

UNITING HEAVEN AND EARTH

Christ in Philippians and Colossians

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Persecuted but Not Forsaken

Paul was in Rome, but not the way he planned it. He wrote to Christians in Rome, hoping to spend time there on a future evangelistic tour of Spain (Romans 15:23, 24). How many times have we made plans that didn't work out the way we intended? Instead of traveling to Rome on a further missionary journey, he was a prisoner chained to a Roman guard. It could have been worse. He could have been in the dank, dark Mamertine Prison where unfortunates awaited their execution. Paul was not there, at least not on this first occasion in Rome.

We learn most about his circumstances there from Luke, who was a companion of Paul during this time (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24). After Paul was imprisoned in Jerusalem and Caesarea (Acts 21:26; 26:32), and after a rather eventful and, at times, harrowing voyage across the Mediterranean Sea (Acts 27:1; 28:15), Paul arrived in Rome in the custody of a Roman guard (Acts 28:16). Assuming he left Caesarea about AD 59, he would have arrived in Rome early in AD 60.¹ Throughout Paul's imprisonment leading up to and

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including his time in Rome, the fact of his privileged upbringing in Tarsus and possession of Roman citizenship—which was somewhat rare for a Jew of that time—gave him many advantages and protected him from those who wanted to kill him. Furthermore, his education at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), one of the most influential teachers among the Pharisees in Jerusalem and a member of the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:34), meant that from both a social and religious standpoint, Paul's impact could be substantial as he was arguably the most influential Christian up to that time.²

On the other hand, the severe social stigma of being arrested, charged, and arriving in Rome as a chained prisoner should not be underestimated. Upon his second arrest and final imprisonment in Rome (see below), Paul laments the suffering he underwent as a prisoner, “even to the point of being chained like a criminal” (2 Timothy 2:9, NIV84). Compared to his previous house arrest, this phrase “may indicate the more serious state of his situation.”³ Paul uses a Greek word (*kakourgos*) which literally means “evil-doer” and is found elsewhere in the New Testament only of the criminals crucified on either side of Jesus (Luke 23:32, 33, 39). He urges people not to be ashamed of him (2 Timothy 1:8) and commends Onesiphorus, who often refreshed him and “was not ashamed of my chains” (2 Timothy 1:16, NIV). Some, like Demas, even deserted Paul, apparently due to the embarrassment of his imprisonment (2 Timothy 4:10) and, following his defense after this rearrest, he indicated that “no one stood with me, but all forsook me” (verse 16). This would not have been unusual due to the stigma and presumed condemnation of those charged with crimes.

Imagine Paul's relief when, upon arriving in Rome for his first trial, he was met by an official delegation from the church in Rome.⁴ The Greek term used in Acts 28:15 (*apantēsis*) “was almost

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a technical term for the official welcome of a visiting dignitary by a deputation which went out from the city to greet him and escort him for the last part of his journey.”⁵ No wonder, as Luke mentions, “When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage” (Acts 28:15). Like Paul, we must not shrink from sharing the three angels’ messages simply because we are afraid of what others might think or because we fear repercussions. The Lord will stand with us, strengthen us, and enable us to make a difference in our circle of influence (cf. 2 Timothy 4:17).

Regarding his first detention in Rome, Paul calls himself “an ambassador in chains” (Ephesians 6:20). He was clearly aware of the potential his circumstances held for gospel witness to the guards, to the increasing number of those who came to visit him,⁶ and to all those they may influence, both Jews and Gentiles. Since Paul had appealed to the emperor, the responsibility for Paul’s imprisonment fell under the jurisdiction of the Praetorian guard. The guard was a select group “of about thirteen to fourteen thousand free Italian soldiers,” constituting “the emperor’s elite bodyguard.”⁷ So Paul was able to share the gospel with these men who guarded him (Philippians 1:13). Interestingly, some ancient manuscripts of Acts 28:16 add further details that may reflect accurate remembrances: “The centurion handed his prisoners over to the *stratopedarch*, but Paul was allowed to stay by himself outside the camp with the soldier who guarded him.”⁸ As Bruce further comments: “The ‘*stratopedarch*’ (‘commander of the army’ or ‘commander of the camp’) is most probably to be identified with the commandant of the camp or barracks where the emperor’s Praetorian guard was housed, near the Viminal Gate.”⁹ Rapske identifies the location of the Viminal Gate as being “just beyond the walls to the NE of the city.”¹⁰ Here, an official who reported to the *stratopedarch* decided where and

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under what circumstances Paul was to be imprisoned. Perhaps some of the believers Paul knew in Rome (Romans 16:1–15) were among those who traveled the better part of two days to meet him at the Appii Forum and Three Inns (located respectively 39.5 and 33 miles southeast of Rome along the Appian Way; see Acts 28:15).¹¹ Given their obvious affection for Paul, it would not be surprising if Christians in Rome helped arrange a more permanent residence for the esteemed apostle at this time.

