

The Sequel

Jesus Continued in the Book of Acts

Captive in the Capital Paul at the Ends of the Earth A Prep Guide for Session Eight with Dr. Allen R. Hilton

"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"

In life, we know partially as we go, but we know more fully as "retrospectators" who can look back with the perspective of how things have actually happened. This is particularly true of impossibilities that astonishingly become possible. The American Revolution, Truman over Dewey, the first moon walk, and the '69 Mets (same year, go figure!) – all of these events seem predictable now, but they were impossible looking forward.

The growth of Christianity from a tiny rag-tag band of scared disciples to the religion of billions today is one of those stories, and its first chapters are the Book of Acts. Roman oddsmakers would not have even allowed it on their board, the probability of success was so low. Yet Acts ends in the seat of the mighty Roman Empire, and we study it twenty centuries later on a continent its cast did not know existed.

In this final session of The Sequel, we land at the end of Acts and find ourselves again at its beginning.

Part One – The Apostle Under Arrest

Our now-familiar Jewish rabbi called Saul, who became a Christian missionary called Paul is a main player in this end-at-the-beginning surprise – not least because he wasn't in the upper room of Acts 1. Cathedrals, colleges, cities, and children bear the name of an overachiever from an out-of-the-way Turkish town called Tarsus. St. Paul gained such prominence because of hard work that began with the astonished realization that he didn't have to work hard.

Luke's story reaches its last chapter with that eminent, impactful Paul in full view. Luke writes, "When we came into Rome (again with the first person plural!), Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him." (Acts 28.16) As our narrator portrays it, Paul's audiences and collaborators come and go freely to hear him hold forth under the lenient care of

Roman guards. House arrest is the supreme version of “minimum security” imprisonment. Luke casts Paul as a bit of a celebrity prisoner. Let’s look in.

Roman Reunion

Paul’s time in Rome begins with family time, but you may have missed this detail. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) that many of us read gives Acts 28.14-15 like this:

The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. There we found believers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. The believers from there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.

While the translators’ intentions are good, in the name of keeping their language gender-inclusive, they have changed the meaning of our passage and squandered its potency.

Take a quick look at Paul’s life in the 3 years leading up to this moment at a Roman harbor:

- A riotous attempt to kill him by an angry mob in the Jerusalem Temple. (Acts 21.27-30)
- Arrest by the Roman tribune that barely saved his life but set him up to defend his life before the mob, who attempt to kill him again after he has announced that God called him to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 21.31—22.22)
- Flogging by the Roman Tribune’s soldiers, until Paul informed him of his (Paul’s) status as a Roman citizen. (Binding and flogging a citizen was a no no.) (Acts 22.23-29)
- Trial before the same Sanhedrin Council that had sentenced Jesus and persecuted Peter and John, which leads to a murderous mob seeking to kill him (again). (Acts 23.1-22)
- Trial before the Roman Governor Felix at Caesarea by the Sea, followed by TWO YEARS in prison awaiting the governor’s verdict (Acts 24)
- Appeal to Imperial Courts, when the Jewish leaders attempt to take him away to Jerusalem for trial, Paul (knowing what would come next in that scenario). Felix’s successor, Festus, then sent him to be tried in Roman courts rather than Jewish ones. (Acts 25)
- Forced to defend himself before the Roman King Agrippa. (Acts 26)
- Shipwreck and near death on the way to Rome. (Acts 27)

Now, imagine you are Paul. You’ve been through hell and back, and you have no idea what will be your plight when you land in Rome, a city you’ve never seen before. Now imagine that you see some people coming toward you as you leave the boat. Are they friends or foes? The question is pertinent, given the perils listed above.

Here’s a better translation of the passage:

*The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. ¹⁴ There we found **some brothers and sisters** who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome. ¹⁵ **The brothers and sisters** there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged.*

To Paul, these weren't merely people who had given their rational assent to certain doctrines with which he agreed (NRSV's "believers"). These were ADELPHOI, "brothers and sisters" in Christ, who opened their arms to receive him as family when he arrived in Rome. These were a Roman branch of the family tree that first added his name when he emerged, soaking, from baptismal waters. Imagine his utter relief and gratitude for them! Luke drastically understates: "At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged." (in this, Luke looks a bit British.) Right there in the harbors of Puteoli and Rhegium, 2,000 miles from Paul's home church in Antioch, God broke out a family reunion for a beleaguered man who hadn't seen family in quite some time. These brothers and sisters would accompany him and his Imperial escort on their arduous cross-land journey to the city of Rome.

