, Luke helped us immensely to understand the apostle Paul's work and travels. This help is especially true of Paul's story from his arrest in Jerusalem to his imprisonment in Rome.

### Jeopardy in Jerusalem

*Riot and Arrest (Acts 21:17–36)* Paul's presence in Jerusalem was problematic for James and the church (21:21–24). James and the elders advised a plan that required Paul's presence in the temple. The plan failed. Instead of proving Paul's Jewish commitments, his presence in the temple only instigated a riot (21:27–30).

### Second Account (Acts 22:1–21)

The Roman tribune arrested Paul (21:31–36). Luke gave the second of Paul's three accounts of his Damascus Road conversion (9:1–19; 22:1–21; 26:1–29). Paul's speech to the Jerusalem populace failed the moment he mentioned his work among Gentiles. The tribune, befuddled by religious agitations, decided to flog Paul to get at the truth, standard Roman procedure in these circumstances. Paul avoided the tribune's *flagellum* order by appealing to his Roman citizenship (22:25). Roman Valerian and Porcian Laws exempted Roman citizens from this particularly cruel form of interrogation.<sup>1</sup>

The tribune commanded Paul to appear before the Sanhedrin to ascertain the precise charges being leveled at Paul. The Council, however, dissolved into theological argument so violent the tribune had to retire Paul back to the military barracks for security. Paul had a vision in the Roman military barracks. The key point of the vision was to reiterate the divine imperative that Paul would go to Rome (compare 19:21; 23:11).

The vision's assurance anticipated a plot on Paul's life. Knowledge of the plot made its way to the tribune. The tribune concluded his only option was to secure Paul by

**Right: At Caesarea Maritima, traditional site where Paul appeared**

**before Festus. Because Paul was a Roman citizen, he had the right to make the**

**appeal that the emperor hear his case.**



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**Left: Roman coin; reverse; with inscription of Festus; bronze.**

**Below: An aerial view of Malta, showing St. Paul's Bay.**

**Lower right: Reconstruction of ruins beside the coast at Sidon.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (19/20/5)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: GB HOWELL, JR. (05/47/89)



military escort to the seaport of Caesarea, residence of the Roman governor. The governor would hear the case and decide Paul's fate. The tribune openly acknowledged Paul's innocence to the governor (23:29).

### Felix and Festus

Paul's two years in Caesarea were a travesty of Roman justice.

No witnesses were ever produced (24:19). Paul should have been released immediately. Felix, however, sought a bribe (24:26). The only time Paul was detained by a Roman administration in Acts, he was held without legal cause through the corruption of a provincial Roman official.

Festus replaced Felix around



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/LOUISE KOHL SMITH (83/29/6)

A.D. 59 and inherited this perplexing prisoner. The Sanhedrin attempted to revive the plot to assassinate Paul by urging the new governor to return the old prisoner to Jerusalem. Charges could not be proved (25:7), yet Festus was willing to ingratiate himself with the Jewish leaders by doing them a favor.

*Paul's Appeal (Acts 25:10-12)*

The novice Festus played right into the hands of the Sanhedrin by suggesting Paul be moved back to Jerusalem. Paul appealed to Caesar. A Roman citizen had the right to such an appeal—called a *provocatio*. The legal precedent for this type of appeal goes back to the foundation of

the Roman Republic in 509 B.C.<sup>2</sup> Paul could expect fairer treatment outside of Judea, because such Roman administration he already had experienced with Sergius Paulus, the proconsul in Cyprus (13:7-12) and Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia (18:12-17).

Festus had a problem with Paul's appeal. He had to send a prisoner to Rome without any sustainable charges and no witnesses! Festus could be recalled for such foolishness (implied in 25:25-26). Herod Agrippa II arrived in Caesarea right at this time. Festus asked for Agrippa's help. Agrippa decided to hear Paul's story for himself.

