

13. PAUL ARRIVES IN ROME AS A PRISONER FOR THE SAKE OF CHRIST

(Acts 21:15–28:30)



St. Paul arrives in Rome – Mariani

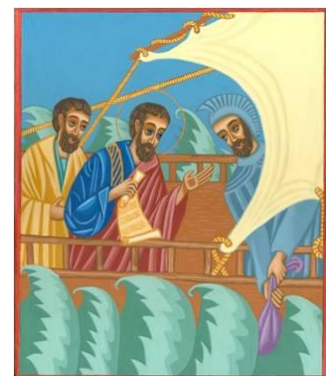
Paul wanted to take the Gospel to Rome and, with the help of the Christians in this city, to then go on to Spain (cf. Rm. 1:10, 15:23-24). He succeeded in reaching the capital of the Empire, but he arrived as a prisoner. After his arrest in the Temple of Jerusalem, he asked to speak to the crowd. He told them what had happened to him en route to Damascus, explaining that he too was a Jew, born and raised in the Diaspora. He assured them that he was firmly attached to the Jewish Faith, to the point that he had relentlessly persecuted the Christians. With deep emotion, he recounted his meeting with the Lord Jesus on the way to Damascus and how this event had changed his life, but his testimony did not move his listeners. Indeed, the only thing that prevented the Apostle from being flogged was his unexpected revelation that he was a Roman citizen. This news came as a shock to the tribune who had arrested him and he immediately released Paul from his chains. The next day, the Apostle appeared before the entire Sanhedrin. Aware that his accusers included both Sadducees and Pharisees, he set one group against the other by declaring that he was on trial because of his hope in the resurrection—a belief sustained by the Pharisees but rejected by the Sadducees. The two groups began to dispute with each other and their accusations against Paul came to nothing (Acts 23:17). That night, the Lord appeared to Paul and said: “Courage! You have borne witness for me in Jerusalem, now you must do the same in Rome” (Acts 23:11).

The Jews plotted to kill Paul but his sister’s son heard about their plans and warned his uncle. To save Paul’s life, the tribune sent Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea under military escort. When they arrived in the city, he was handed over to Felix, the governor. Felix was an ambiguous person. He wanted to profit from Paul’s situation and indicated that he was open to bribery, but the Apostle preferred to remain in prison rather than buy his freedom (Acts 24:26). Even though there was no reason to keep Paul a prisoner, the governor left him in custody so as to gain favor with the Jews. Two years later, Felix was replaced by Festus who, immediately after his arrival in the province, went up to Jerusalem. There he was assailed by the Jewish priests and leaders, who urged him to have Paul’s case transferred to Jerusalem. Tired of all the delays, Paul invoked his right as a Roman citizen to be judged by Caesar.

A few days later, King Agrippa and Berenice arrived in Caesarea. Festus related Paul’s situation to the king, concluding that the Apostle had appealed to Caesar and so he was sending him to Rome, even though there was no clear case against him. Agrippa and Berenice asked to hear Paul’s story and the Apostle willingly told them about what had happened to him on the way to Damascus. In this third description of the Damascus event, Paul described his mission as a call to be not only an apostle and witness but also a prophet who opens the eyes of the blind so that they might turn from darkness to light (Acts 26:16-18). While Festus was bewildered by the message of the resurrection, Agrippa exclaimed: “A little more and your arguments would make a Christian of me!” And he concluded: “This man is doing nothing that deserves death or imprisonment.”

Paul’s voyage to Rome (2500 km. from Jerusalem) was a difficult one, but God made it evident that he was traveling with him. Luke’s account of the trip symbolically recalls the last stage of the life of Jesus: his condemnation, death and resurrection.

After arriving in Myra in Lycia, Paul’s guard found an



St. Paul travels to Rome
– Icon of
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Alexandrian ship leaving for Italy. He and his prisoner boarded they ship, which struggled through rough waters to Fair Havens, a port on the island of Crete. In spite of Paul's warning to remain where they were and not attempt to reach the harbor of Phoenix on the other side of the island, the ship set out again but soon ran into a hurricane. Despite of the dire condition of the passengers and crew, the Lord appeared to Paul and said, "Do not be afraid, Paul. You are destined to appear before Caesar, and God grants you the safety of all who are sailing with you" (Acts 27:24).

Heartened by these words, the Apostle encouraged his companions to have faith because the Lord had assured him that everyone would be saved. The badly-damaged ship finally ran aground on the island of Malta, where the local people proved to be very friendly. After three months on the island, Paul and his companions resumed their voyage to Rome, stopping first at Syracuse, Rhegium Calabria and Puteoli. Following the Appian Way, Paul finally reached the height of his desire: "to proclaim the Gospel to you also who are in Rome" (Rm. 1:14). Luke ends his narrative with the words: "When the believers heard about us, they came to met us, as far as the Forum of the Appius and the Three Taverns. When Paul saw them he thanked God and took courage. On our arrival in Rome, Paul was allowed to stay in lodgings of his own with the soldier who guarded him" (Acts. 28:15-16).

Pope Benedict XVI says: "Luke's account ends with the mention of two years spent in Rome under mild military surveillance. He mentions neither a sentence of Caesar (Nero) nor, even less, the death of the accused.... This seems to me to be what remains for us from this brief review of St Paul's journeys: to see his passion for the Gospel and thereby grasp the greatness, the beauty, indeed the deep need of the Gospel for all of us. Let us ask the Lord, who caused St Paul to see his light, who made him hear his word and profoundly moved his heart, to help us also see his light, so that our hearts too may be moved by his Word and thus that we too may give the light of the Gospel and the truth of Christ to today's world which thirsts for it" (*General Audience*, 27 August 2008).

FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

Note the parallel Luke draws between Jesus and Paul

Jesus	Paul
Jesus goes to Jerusalem: Lk. 9:51	Paul goes to Jerusalem: Acts 21:1ff
Testimony before the Sanhedrin: Lk. 22:66ff.	Testimony before the Sanhedrin: Acts 23:1ff.
Jesus released to the Jews: Lk. 23:1ff	Paul released to the Jews: Acts 23:12ff.
Jesus declared innocent by Pilate: Lk. 23:14	Paul declared innocent by Festus and Agrippa: Acts 24:25-27
Jesus is abandoned by everyone: Where are the Twelve during his trial?	Paul is abandoned when he is accused: Where are his companions?