

Paul in Prison

*Acts 20:4–28:31, Ephesians, Philippians,
Colossians, Philemon*

Arrest in Jerusalem

Paul was an international pariah among the Jews. That spring of AD 57 he fled Corinth because they were trying to murder him. On his way east, he visited with the elders of the Ephesian community to say goodbye; he expected never to see them again because of trouble awaiting him in Jerusalem. Each time his ship docked at a port where disciples of Jesus lived, the Holy Spirit would warn them of danger in Jerusalem, and they would beg Paul not to go. But Paul insisted the Spirit wanted him to go, even if it meant death.

The elders of the Jerusalem community greeted Paul's Gentile delegation warmly. However much they appreciated the money, though, they were more concerned with how Paul's arrival would affect their work. It was rumored in the community that Paul was teaching Jews not to keep the Law. This was probably false—he had said only that keeping the Law's external rituals did not affect their standing with God. Unless they were trying to reach Gentiles, Paul didn't mind their cultural preferences. But Paul's own freedom to ignore the Law had undoubtedly affected Jewish believers who knew him. In

any case, the Jerusalem elders asked Paul to finance an expensive sacrificial rite for some men, as a sign that he was still a practicing Jew.

Paul was glad to do that. But one day some Jews who had seen Paul in Ephesus noticed him in the temple. They incited a riot, accusing Paul of bringing unclean Gentiles into the sacred temple precincts. The penalty for that was death. Only the intervention of the Roman troop commander saved Paul from a lynching.

The commander granted Paul's request to address the crowd, and they listened with fascination as he described his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. But when he got to the part where Jesus sent him to the Gentiles, they went wild. The commander had no idea what was going on, so he had Paul dragged off for questioning. He tried to get the Sanhedrin to make a coherent charge, but Paul threw the Jewish council into confusion by saying, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 23:6). The Pharisees on the council began to defend Paul staunchly (they had a long-standing dispute with the Sadducees about resurrection). The dispute degenerated into a brawl, and the commander was obliged to have Paul carried out to keep the Sadducees and Pharisees from tearing him apart between them.

The next day Paul's nephew informed the commander of a Jewish plot to assassinate Paul, so the commander had this perplexing but obviously important prisoner moved to the Roman governor's headquarters in Caesarea.

Waiting in Caesarea

Governor Felix was the first former slave ever to become governor of a Roman province. His brother was an imperial toady. Felix kept Paul under house arrest for two years without settling his case. He didn't want to release Paul, even though he knew the charges were absurd, because he feared making the Sanhedrin upset. Also, he was hoping Paul would offer him a bribe. But he wouldn't condemn Paul to death because something about his message scared and fascinated Felix. Occasionally the governor would send for Paul to hear him talk about Jesus, but statements about self-control and judgment for wrongdoers made Felix too

uncomfortable to actually face what he feared was true.

When Felix's brother finally fell from favor in AD 59 and could no longer protect him, Felix was recalled to Rome for mishandling riots, overusing violence, and other acts of incompetence and corruption. Because he couldn't afford to make the Jews any madder than they already were, he left Paul in prison.

Three days after Felix's replacement arrived in the province, representatives of the Sanhedrin arrived to press charges against Paul and request that he be transferred to Jerusalem for trial. But Paul, knowing that a trial in Jerusalem meant death and that God wanted him to testify in Rome, appealed for trial before Caesar. It was his right as a Roman citizen, so Governor Festus agreed.

To Rome

Sailing westward was tedious because the prevailing winds blew eastward and rudders hadn't been invented yet. It was already October before Paul, two companions, and his guard reached Crete. Sailing in autumn was hazardous bordering on insane, and Paul prophesied trouble, but the harbor into which the ship had limped was unsuitable for wintering over. When a gentle south wind blew in, the pilot thought he had a prime chance of reaching a better harbor. Suddenly a northeaster swept through and enveloped the ship in a two-week-long virtual hurricane. The crew threw the cargo overboard and rationed the food—nothing helped. At last Paul coolly added a second prophecy that everyone would survive because his God wanted him to testify before Caesar.

A few days later the crew was able to ram the ship aground on the island of Malta. There Paul further amazed his guards by sustaining no ill effect from the deadly bite of a viper, and by healing many sick Maltans by laying his hands on them and praying for them. In response, the Maltans entertained Paul and the other men generously all winter. But Paul's guard took the first ship that left harbor the next March, and in a few weeks Paul was under house arrest in Rome. The first thing Paul did was contact the local Jewish leaders to give them their chance at accepting Jesus as their Messiah. As usual, few heeded him, but he now felt free to turn to the Gentiles. For two years Paul

worked at full steam while under arrest in a house he had to rent with contributions from friends.

