

LUKE AND PAUL AT THE END

Since The New Church began, we have traced several of the lesser known yet rather exciting stories that can be found in the records of the ministry of the Apostle Paul. It will be interesting to see if these stories grow on you over time. Some things impress us instantly, but lose their impact just as instantly. Others burn more slowly, but keep on warming us for years to come. Of course, these stories have warmed and instructed me for years or I wouldn't have bothered to tell them to you.

Today we come to the end of Paul's life, at least in this realm. Strangely, we know nothing about his last days. To be sure, there are guesses and theories and traditions and assumptions. But the fact is, we have no information about Paul's last days. No one tells us anything about his trial, the decision of the court, or his actual death. Tradition says he was beheaded; a pleasant guess because he was a Roman citizen. But Nero may have overruled that in favor of crucifixion, since Nero was scapegoating Christians. However, that depends on when Paul was condemned. In any case, lack of information often leads to diverse conclusions. As a result, we have two very different endings. Liberal Christians tend to assume that Paul died in A.D. 62, having been executed at the end of his first trial. Conservative Christians tend to assume that Paul died about A.D. 67. There are variations, but in general it is said that upon his release after the first trial, Paul went east through Macedonia, then to Ephesus, Laodicea, and Colossae (thus fulfilling his promise to Philemon to pay him a visit). Then Paul went to Spain for two years. Returning to Greece (Achaia), he wintered in Nicopolis, was arrested there, and was sent to Rome for a second trial, at which time he was sentenced to death. Or maybe he went to Spain after he wintered in Nicopolis, then was arrested in Ephesus and sent to Rome for the second trial. The point is, we don't know. Confusion and argument are often the products of insufficient information. The truth is, we know nothing about Paul's last days.

Why is that? I claim it is because our best source of information was suddenly taken out of the picture: Luke died along with Paul. The last thing we know of either one of them is that they are in Rome together, awaiting Paul's trial. I suspect that Luke was working on his "brief for the Roman court" – his Luke/Acts would be invaluable for other reasons,

but we know it was also Paul's hope and purpose that his trial would vindicate Christianity in the eyes of the Roman Empire. Luke was with Paul; did he not share the same hope and purpose?

In any case, we just read the last words of the Book of Acts. Whether or not the last sentence has been tacked on by a scribe trying to round things off, clearly the story is not over. The Book of Acts does not end – it is chopped off. It stops in midstream, without telling us anything about what it has been leading up to. Maybe Luke just got discouraged and stopped writing. What are the chances? But we never hear another word from Luke or Paul. And neither one of them is the silent type. We do know that Nero scapegoated the Christians for the great fire that destroyed Rome in A.D. 64. I suspect that Paul's trial (long and complex) was held over for a second hearing, and that both Paul and Luke were condemned and executed in 64 or 65 A.D. As we have mentioned before, life does not always come to us in clear and certain facts. Often it is a matter of probabilities.

Anyway, today we come to the end of my stories about Paul. As you have just heard, and very unfortunately, I do not have enough information to tell you this story. In fact, you will go home complaining that we thought more about what we do *not* know than we did about what we *do* know.

But let's pick up the story from what we do know. After the Roman soldiers save Paul's life and take him out of Jerusalem to Caesarea (remember the two hundred foot soldiers, seventy cavalry, two hundred spearmen), Paul is under house arrest at Caesarea for two years. That is, Paul is not behind bars. His friends can visit him freely. He is behind the walls of the Roman garrison, but that's for his own safety. At Caesarea we meet Felix and Festus and get some fun stories. I have not retold these stories because they are not obscure and have not fallen through the cracks.

Then Paul's hand is forced. That is, Festus (the new governor) is determined to deal with "the Paul situation" one way or another. It is quite likely that his predecessor as governor, Felix, lost his post because he would not deal with the Paul situation. Apparently the Jewish leaders complained enough to Rome to get Felix removed. Now Festus is insisting that he and Paul need to go to Jerusalem to hold court and resolve this situation one way or the other. Of course, Paul knows that if he is taken to Jerusalem (out in the open), he will be assassinated. So, as a Roman

citizen, he appeals to the Emperor. Paul has been hoping to get to Rome, and then from there to Spain. Why not go at the Emperor's expense?

