

Conclusion: Paul's Two Years in Rome

Luke's Acts account is a carefully crafted, sweeping narrative. It provides a broad and, at times, minutely detailed record of the genesis and early decades of Christ's Church. It moves quickly to Paul's introduction, and from that point forward Luke puts him at the very center of his account. The obvious reason for this is Luke's close association with Paul and his personal participation in much of Paul's missionary labors. But there is a more important reason for Paul's centrality.

Luke's intent was to demonstrate the fact that, in his own day, God had fulfilled in His Son all that the Scriptures had revealed and promised: He'd ended the enmity and reconciled His creation to Himself, seated His King upon His throne and ushered in His everlasting kingdom; now He was undertaking the process of gathering in the sons of the kingdom – people from every tribe and tongue and nation. Affirming the fulfillment of all the Scriptures in Jesus Christ was Luke's foremost concern in constructing his two-fold account, and the overarching issue of that fulfillment is the kingdom of God – the all-embracing kingdom of the new creation. Paul is the central player in Luke's account precisely because he was Christ's primary instrument for building that kingdom by taking His gospel to the ends of the earth.

Paul was at the center of Jesus' early work in founding and building His Church, making him the perfect vehicle for Luke to employ in carrying his narrative forward. Moreover, Luke directed the trajectory of Paul's ministry toward the city of Rome: Fittingly, Jesus' apostle to the Gentiles was to realize the apex of his commission in his witness to the preeminent Gentile ruler in the city that was the epicenter of the Gentile world. Paul could hardly be Christ's ambassador to the Gentiles and not testify of Him to Caesar and the inhabitants of Rome.

Luke set forth Rome as the goal of his narrative, and, having traced out in detail the circumstances that culminated with Paul's arrival in the capital city, it is remarkable how little he said about the apostle's two years of ministry there. Equally remarkable is the abruptness with which Luke ended his account: Paul is his main character, and yet Luke closed the curtain on him in such a way that his readers are left without any indication of what became of him. There are, then, at least three arenas in which Luke's closing appears awkward and uncharacteristic:

- The first has already been noted, namely that Luke made no mention of Paul appearing before Caesar, though this was a key feature in his narrative leading up to Paul's arrival in the imperial city. True, the Lord said nothing to Paul about testifying to Caesar (23:11), but His angel did (27:23-25). Moreover, Paul's appeal to Caesar was the very reason he was in Rome under house arrest. Short of Nero dismissing his case (which some believe happened), Paul clearly had his day before the emperor. And knowing Paul, he would have centered his defense in his commitment to the good news of Jesus Christ.
- The second is Luke's treatment of Paul's time in Rome. Though he noted that the apostle spent two years in the city, he provided only a brief, one-sentence summary of those years and Paul's ministry to the Roman population (28:30-31). This is the only instance in his account in which a long stay in one place received so little commentary (cf. Paul's time in Corinth (18:1-17) and Ephesus (19:1-41)). This treatment is especially notable given that Rome represented the apex of Paul's ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles.

- The third is perhaps the most striking, and that is Luke's complete silence regarding the outcome of Paul's two years in Rome. Not only did he provide no account of an appearance before Nero, Luke left his readers speculating as to whether or not Paul ever left Rome. While the tone of his summary suggests that the apostle was eventually released – and many commentators have observed that Luke surely would have recorded Paul's death had Nero executed him, others have interpreted Luke's silence as evidence that Paul did indeed die at the end of those two years.

The book of Acts doesn't answer this question; one must look outside it to Paul's letters and other historical sources to make a determination. And when those sources are interrogated, it seems likely that Paul was in fact released from what would prove to be his first Roman imprisonment: After a couple years of freedom and further ministry in the gospel, he was again taken prisoner by Rome, this time to be executed at Nero's hand. The following presents some of the more important evidence for this scenario:

1. Paul's so-called *prison epistles* (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon; note that 2 Timothy is usually associated with a second imprisonment) are a primary source of scriptural evidence. However, the contribution of those epistles is inconclusive for the simple reason that their dates and circumstances are disputed. The matter is obviously simplified if Paul only experienced one Roman imprisonment; but if there were two, then each prison epistle must be assigned to the correct incident. And that, in turn, presumes that none of those letters was connected with an incarceration outside of Rome.