Letter to Philippi

Under house arrest, Paul had to pay rent and buy food. But the believers in Rome were very likely reluctant to support a missionary accused of an imperial crime. It was not illegal to be a disciple of Jesus, but it was dangerous to be associated with enemies of the state, so prudent people kept at arms' length from someone Rome suspected of agitation and treason.

The believers in Philippi had chimed in with financial support when he was planting the community in Thessalonica (Philippians 4:16) and again in Corinth. They were Paul's most loyal financial supporters. At some point, however, they lost track of him, perhaps after he set off for Jerusalem with their gift for the poor. So, when they heard that Paul was in financial straits, they dispatched one of their members, Epaphroditus, to bring Paul some cash and take care of him while he was under arrest. But Epaphroditus became severely ill, so Paul felt he should send him back to Philippi to finish recovering. He sent Epaphroditus with a letter explaining the unexpected return, thanking the Philippians for their gift, informing them about his circumstances, and exhorting them to respond to their none-too-pleasant situation in a way befitting servants of Christ.

Partners

The way these friends were always there when Paul needed them, always eager to support him with prayer and money, always avidly serving Christ in their own sphere as Paul was in his — all this told Paul they understood what partnership or community was supposed to be about. The affection between them and Paul had deep roots born of time and shared commitments.

Paul reassured them that his imprisonment was actually advancing the gospel because as soldiers took shifts guarding him, they were forced to observe the community of Christ in action. By now the whole imperial guard had heard the gospel. Likewise, Paul urged the Philippians to use their shaky situation to the best advantage. If the hyperpatriotic Roman colonists of

Philippi made life rough for followers of an obscure Jewish cult, their very response would make the pagans sit up and take notice.

The attitude that would grab attention most would be that selfless, humble unity that was possible only among those who were truly letting the Holy Spirit change them into being like Jesus. Only people who understood that Jesus had emptied Himself of His rights for the sake of the humans He loved could "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). Paul wasn't urging people to be doormats before a few strong-willed leaders, but to exercise the same tough-minded unselfishness Jesus displayed. When unbelievers saw a group of people free of complaining and arguing, that would be positive proof that Christ was more than just another god.

Joy

Another attitude that would attract the pagans was joy. How many of those hard-bitten colonists knew joy? But the people of God had every reason to rejoice because they could release their anxieties to One who had the love and power to take care of His own. In frank prayer born of genuine trust, God's people could find peace in the midst of both danger and the daily grind of life's hassles.

Paul added a warning against listening to the circumcision party, who urged believers to substitute rules for relationship. Paul assured the Philippians that his years of flawlessly obeying religious rules had never given him anything of value. All of his self-powered achievements were worthless "compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (3:8). Paul didn't even mind sharing Jesus' suffering and death because that enabled him to taste Jesus' resurrection.

In fact, as much as Paul deeply appreciated his friends' gift, he wanted them to know that he valued it more as a love token than as survival funds. Life was tough in Philippi for someone who allied with Jesus, and Paul hoped to set an example of contentment in the face of hardship. He wrote, "I know what

it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (4:12-13). Strong words from a man who could have been a prosperous rabbi, but who had chosen prison, lean living, even shipwreck and imminent execution.

Crisis in Colosse

Sometime during his imprisonment in either Caesarea or Rome, Paul received a visitor from the believing community in the town of Colosse. Colosse was a small cosmopolitan city in Asia, less than a hundred miles from Ephesus. Originally known for its wool industry, the town had declined considerably and had been surpassed by Laodicea, ten miles to the west, and Hierapolis, twelve miles to the northwest.

The community at Colosse was probably planted by Epaphras, one of Paul's converts at Ephesus. Paul had never been to Colosse, but Epaphras apparently felt that the town fell under Paul's apostolic jurisdiction. At any rate, when trouble brewed, Epaphras sought Paul's advice.

The gospel flourished in Colosse until some false teachers arrived and confused the young believers by mixing ideas from pagan cults with the gospel. Unable to combat this cancer alone, Epaphras appealed to Paul for help. Paul did the only thing he could: write a letter to help the Colossian believers see the truth.

First, the false teachers were claiming that Christ was less than God, on the level of a created angel. Against this doctrine, Paul stressed that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God. . . . For by him all things were created. . . . For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (Colossians 1:15-19).

Second, the teachers said true enlightenment required knowledge of certain secrets. Paul countered that the only secret anybody needed to know was God's plan to place Christ's life in anybody who welcomed it, Gentiles included.

Third, the troublemakers were teaching believers to practice ascetic rules about food, sex, and an amalgam of Jewish ritual: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (2:21), they said.