*Third Account (Acts 26:1-29)*

Paul's defense before Agrippa II gave Luke the third opportunity to recount Paul's Damascus Road experience. Paul's defense was interrupted by Festus's accusation of Paul's insanity (26:24). We also

**LESSON REFERENCE**

ETB: Acts 21-28



get Agrippa's famous retort, "In so short a time do you think to make me a Christian?" (26:28, writer's translation). After all the leaders and aristocrats assembled together concluded that Paul had not done anything deserving of death or imprisonment, Agrippa mused ironically, "This man could have been released had he not appealed to Caesar" (26:31-32). Without the appeal to Caesar, Paul could have gone to Rome a free man.

### Journey to Rome

Caesarean prisoners were under the guard of a centurion named Julius of the Augustan Cohort. They boarded a coasting vessel, but Julius sought an Alexandrian grain ship of the imperial service along ports on the Asian coast. At Sidon, Julius allowed Paul to visit friends (27:3). Luke used the centurion's unexpected kindness to reinforce the theme of Paul's innocence already developed in the narrative.<sup>3</sup>

### Unfavorable Sailing

Sailing was not favorable (27:4). The travelers finally made Myra of Lycia, a major port for imperial grain ships from Egypt. Boarding a grain ship, they made Cnidus after a number of days only "with difficulty" (27:7). Not wanting to winter at Cnidus, the crew struck out for Crete. The going was only rougher still. At Fair Havens near the city of Lasea, they had a crucial choice to make. Paul advised not to continue (27:9-10). The centurion, however, decided to chance making the better harbor at Phoenix. As soon as they set sail, disaster struck with furious force. A northeaster arose, called in Greek *Euraquilo*, a hurricane-force wind likely fueled by a downward thrust off the slopes of Mount Ida in the center of Crete. Pushed by the winds, Paul and his shipmates sought relief behind the small island of Cauda just off Crete's southwestern end.

Unfortunately for all on board, the semi-flat hull construction of these grain ships could render them structurally unsound.<sup>4</sup> The crew attempted to reinforce the lateral strength of the hull—likely by passing large cables transversely underneath to lash the timbers together. The sailors feared drifting into the dreaded Syrtis, a system of sandbars and shoals off the northern coast of Africa that wrecked many ships (27:15-17).

As the crew tried to tack westward, the ship was taking a beating. To try to ease the hull's stress, the crew began to throw weight overboard including the grain cargo, which would have meant the loss of livelihood for the ship's owners, captain, and crew. Later, more weight was jettisoned, even spare gear and the remainder of the grain. Many more harrowing nights and days without stars or sun passed. The seasoned sailors were totally lost (27:18-20).

Left: Modern-day Port of Crete (facing west).

Below: About 43 miles southeast of Rome, the Appian forum sits beside the Appian Way. In the 1st century, this was the only stopping place between Rome and Puteoli and was about a day's journey from Rome. First-century travelers complained about the poor tasting water served here as well as the frogs and gnats (from the nearby river), which made getting a night's rest difficult.



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### Shipwrecked Survivors

Paul then had another vision—an echo of the barracks vision (27:21–26). He was reminded of his divine itinerary to Rome. Paul also was promised all those sailing would be brought safely through

the storm, though the ship would be lost. Paul reported his vision to the crew and centurion.

Upon hearing crashing sea breakers, the crew set all four ship's anchors out at the stern to slow the ship and point in

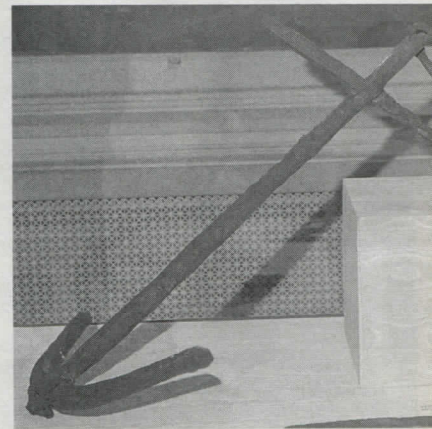
the right direction for a morning beaching. Some crew attempted to leave early on the ship's dinghy, but Paul warned the centurion their departure would put the entire company in jeopardy. The centurion this time heeded Paul's advice. All on board made the shore safely—a clear miracle. The island was Malta (27:27–44).