Perhaps one of the strongest arguments for a second Roman imprisonment comes from a comparison of Luke's account in Acts with the Philippian epistle and Paul's second letter to Timothy.

- a. First of all, Luke was clear that Paul was innocent of the charges against him; though his Jewish accusers were adamant, the rulers to whom they brought their case were unconvinced. King Agrippa himself acknowledged that Paul could have been released had he not appealed to Caesar (cf. 24:10-13, 25:23-26, 26:30-32). And if these men recognized Paul's innocence, wouldn't Nero have done the same? The emperor would eventually look for a scapegoat in the Christian community, but that time was still a couple of years off. These considerations, together with Luke's silence about Paul's death, point toward the conclusion that he was released after his two-year imprisonment.
- b. Assuming that the Philippian epistle was penned during those two years in Rome (cf. 1:12-13 with 4:22), Paul himself was confident that he was going to be released. He, more than anyone, knew he was innocent of all criminal charges, and perhaps he'd been given some indication from those around him that Caesar was going to set him free. At the very least, his experiences with Felix, Festus and Agrippa reinforced his sense that an objective Gentile judge would not be able to find him guilty of any crime – certainly not one deserving of death. But whatever fueled his confidence – and assuming he was indeed writing from Rome – Paul seemed to have no doubt that his freedom was forthcoming (ref. again 1:12-13).

- c. But whereas the Philippian epistle found Paul confident of his release, his second letter to Timothy expressed his conviction that his life was coming to its end. In that context, too, he was in bonds in Rome for the gospel (1:16-18), but this time with an entirely different mindset about what lay ahead (cf. 2:8-9, 4:6, 16-18).
2. Another important scriptural evidence for a second Roman imprisonment is drawn from the Pastoral Epistles as a whole. In general terms, many scholars contend that ascribing Pauline authorship to those three letters depends upon granting that the apostle was indeed released from the incarceration recorded at close of Acts and then subsequently reimprisoned in Rome. The only alternative is to try to fit the circumstances recounted in the Pastorals into the Acts timeframe, which, in the judgment of those same scholars, cannot be done. (Others solve the problem by denying that Paul wrote the Pastorals.)
 3. Assuming, then, that Paul underwent two imprisonments in Rome and that he penned the Pastoral Epistles subsequent to his release from the first one, certain details of that intervening period can be surmised.
 - a. The first is that Paul continued his missions work, revisiting the region of Asia – in particular Troas (2 Timothy 4:13) and Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20) – as well as Macedonia and Greece (1 Timothy 1:3; 2 Timothy 4:20). He may also have returned to Ephesus (again, 1 Timothy 1:3) and spent some time in Crete where he left Titus (Titus 1:5). Some scholars speculate that Paul may even have realized his goal of traveling as far west as Spain.
 - b. The second is that this period of freedom was relatively brief. Most scholars place Paul's death between A.D. 64 and A.D. 67. Assuming Paul arrived in Rome the first time in the spring of A.D. 61, there may have been as little as one year between his release and rearrest.
 - c. The formal persecution of Christians arising from the Great Fire of A.D. 64 seems to have been the occasion for Paul being again taken into custody by Rome. Nero was away from the city when the fire broke out, but rumors circulated that he'd had it set in order to rebuild Rome in accordance with his own grand vision. To distract attention from himself, Nero located a suitable scapegoat in Rome's Christian population. This sect was already regarded with suspicion, and the emperor knew that few if any would raise an objection to his unproven allegations. If someone needed to bear the blame, who better than a marginalized group of misfits who acknowledged and worshipped only one deity and made no pretense about giving their allegiance to another king?