Consider a lonely moment in your life, when God has given you the gift of Christian brothers and sisters when you needed them most? You may want to take a moment to thank God for brothers and sisters in Christ.

Time Management

Paul is in Rome now awaiting trial in an imperial court. If you were in his shoes, how would you spend those suspenseful days before your trial? Worrying? Dreading? I'm not sure what I'd do if the massive engine of power that was the Roman legal system might descend on me any day.

Paul makes the most of his time in captivity. He invites leaders of the Jewish community in Rome to visit him where he is sequestered. When they ask to hear his story, he spends a whole day telling them, both what has happened to him, and his reason for becoming a Jesus person. Some decide to follow Jesus. Others are unconvinced. To the latter he follows the pattern we've seen Luke trace for many chapters. Here, he quotes Isaiah on hard-heartedness, then adds, "I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"

Two things about this:

Context

In our 21st-century setting, these words may seem harsh to some. Many Christians in our time spend a whole lot of time working to build peaceable relationships between Jews, Muslims, and Christians. As people who live in a pluralistic setting, it may help us to read this well if we remember that, both when Paul was in Rome, and when Luke wrote about it, the Christian

population was much smaller than the Jewish one, and Judaism was infinitesimal compared to the reigning religions of Rome. This isn't a conversation between two prominent world religions. This is still really an internal conversation between Jews who believe differently. Both of these branches of Judaism – those who follow Jesus and those who don't – sustain extensive missions among the Gentiles. Outsiders call Christians a sect within Judaism well into the 2nd century.

This contextual understanding does not remove the difference between Judaism and Christianity – especially in the non-embrace or embrace of Jesus as Messiah. This remains a live matter that different kinds of Christians process differently from one another – both often drawing on the words of Paul to argue their case. Some cite the centrality of Jesus as Messiah to Paul's good news and claim that he would have placed Jews outside the bounds of God's covenant and community (e.g., Romans 10.9); others cite Paul's claim (a chapter later) that, "in the end all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11.26) as evidence that God's chosen people never could be outside God's presence.

Time. Look at the sheer force of Paul's vocation. Whatever you and I might do while dangling under Rome's control, Paul won't waste a day. His contemporary, the Stoic philosopher Seneca (4 B.C. – 65 A.D.), wrote these words at almost the same time that Paul was speaking the Gospel under house arrest:

"Lucilius...gather and save your time... Make yourself believe the truth of my words, – that certain moments are torn from us, that some are gently removed, and that others glide beyond our reach. The most disgraceful kind of loss, however, is that due to carelessness. Furthermore, if you will pay close heed to the problem, you will find that the largest portion of our life passes while we are doing ill, a goodly share while we are doing nothing, and the whole while we are doing that which is not to the purpose... For we are mistaken when we look forward to death; the major portion of death has already passed. Whatever years be behind us are in death's hands."

Paul, the Christian apostle, would have written this differently – no fear of death as a final end – but the spirit is the same: time is a gift from God, not to be squandered, but rather to be lived to God's glory. Here's part of Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰ giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Elementary” is an American television series that imagines Sherlock Holmes, the product of Arthur Conan Doyle’s imagination, in 21st century New York City. His Watson is not John, but Joan – Dr. Joan Watson, who is a doctor-turned-addiction counselor. In one of the first episodes, Holmes notices that Joan sets 2 or 3 alarm clocks each night. He asks, “Why do you suppose you hate your job so much? I don’t hate my job. No one with two alarm clocks loves their job.” Holmes then proceeds to tell Watson that he loves his own detective work. It ends up she will too.

The newly-called Apostle Paul is passionate about his new job. Nary an alarm clock in sight! In one place he says, “Woe to me if I do not preach the good news!”

Part Two – Rome

Rome ruled most of the known world. So the context for the early Christian movement was an Empire that spanned from north Africa in the south to present day Britain in the north, and from the Atlantic coast of Europe and north Africa in the west to the western edge of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) in the east. In other words, all of western Europe, north Africa, and the middle east. This range, while remarkable, left tribes in Germany and eastern Europe who would later knock down the door and invade, but at the time of Paul, the *Pax Romana* meant a stable empire with huge holdings. This peace and order, along with the common trade language of Greek, made Paul’s missionary work easier than it would have been at almost any other time in ancient history.