It is an exciting and dangerous sea voyage, which ends with their being shipwrecked on the Island of Malta. (Acts 27:1-28:11) In addition to being another very exciting episode in the life of Paul, we learn quite a bit about what it was like to travel by sea in Paul's day. In late fall and through the winter, most people would not sail at all. The ship taking Paul to Rome tried to stay pretty close to land, but it kept running into delays. Finally they realized that it was too late in the season and they would have to wait until spring. So much for our notions of precision timetables and travel plans. We get interruptions and delays enough even in our time.

I do not intend to tell the whole story of this exciting voyage, just one little piece that many miss for sheer lack of information. It is getting late into fall – into the season for storms – but with luck they might still make it. However, they are not making good time. They hug the southern shores of Turkey and spend too many days fighting the winds. They drop south then, to Crete, so that if they get a break in the weather, they can make a run for Italy. Much is at stake – the cargo, the passengers – and if they cannot find a window of fair weather, they will have to find a safe harbor and spend the whole winter there. A costly delay, but that option is starting to look very good to them. They are trying to hug the southern coast of Crete, with winds giving them more and more trouble. Finally they come into the little harbor of Fair Havens but cannot stay there. It is a harbor for fair weather and cannot protect them against real storms. They must get around the corner to Phoenix. That is a great harbor and they can winter there, and it's only a short distance away – on the map. So when a south wind blows gently, they think they have found their window of opportunity. They hoist sails and make a run for it. But before they reach Phoenix, they run into a granddaddy storm – a northeaster. That's just for openers, and I will let you reread the rest of the account in Acts (27); I only wanted to draw your attention to verse 17. They are driven by this storm for many days. They throw cargo, tackle – everything they can – overboard. Clearly the storm is fearsome, but they have one reason to be more afraid than most of us realize: *“Then, fearing they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along.”*

A northeaster is driving them southwest. What is the “Syrtis” and why are they so afraid? Is there not a lot of sea between Crete and the

northern Africa coast? Yes indeed, but they have no way of knowing how far or how fast the storm is driving them. What they do know is that if they reach the Syrtis, they are dead. “Fearing they would run aground on the Syrtis” does not ring alarm bells for us, but it certainly does for them. The south winds blow the sands of the Sahara Desert into the sea at the coast called Syrtis Major. For miles out to sea, the sand lies deep beneath the water. Touch it and you are dead – the sand is too soft to hold your weight. If a ship runs into the sand, everyone onboard is dead. If you get out of the boat and try to walk, you sink in the sand and drown. No one can come to the rescue, and the shore is much too far away to offer any hope. A ship, once run aground in the soft sand, has very little chance of getting free. Eventually either the ship turns over in a storm or the people aboard all starve. So everyone onboard this ship with Paul is wondering, as the days and nights go by: When will the next wave run us into the Syrtis?

Well, they do not run aground in the Syrtis. They run into rocks on the island of Malta. The ship breaks up on the rocks, but no lives are lost. So they spend the winter on Malta. When spring comes, it’s on to Rome. Then Paul is another two years under house arrest at Rome, waiting for his trial. These are possibly the most peaceful days of Paul’s life. Confinement here is not even as strict as at Caesarea. Paul cannot go on traveling, but many will come to visit him. Paul has time to write, think, pray – even more than ever before. Of course, the trial hangs over his head. And Nero has come to power. Why didn’t Paul write more things from Rome? He did. But his friends abandoned him at the end, afraid that what eventually happened to Luke might happen to them. After Paul’s execution, strangers cleaned out the room where he had been staying, and they threw everything away. (That part is not in the Bible, you understand. That’s just my version.)

Are we clear so far? Luke has been with Paul from the tail end of the third missionary journey (Paul picked him up in Philippi, on the way to Troas). Now together in Rome, Paul and Luke prepare for the coming trial. And yes, I do know that there are inconsistencies between Acts and Paul’s letters. There are also inconsistencies between Acts and Acts (three versions of Paul’s conversion, for instance), and there are inconsistencies in Paul’s letters, at least from our perspective. I wonder if any of you have ever been inconsistent. Or if you and your friends always tell the same stories about the same events. Or if you ever get confused about dates or the sequence of events, even though you have lived through them. Nevertheless, the Gospel of Luke is known to have

a certain “Roman bias” – that is, it is worded to be less offensive to the Roman perspective than other New Testament writings. For instance, in Luke’s Gospel, Pilate tries to exonerate Jesus.