Traditional accounts differ as to how Paul came to be swept up in the furor. Concerning scriptural witness, some infer that Paul was in Asia when he was arrested (cf. 2 Timothy 1:15, 4:16). If this was the case, it occurred long enough after the Roman fire that the formal persecution of Christians which arose from it had become well established throughout the empire. Paul was likely recognized as a leader of the sect and, following his arrest, transported to Rome for trial.

4. One final thing to note regarding a second Roman imprisonment is that Luke was with Paul in Rome during that episode as well (2 Timothy 4:11). The reason this is important is that some have speculated that the abrupt ending to Luke's Acts account – and especially the absence of any record of Paul's life beyond his two years in Rome – was due to Luke dying around that time. But assuming the historical context for Second Timothy postulated above, Luke was still alive and with Paul in Rome during his second imprisonment when he was awaiting execution. (The Scripture is entirely silent regarding the particulars of Paul's death, but some information – albeit much of it unverifiable – is found in the writings of early Church fathers and historians.)

“There can be little doubt that he appeared again at Nero's bar, and this time the charge did not break down. In all history there is not a more startling illustration of the irony of human life than this scene of Paul at the bar of Nero. On the judgment-seat, clad in the imperial purple, sat a man who, in a bad world, had attained the eminence of being the very worst and meanest being in it, a man stained with every crime, a man whose whole being was so steeped in every nameable and unnameable vice, that body and soul of him were, as some one said at the time, nothing but a compound of mud and blood; and in the prisoner's dock stood the best man the world possessed, his hair whitened with labours for the good of men and the glory of God. The trial ended: Paul was condemned, and delivered over to the executioner. He was led out of the city, with a crowd of the lowest rabble at his heels. The fatal spot was reached; he knelt beside the block; the headsman's axe gleamed in the sun and fell; and the head of the apostle of the world rolled down in the dust.” (Easton's Bible Dictionary)

Luke provided only a summary statement of Paul's two years in Rome, but that statement – especially when interpreted within his overall account – is rich in content and implication.

1. The first thing Luke did was highlight the *heart* of Christ's great apostle. Paul had his own quarters in Rome, but quarters for which he was expected to pay rent. This implies that Paul worked during that period, perhaps in his trade as a tent-maker. Beyond the burdens of work, Paul faced the constant temptation to allow himself to become preoccupied with his pending appearance before Nero and the uncertainties attached to it.

Yet Christ's servant never lost sight of his high and privileged calling: He regarded his home as he did his days – as belonging to his Master and committed to His cause. Aged and worn out from the years and their toll, Paul didn't seek retirement or a less strenuous life; he kept his door always open, eagerly welcoming all who came to him (28:30).

2. Secondly, Luke highlighted Paul's *motivation*. The apostle happily opened his door to all visitors, but not because he loved a busy social life or was a “people person” as such; Paul welcomed all who came to him because he desired that Caesar's subjects should know and embrace the truth of the kingdom of God and its Lord – the King of kings into whose hand God has committed all dominion, power and authority. Luke expressed this ministration in terms of Paul *proclaiming* the kingdom of God and *teaching* the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. The distinction is easily passed over, but it provides important insight into how Paul (and Luke) regarded the ministry of the gospel.

- a. First, it shows that gospel ministry begins with proclamation, *but of a specific sort*. In our contemporary setting, witness to Christ typically begins with confronting people with their sinfulness and need of deliverance from divine condemnation. Jesus is then introduced as their remedy on the basis of His cross work. Stated simply, the ministry of the gospel has, in our day, morphed into an individualistic reflection of our individualistic and self-preoccupied culture.