The City

In Paul’s day, that whole vast Empire was run from the city of Rome, by Emperors called Caesars. That had not always been the case. The city had, within the century before Paul’s birth, undergone a major political change, from republic to empire. Julius Caesar had shoved things in that direction and then placed his adopted son Octavius (Augustus Caesar) on the throne as first emperor. Under Augustus, the city had also been transformed physically as a result of its increasing wealth. As the Emperor Augustus of nativity story fame (reigned 27 B.C.- 14 A.D.) put it, “I found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble.” The emperors who followed added their own touches, so that when Paul walked into town, Rome looked something like this:



Source: The British Museum

It must have been a breathtaking sight for the Apostle!

When Paul arrived, Christianity had already been in Rome for a while. We don't know which apostle or missionary introduced the city to the message, but when he writes his Letter to the Romans, Paul (who has not yet been to the city) can greet no fewer than 26 Christians there by name. (Romans 16) And that's just the people Paul had already met when his travels through Turkey and Greece crossed paths with theirs. We should imagine a network of house churches in the city, though we don't know whether they would have been scattered throughout or clustered in one section.

Over the two centuries before Paul's arrival, the Jewish population of Rome had gravitated mostly to the West Bank of the Tiber River, a section called Trastevere. When Paul invited Jewish leaders to visit him in his house arrest, they probably came from there. Some scholars surmise that it would have been natural for Christian house churches to spring up there. But since the earliest Christians did not erect church buildings (for fear of persecution) it is almost impossible to identify specific Roman houses that were occupied by Christians. We do know that non-

Christians in Rome often saw Christians as Jews – probably because they would have been the only monotheists in town.

We know from his letters that Paul had long wanted to take his good news about Jesus to Rome. In his letter to the churches in Rome, he wrote,

I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—¹² or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.¹³ I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles.¹⁴ I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish¹⁵ —hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome. (Romans 1.11-15)

Our passage this week chronicles the time when he finally realizes his “longing” and his “eagerness” – in chains, undoubtedly not the way he had envisioned it.

A Gateway to the World

In those earlier days, the audacious Paul saw Rome, not as a terminus, but as a jumping off point. As much as he wanted to greet the brothers and sisters in the capital, his job was cold calls and Rome was already someone else's territory. He was headed further west. Paul wrote:

I have so often been hindered from coming to you.²³ But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you²⁴ when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. (Romans 15.22-24)

I told you Paul was audacious. He speaks here of Rome, the capital of the world, as a way station – “Can I spend a few nights on someone's futon on my way to Spain?” – and the church in Rome as a potential source of funds for a trip beyond them.

With energy and aspiration like Paul's, it's no wonder we're meeting for the Yale Bible Study these eight Thursday evenings in a land no one in Paul's time knew existed.

Paul's Death

We do not know how Paul died. Luke ends his story before Paul's day in court. It's difficult to know why Luke omits Paul's death. He has, after all, featured the martyrdom of Stephen and the death of the disciple James. Some date the Book of Acts in the early 60s AD because of this absence, reasoning that the author would have included Paul's death if he wrote after it. But this is not a necessary conclusion. Luke may leave Paul's death unmentioned because his audience is

already familiar with it. Or he may leave it out for literary reasons. The Gospel of Mark famously ends with an empty tomb, but no resurrection appearances and the women who witness the empty tomb scared into silence. Is Luke here leaving his readers in suspense about Rome's verdict as a way of including his audience in God's future?

Again, we do not know. What we do know is that from 54 on Nero ruled from Rome, and his antipathy for the Christians was and is well known. Here is the Roman historian Tacitus summarizing Nero's infamous scapegoating tactic when the emperor is blamed for a fire in Rome:

Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, [27] whom the crowd styled Christians. [28] Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus. (Tacitus [Annals 15:44.26-27](#))

Because of this timing and the brutality of Nero's persecutions, Christian legend has it that both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome around 64 AD.

If we do not know how Paul's life ended, however, we do know well how Luke's Sequel ends. So join the fun of the finale on Thursday evening!