The second phase of Paul’s trial coincides with the great fire of Rome (64 A.D.). To cover his own guilt, Nero (54-68 A.D.) blames Christians for the fire. Hence the persecution of Christians is at its height at just the wrong moment for Paul and Luke. Both are sentenced to death, and we hear from neither one ever again. (This is also my own personal “take,” you understand, and not provable.)

Acts does not end – it stops. Why didn’t Luke tell us what happened at the trial? Why didn’t he tell us about the end of Paul’s life? It is a mystery – one everyone still wants to know about. I believe that Luke didn’t tell us because he died along with Paul, before he could finish Acts.

This would mean that Luke/Acts (as we have it) was written as early as 61 or 62 A.D. – in preparation for the first hearing of Paul’s trial, and with the ending left off while waiting for developments. If this scenario is the setting, then Luke/Acts was not written any later than 64 A.D. (possibly with some editing going on between the hearings). But neither Luke nor Acts was written in 85-95 A.D., as is being taught in so many places today. And why is the Gospel of Luke often dated so late? Mostly for one reason: Luke tells of the destruction that is coming to Jerusalem. (Luke 19:42-44; 21:20-24) This destruction did not take place until A.D. 70. Therefore it is assumed that Jesus could not have known it was coming; it’s an anachronism in the Gospel; and furthermore, if Luke had been writing close to the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, his Gospel would have been full of more news about such a huge and tragic event. Hence, we must move the writing back another twenty or more years until the destruction of all Israel is no longer so much on everybody’s mind. Have you ever heard of a more ridiculous circular argument? By the way, Jesus was not the only one who saw the destruction of Jerusalem coming. Do you know anybody today who thinks the United States is going downhill?

In any case, Luke turns out to be among the dearest and most faithful of all of Paul’s friends. Curiously, we lose Luke for a while early in the second missionary journey, not long after he and Paul meet on the shores at Troas. Luke persuades Paul to come to Macedonia, but when they reach Philippi, Luke seems to disappear for five years or so. He doesn’t even seem to be present when Paul and Silas are thrown

into prison at Philippi. Where did Luke go? Of course, Luke and Paul are not good friends yet; they have only just met. But we do not hear about Luke again until Paul picks him up in Philippi on the way back to Jerusalem at the tail end of the third missionary journey. I suspect that Luke went to Ephesus to visit Paul when he was in prison there, but this is uncertain. Did Luke know Lydia, the wealthy merchant of purple goods in whose house the Philippian church first began to meet? How is it that the church at Philippi was the best, the most supportive, the most loving church Paul ever started? Could it have anything to do with the fact that Lydia and Luke were members there? Luke and Lydia – Lydia and Luke. I’m not trying to start any rumors; I just can’t keep from wondering – and hoping that they were at least good friends.

Then Luke seems to stay with Paul from Philippi to Rome – and even unto his own death with Paul, as I have surmised, at the close of the trial in 64 or 65 A.D.

Where are we getting *any* of this information? From the so-called “we” passages, beginning in Acts 16:10: “*When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia*” From here to the end of Acts, sometimes the story is told in the third person, and sometimes the telltale “we” (or “us”) is used. It’s possible that Luke went to some places to take care of other things during the two-year house arrest at Caesarea – and again during the house-arrest days at Rome, though that seems less likely because the trial is crucial and the timing uncertain, and Rome is a long way from home. It seems very likely, then, that Luke is with Paul all through the last seven or eight years. They are hard, uncertain, and very important years for Paul. For those of us who care about relationships and think friendship is important, that is impressive.

This might give you a hint about why I prefer the Gospel of Luke to the others. Luke is more influenced by Paul’s perspective, theology, friends, and purposes than any of the other Gospels. And of course, I haven’t been telling you stories about Jesus – or the stories Jesus told us – because, and only because, most of you are already constantly reading and studying the Gospel of Luke. Isn’t that right?