One might argue that times have changed since Paul walked on the earth, but the truth is that people have always been self-referential and self-centered. The fallen human heart and mind have always revolved around personal circumstances, needs and concerns, and yet Paul's gospel witness – like Jesus' before him – didn't begin with or ultimately focus on individual concerns. Rather, it was grounded in a message having cosmic, creation-wide significance; Paul's gospel began with the proclamation of the kingdom of God (28:31a): *the announcement that God's all-encompassing, all-transforming purpose for His creation has now been realized and is bearing its fruit in the world unto the day of final consummation* (cf. Luke 1:26-33 with Matthew 3:1-2, 4:17-23, Mark 1:14-15 and Luke 4:42-44; cf. also Acts 8:12, 19:8, 20:25, etc.).

The appropriateness of this starting point and emphasis is evident in the fact that the “good news” announced by Jesus, and then by His disciples, is the word of hope and renewal revealed and promised throughout the Scriptures. When the Lord proclaimed the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, He was announcing the fulfillment of that which His Father – and so the scriptural record – had been holding forth from the beginning. Jesus' presence meant that the promised kingdom – the kingdom that is the grand theme of the Scriptures – had at last come upon Israel and, through Israel, the world of men. This is precisely the sense in which Jesus insisted that the Law, Prophets and Writings testified of Him.

- b. The gospel proclaims the kingdom of God as the realization of the divine purpose of creational renewal, reconciliation and consummation. But for that very reason the gospel finds its essence in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not merely that a kingdom requires a king (a *lord*), though this is true. The centrality of Jesus to the kingdom of God resides in the *nature* of this kingdom: not the rule of God as such, but the blessed, shalomic reality of Creator-creature intimacy ordered in and through the creature who is God's image-son.

Jesus Christ is indeed the King of God's everlasting kingdom, but His kingship can only be rightly discerned and embraced when it is understood in terms of the nature of the kingdom over which He presides as the Last Adam, Seed of Abraham, and Son of David. The kingdom of God is not a “kingdom of this world” (John 18:28-36; cf. Revelation 11:15-17), but the kingdom revealed in the Scriptures; it is the consummate and everlasting manifestation of *sacred space*. So its King is the One set forth in all the Scriptures – the Servant-King who, in and by Himself, brings sacred space to realization, namely the summing up of all things in the created order in Him (Ephesians 1:9-10; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

Thus Paul's announcement of the kingdom of God was necessarily followed by careful and thorough *instruction* in "the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ" (28:31b). Then as now, the proclamation of God's kingdom demands explanation, and Paul provided it by connecting the kingdom, its nature, substance, scope and purpose with the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

This relationship between the proclamation of the kingdom and instruction in the things concerning Jesus Christ highlights three crucial implications that must not be missed:

- 1) The first has already been touched on, which is that true "gospel preaching" doesn't begin with Jesus' death on the cross for sinners, but with an announcement of "good news": The Creator-God has resolved the fundamental problem of creational estrangement, and has therefore addressed all of the ills, evil and tragic consequences that flow from it. The good news of the kingdom is that God, in His Son, has set all things right – in truth and in substance, if perhaps not in actual expression and not yet in consummate extent and fullness.
- 2) The second is that this foundation must have the superstructure of Jesus Christ built upon it. The announcement of the good news of creational renewal and reconciliation demands substantiation and explanation, and the person and work of Christ provide that. The good news of the kingdom is given substance and made coherent only as it is rightly connected with the person, purpose and work of Christ. But the converse is also true: It is wholly inadequate to "preach Christ" except as that message stands upon the foundation of the truth of the kingdom of God. Without that foundation, the *meaning* of Jesus' person and work – and therefore the *truth* concerning Him – is lost, leaving the void to be filled by the personal speculations of the hearer.
- 3) Finally, and flowing out of the previous two implications, true gospel preaching must include a thoroughly biblical presentation of Jesus Christ, and not simply a few discrete facts about his sacrificial death for sinners and the need to believe in Him. This is not to say that those truths have no place in or are not important to the gospel message, but they must be put into the larger context of the scriptural revelation of Jesus Christ and His role and relation to the kingdom of God.