Those rules had something to do with the worship of angels, or spirit beings—perhaps rituals and physical self-denial put a person in harmony with or appeased the spiritual forces. In Greek culture, it was commonly believed that the material world was essentially evil, or at best indifferent. Therefore, the body was evil and had to be controlled. Also, between the pure divine essence and base matter there supposedly lay a host of spiritual powers who ruled the world. Religion was largely aimed at pleasing those powers.

Against these ideas, Paul insisted that the only thing necessary for intimacy with God was commitment to the crucified and resurrected Jesus. On the cross, Jesus defeated all the anti-God spirit beings, so the Colossians had nothing to fear from them. As for rules to control the body, they appeared to be wise and spiritual, but in fact they failed to affect what really counted: lust, greed, and selfishness in the heart.

The real key to holy living, said Paul, is to set your mind on the agenda and activities of God's Kingdom. Instead of worrying about external rules, invest your energy in putting to death real evil in yourself: lust and sexual immorality, evil desires and greed, malice and lying and slander. Invest in seeking Christlike qualities, such as compassion, forgiveness, and peace. Paul seemed to think these were attainable qualities (maybe not overnight) for people filled with Christ, in love with Christ, drawing on Christ's power.

Paul did lay down a few rules; they had to do with how to run a household. They were remarkably progressive rules in that strict, hierarchical society: Not only should wives submit to husbands, but husbands should love their wives and not be harsh with them. Not only should children obey their parents, but fathers should take care not to embitter their children. Not only should slaves obey and work diligently, but masters should be fair. Compared to the practice in most pagan homes where wives, children, and slaves were mere property, this was progressive thinking.

A lifestyle that fit the society but treated everyone with dignity was important for two reasons. First, it encouraged harmony in the community. But second, it made the gospel attractive to

outsiders. Paul commissioned the Colossians not only to pray for his ministry, but also to keep reaching out to their pagan neighbors: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (4:5-6).

A Personal Intervention

One of Paul's team members, Tychicus, carried this letter from Rome (or Caesarea) to Colosse. With him went a new believer named Onesimus. This Onesimus was a slave of another Colossian believer, Philemon. Onesimus had apparently stolen something from Philemon, then run away—crimes punishable by death. However, somehow he had found his way to Paul and, under his influence, become a follower of Jesus.

Onesimus preferred staying with Paul, rather than returning to Colosse to face his master. But Paul wanted to give Philemon the chance to do something Godlike. So he sent Onesimus back with a letter for Philemon, asking him to do what God had done: free Onesimus from slavery and accept him as family rather than as a servant.

How could Philemon say no? He owed Paul his own life (a fact which Paul did not blush to point out), and Onesimus was a brother now. God Himself had freed Philemon from slavery and an unpayable debt; could he hold Onesimus to the letter of the law? Paul didn't bother to attack slavery as an immoral institution on humanistic grounds. He merely laid the situation out in plain colors and let Philemon judge for himself: is it even conceivable for one child of God to treat another as unforgivable or inferior? (Of course, if Onesimus began to take advantage of Philemon, the Colossian community would have to deal with that.)

Letter to Ephesus

Yet a fourth biblical letter dates from Paul's time in prison (no doubt he wrote dozens of letters since he could not travel). This one reads more formally than Paul's often ironic and blunt personal notes. Although addressed to the community in Ephesus,

Paul writes as though many of his readers are strangers to him (he says he's *heard* of their faith, not seen it). Probably this letter was meant to circulate among communities throughout Asia, many of which Paul had never visited. In almost musical phrases, it sketched the glorious place believers have in God's eternal purposes, and the lives they should live in light of their identity.

Ever since He conceived the idea of creation, God had one overarching plan: "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:10). His idea was not a rigid hierarchy, but a choreographed dance with the Son of God as center and leader—the Source from whom would flow the patterns and rhythms of relationships.

But some of God's spirit creatures had followed the Snake in rebellion, and had ensnared men and women into their corruption. Instead of a grand ball, there was war. Hostility against God and man devoured souls.

Yet God was not thwarted. All along, His plan had been to teach His creatures—especially those without bodies who inhabited the heavens—something about Him they could never otherwise understand. They knew His power and holiness, but certain areas of His wisdom eluded them. Above all, love was a mystery. (It may even have been their incomprehension of love that inspired the rebels' contempt for their Maker.)

The cosmos watched as God painstakingly groomed a family generation after generation: Seth, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob . . . Jesus. The line had survived by a hairbreadth more than once. But when the time was ripe, the King invaded earth to begin reversing the process of hostility. First He reconciled humans to God by taking their penalty upon Himself. Then He reconciled these freed ones to each other by dissolving the barriers between them. Even pagans, who throughout the time of the Old Covenant had seemed hopelessly sunk in moral slime, were now welcomed into God's family. In His agony, Christ had embraced all their evil to Himself, neutralized it, and changed former children of evil to children of glory.