### Island Adventures

A viper bit Paul as he gathered firewood. Island natives initially surmised the god “Justice” had struck this guilty criminal under Roman guard who should not have escaped the sea. When Paul did not die, the natives concluded he was a god (28:3–6). Luke used the islanders' words as a message: though in chains, this person was innocent. Though bitten by life's circumstances, this person had divine providence surrounding his life to protect him and guarantee he fulfilled the divine purpose for his life in this voyage to Rome. Paul healed many on the island of their diseases, including the father of Publius, chief resident of the island (28:7–9).

### Destination Rome

With spring's arrival, Paul and company boarded another Alexandrian



ship. About a day's sailing made Syracuse on the eastern coast of the island of Sicily with a three-day layover. They then sailed to Rhegium, where they awaited winds to navigate the seven-mile wide Straits of Messina between Sicily and the Italian mainland. Favorable winds the next day put them through the straits and up to Puteoli, the grand port of call for Rome's great grain ships. The centurion allowed Paul a week's stay with Puteoli believers, similar to his courtesy at Sidon (28:13-14). Roman believers welcomed Paul at the Forum of Appius, about 43 miles from Rome, and the Three Taverns, another 10 miles farther up the road (28:15).<sup>5</sup>

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (2008/14)

Left: Harbor at Puteoli.

Right: Exterior, Chapel of the Crucifix in Rome; built in the late 1500s. Beneath is the two-layered Mamertinum Prison where tradition states Paul may have been held. The higher part of the prison was named "Mamertino." The lower part, "Tullianum," was originally a water reservoir or cistern. Prisoners were lowered into Tullianum through a hole in the floor of Mamertino.

Lower left: Iron anchor, dated A.D. 79; Roman.

Far lower left: The traditional site of Three Taverns along the Appian Way. The church commemorates the Christians meeting Paul on his way to Rome. Named "Three Taverns" from the Latin *Tres Tabernae*, the term originally meant "three shops." History shows that the original three businesses at this intersection included a blacksmith, a general store, and a refreshment house.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BOB SCHATZ (2015/19)

### Faithful Finish

The arduous journey over, Paul at last arrived in Rome. Once there, the apostle was kept under house arrest. He was allowed his own accommodations for lodging, simply attended by a soldier escort. He could receive visitors. These lenient custody arrangements might have been the final act of kindness of the centurion Julius, who may have commended this exemplary prisoner to the officer in charge. Paul remained in this

custody for two years. He preached and taught "quite openly and unhindered" Luke reported (28:31). Through riot, corruption, storm, shipwreck, and snakebite, God had brought Paul to Rome to preach the good news. What a testament to the sovereignty of God! **B**

1. Enacted during the struggle against Roman kingship as the Early Republic emerged with rule by two consuls, these laws protected common citizens from the arbitrary exercise of power. Titus Livius, *The History of Rome*, trans. D. Spillan and Cyrus Edmonds (London: George Bell & Sons, 1903), 10.9 (p. 638).

2. The exact nature of the appeal is debated. Some have argued the appeal may have been one of *reiectio*,

rejection of one court for another. See Mark Reasoner, "Citizenship, Roman and Heavenly" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 140.

3. This is the conclusion of the tribune Lysias, the governor Festus, and the entire Caesarean military and political aristocracy (Acts 23:29; 25:25; 26:31–32).

4. Michael Fitzgerald, "The Ship of Saint Paul, Part II: Comparative Archeology," *Biblical Archeologist* 53 (March 1990), 32–34.

5. Perhaps Luke mentioned two separate places of encounter because these were two different delegations representing differing groups of house churches in Rome.

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