This understanding and approach to the gospel message is largely absent from the contemporary Church. In fact, when confronted with the above considerations most Christians would probably object, arguing either that the gospel is "simpler than that," or that, because people don't understand the Bible, we need to meet them where they are ("become all things to all men"). A more reasoned – though equally false – objection is that Paul, like his Lord, took this approach because his audiences were mainly Jews who were well versed in the Scriptures and the salvation history they record. But Luke notes that Paul preached and taught in this way to *all* who came to him. His audience included Gentiles as well as Jews; it even included members of Caesar's household – individuals who knew little or nothing of the God of Israel and the Jewish Scriptures. Paul doubtless met them where they were, but with the gospel of the kingdom in Jesus Christ.

3. The third thing Luke highlighted in his summary statement was the *Lord's provision* for Paul in his gospel witness: Though residing in the “belly of the beast” of Gentile paganism under the watchful eye of Caesar’s soldiers, Paul was able to preach Jesus Christ and His kingdom openly without any sort of restraint (28:31c). Luke’s descriptors are sometimes interpreted as emphasizing Paul’s boldness, but this is to miss his point. Paul *was* bold and unintimidated in his testimony to Jesus, but Luke was taking note of something else – *something that, when rightly recognized, gives an entirely different perspective to what appears to be an abrupt and unnatural ending to his account.*

Again, Luke’s language spotlights, not Paul’s boldness, but the complete freedom of testimony he was afforded in Rome. The astonishing significance of this is easily lost on Americans who, for the most part, know nothing of restraint or persecution in their witness to Christ. True, speaking of Jesus is frowned upon in certain settings and environments, but this hardly compares with what met Christ’s witnesses in the ancient world (and in many other parts of the world to this day). Paul knew the terrible and often lethal cost of testifying to Christ; he had sustained it at the hands of Gentile and Jew alike. So also Luke’s early readers knew that cost, and all the more because they were witnessing and experiencing the fury of Rome directed against Christ and His Church. What Nero initiated would continue in some form for nearly three centuries.

Those readers knew a very different Rome than Paul experienced. They were enduring what the Scriptures warned of (Daniel 7:7, 23) and John’s vision presupposed. They knew the fury of Rome’s opposition to the Son (Psalm 2:1-3), but here Luke’s summary was putting that opposition into its larger context, namely the unqualified triumph of the kingdom of God (so Psalm 2:4-12; Daniel 7:1-27). Dreadful days were at hand for Christ’s people, *but in accordance with the same sovereign authority that secured for Paul complete freedom in his witness – witness in Rome itself under Caesar’s charge.* In spite of Rome’s apparent invincibility, the fact remained that “the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ” (Revelation 11:15-18).

God’s providential hand had brought Paul to Rome, thereby fulfilling Jesus’ promise to him. But the Lord ordered His providence so as to nurture the apostle’s faith: The path to Rome was filled with unforeseen tribulations and hardship, testing whether Paul would fall prey to distraction, deviation or even despair. Now, in Rome, the Lord had given His servant an arbor on the Hill Difficulty and opened for him a great and effectual door for the work of ingathering. But all too soon the tide would shift and the favor afforded him by Rome would be replaced by lethal indignation.

Thus Luke’s abrupt ending is actually perfectly appropriate. Far from taking his narrative off a cliff, his closing summary completes it with amazing succinctness. From its opening verses Luke’s two-fold account adheres to his purpose to demonstrate the fulfillment of the Scriptures, and therefore God’s eternal purpose, in His Son. His record proclaims the kingdom of God – its in-breaking, inauguration, growth and interaction and conflict with the “kingdom of this age.” Conflict is inescapable because these two kingdoms contradict each other, but triumph has been achieved and the true King enthroned. His kingdom is bearing its fruit in renewal and ingathering, whether with Jew or Gentile, through opposition or open door, faithfulness or folly.