As we leave Paul to face his last days without our truly knowing anything about them, I cannot keep from musing about Paul’s friends. Scattered and uncertain comments (in the questionable information of the letters to Timothy) suggest that Onesiphorus had dared to visit Paul in Rome despite the danger of associating with him at this time. Luke is still with him, of course. Timothy had problems of his own; released

from prison himself, he was probably on the way to visit Paul, but apparently did not make it in time. For various reasons, fear being among them, Paul seems to have faced his last days much like Jesus did: Abandoned. Except for Luke. Luke never heard the rooster's cry – and died because of it.

It is nevertheless fascinating to notice, both with the story of Jesus and with the story of Paul, that neither story is possible or comprehensible apart from a group of rather amazing and incredible friends. In fact, as I have frequently mentioned ever since I first realized it: Jesus based His whole earthly ministry on the power of friendship. Why have we ever heard of Jesus? How has His Message and purpose survived all these many generations? It has been carried all through the years by His friends. Some would claim that Christianity has been carried mostly by institutions down through the years; to be sure, some of Jesus' friends are in these institutions. Some of us think the institutions keep corrupting the Message and that the friends keep bringing it back to light. But that is an argument for another day.

In any case, Christianity is a religion based in and carried by relationships. Not rules, not creeds, not ecclesiastical hierarchies – it is carried in and by relationships. The most essential relationship comes in our reconciliation with God. That requires a Savior. That is what Jesus does for us, among many other things. It goes from there to forming bonds of relationship between the followers. Wherever this is not the case, Christianity is a charade. It is usually also weak and dying. There are many things that humans try to substitute for authentic relationships: structure, authority, success, entertainment, denominational organizations, a good youth program, and on and on. But Christianity is about love-bonds. That is its product and purpose. That is what it is about. And that is a total surprise and mystery in our kind of world.

Other great leaders have based their hopes on other kinds of power: money, military might, special teachings, special promises, effective principles of organization. Jesus bet it all on His friends. And it looked very much like that was as silly and misguided as everything else Jesus had tried to do – at least for a while. Of course, Jesus was betting on a special kind of relationship: one based and built on the love of God for each one of us.

So what of the Great Apostle? Did he get close enough to Jesus to pick up the real secret? How often I have been told that Paul was a cold fish; that he was authoritarian; that he was judgmental, rigid,

opinionated, and far too serious. But Paul's whole ministry was also based on relationships. Never mind the rumors; what about the record? What about the Ephesian elders weeping because they will not see him again? What about his nephew risking his life to save Paul's life? What about all the stories we have been reviewing for months now? What about Timothy, Onesimus, Philemon, Silas, Tychicus, Mark, Phoebe, Lydia – and most of all, Luke? These are stories of passion, and forgiveness; of danger, and adventure; of incredible loyalty, and a common Message and purpose that often defies the authorities and expectations of the time – that often defies death itself – and finally, unto death. Have you ever known a “cold fish” who called forth this kind of affection and devotion? Paul's life is a story of friendships almost as remarkable as the friendships of Jesus Himself.

Oh yes, and I seem to remember something about: *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love ... I am nothing.”* Now where could that have come from?

So what about us? Do we sometimes pretend to be Christians apart from friends – apart from friendship? Do we try to carry the Christian Message apart from forming friendships? Many do. But that is a travesty. What is evangelism? Scratch that. What is *true* evangelism? It is making friends with people who are, or who may one day become, the friends of Jesus. I did not say making friends with “church members”; that would be nice, but it is still a broken world.

How many people can we become friends with? That is a very big and important question. We need humility and prayerfulness, or Satan will help us to pretend we have no limitations – and thus steal all quality of friendship from us, as he steals all other quality of life from the careless and the unwary. Then we will end up with one of the false and counterfeit substitutions that pretend to be Christian but are not, and cannot be – for Christianity is about relationships. Without relationships, Christianity has nothing to offer to us or to anybody else – it has nothing for us to do, and nothing for us to be about.

Do you think God loves you, or don't you? Do you think God loves anybody else? Track it from there.