The dance was born: Christ had united warring factions into one body, one community, with Himself as its head. The spirit beings who well knew human hearts must have gaped. Who

would have thought Christ could weld such selfish renegades together?

This, said Paul, is the primary reason the community exists on earth: "His [God's] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (3:10). Precisely because it is humanly impossible, the united Body of Christ parades God's wisdom.

Therefore, Paul went on, it is crucial that we live up to our noble calling. Not only is the pagan world looking on to judge Christ by the quality of *our* love and unity (John 13:35, 17:23), but so are the heavenly beings. Our reason for existence is not only to be ambassadors of reconciliation, drawing unbelievers to Christ through the quality of our lives; it is also to display God's greatness to the universe through that same quality of living. God has raised us from the sludge and made us joint heirs of Christ's wealth—how should we respond?

We should seek to live as reconciled people through the power of God's Spirit at work within us. Humility, harmony, and forgiveness don't come naturally; we have to be actively dependent upon God to produce them in us. Paul prayed that God "may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being . . . that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power . . . to grasp . . . the love of Christ" (3:16-18). Paul knew that only a person who was experiencing Christ's love and the Spirit's activity would have what it takes to live as a reconciler.

To Paul, this "unity of the Spirit" (4:3) was not uniformity—in which everyone thinks the same thoughts, lives the same lifestyle, does the same things, enjoys the same things. Nor did he describe it as a tight system where subordinates mutely obey orders from on high. Paul saw it as a body, a living organism in which each part had function and responsibility. God gave the community certain people whose job was to equip the rest to do their jobs. The body wouldn't work as long as some members were mature but the rest were infants living off their leaders and believing whatever new ideas drifted by. Paul's vision was for each member to be mature and connected to Christ on his or her

own, drawing strength from Him to do his or her unique tasks, and interconnected with other believers like the cells of a body or the members of a team. As in an orchestra, wide diversity would weave together in harmony. Christ Himself would be the conductor.

The cultural expressions of the body might vary greatly, but certain core values would be constant: integrity, honesty, healthy ways of handling anger, no obscene language or bitterness. Family order was essential because it mirrored the dance; in fact, the relationship of husband and wife was supposed to echo the love union between Christ and the community of believers. Paul had an astounding view of sacrificial love within marriage, and his view of social relationships in general exploded the authoritarian norms of the day: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (5:21).

Paul closed this letter in a way unusual for him: with an open reference to the war. Usually he preferred to only allude to the cosmic conflict, and to focus his readers' attention on their earthly job of living lives that would attract unbelievers to Christ. But this time he felt it necessary to stress that his readers were not in a struggle against the Roman authorities, malicious neighbors, or irritating relatives. Rather, they were engaged in a violent wrestling match with evil spiritual beings. Those beings were committed to corrupting love and mutual submission in the body. They would use every trick to encourage domination, manipulation, selfishness, and hostility. The defense against such deception, said Paul, was to armor oneself with Christ's nature: His truth, righteousness, salvation, faith, a solid understanding of the gospel, and God's written Word.

These became offensive weapons when employed in prayer. In giving humans the freedom to make real choices in their world, God had actually committed Himself not to do certain things unless humans invited Him. The rebel spirits thought God weak for yielding some of His authority to paltry humans. That He loved the dust-creatures enough to become one with them was inconceivable.

But God's joke was this: He would not esteem the traitors even so much as to defeat them with His ungloved power. He

had vanquished them decisively through the humiliation of the Cross, and now He was handling the cleanup through the prayers and love works of this very community of humans.

Farewells

1 and 2 Timothy, Titus

Nero's Pogrom

Luke's book of Acts ended with Paul spending two years in Rome under house arrest, awaiting trial. What happened then? Was Paul convicted of anti-Roman agitation and executed? Or was he acquitted and allowed to pursue his plans, either westward to Spain or back east to his current communities?

We don't know. Tradition has it that he was acquitted in AD 62 but rearrested and executed two to five years later in a general persecution of Christians. In AD 64, a fire broke out in Rome, raged for five days, completely consumed three of the city's fourteen districts (including the imperial palace), and ravaged seven others. Emperor Nero worked overtime to help the homeless, but rumors flew that he had arranged arson in order to rebuild the city to his taste. (It was true that the reconstruction he financed was far more elegantly planned than the old irregular blocks of tenements, but the new approach was partly aimed at fire prevention.)

As the whispers grew louder, Nero became desperate for scapegoats. He fastened on a controversial sect: the Christians. Some said they were cannibals (they supposedly ate somebody's