Paul was placed under house arrest and bound to a soldier by a single chain at the wrist (Acts 28:20).¹² Guards would be rotated “every four hours or so.”¹³ Typically, two soldiers would be charged with keeping a prisoner, who would be secured with chains on either side of their charge (Acts 12:6). The fact that a single soldier has this duty suggests, at a minimum, that the Romans considered it unlikely Paul would try to escape.¹⁴ This lenient treatment and relatively light confinement under house arrest also seems to suggest “the weakness of the case against Paul as indicated in the documentation sent with him to Rome.”¹⁵ This documentation “would have included not only Paul’s appeal to the emperor but also the rehearsal of what Felix, Festus, and for that matter Agrippa had concluded—namely, that Paul was not guilty of any significant crime (*crimen maiestatis*) under Roman law.”¹⁶

Luke’s description of Paul being allowed to “dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him” (Acts 28:16) and receiving guests (verses 17, 23, 30) suggests Paul’s apartment had ample room.¹⁷ Taking the relevant historical and social elements into consideration, it seems likely that Paul lived in “one of the thousands of tenement buildings in Rome,” rented a less expensive apartment on the third floor or higher (cf. Acts 20:9), and could “prepare his own meals.”¹⁸ After such a long journey occupying about five

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months and consisting of life-threatening challenges, this relatively lenient confinement under house arrest, providing many avenues for witness, must have seemed like a wonderful gift from the Lord.

These two years of imprisonment (Acts 28:30) enabled Paul to write and convey through trusted emissaries not only the epistles of Philippians and Colossians but also Ephesians and Philemon. Only during his later imprisonment would Paul have been kept in the Mamertine prison, which was essentially a “death prison” where “notorious prisoners were detained . . . and sometimes were executed.”¹⁹ Thus, in 2 Timothy, Paul’s situation seems to have deteriorated considerably to one of privation. He asks for the warm traveling cloak he left behind in Troas (2 Timothy 4:13), imploring Timothy, “Do your utmost to come before winter” (2 Timothy 4:21). He implies he is nearing death’s door. In his current imprisonment, Paul does not know whether he will “depart” (Gk. *analuō*) this life or “remain in the flesh” (Philippians 1:23, 24). But by the time of his second letter to Timothy, he says, “The time of my departure [Gk. *analysis*] is at hand” (2 Timothy 4:6), employing the noun form of the verb used in Philippians.

Throughout his life, Paul rejoices in his privilege as a “bond-servant” or “slave” of Christ (Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 1:1) and of God (Titus 1:1), just as Jesus Himself willingly became a “bondservant” to save us (Philippians 2:7).²⁰ Turning Roman conventions upside down, Paul elevates “slavery” from abject, ignominious servitude to honorable service, something to be desired because we are serving the Lord. If we are truly Christians, we are all slaves, just as Jesus admonished us: “Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:27, 28). If this is true of us, we can truly

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“rejoice *in the Lord* always” (Philippians 4:4; emphasis added) and say, with Paul, “I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content” (Philippians 4:11).

1. This dating, despite lingering questions, is widely accepted. See, for example, Clinton E. Arnold, “Acts,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 2:489; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 4:3722 and especially 4:3444–3446, where he discusses the available evidence in more detail.

2. For further elaboration on this point, see Brian Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody*, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 72–112. Some question his high social status due to his laboring as a tentmaker, but this fails to account for the obvious advantages outside of Israel for Jews who plied a trade, namely, they could work independently and determine their own work schedule, thus enabling them to observe the Sabbath without hindrance from an employer or out of economic necessity.

3. Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 503.

4. Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 381 argues that the “brothers” mentioned in Acts 28:15 were in fact “leaders of the church in Rome.”

5. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed., *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 502n35 (compare use of the term in Matthew 25:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:17).

6. Paul met with “the leaders of the Jews” (Acts 28:17), followed by “many” more Jews (verse 23), and “all who came to him” during the two years of his imprisonment (verses 30, 31).

7. Craig S. Keener, *Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 559.

8. Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 504.

9. Bruce, 504. So also Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 175–177, with an in-depth discussion.

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10. Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 177.

11. Keener, *Acts*, 4:3712.

12. Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 504. Note that here, in contrast to previous mentions (Acts 20:23; 23:29; 26:29, 31), the reference seems to be to a single chain or soldier to which Paul was bound. Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 181n47 indicates that it was probably a light chain rather than a heavy iron chain, which might have caused physical discomfort, severe health problems, and even permanent disability (cf. Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 206–209).

13. Bruce, 504.

14. Similarly, Keener, *Acts*, 4:3725.

15. So Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 183–185.

16. Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 790.

17. Although Acts 28:23 refers more generically to “lodging” (Gk. *xenia*), the larger context suggests rather comfortable accommodations.

18. Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 238, 239, calling it “house church-like” (365; emphasis in the original).

19. Keener, *Acts*, 4:3732. On Paul’s probable release, rearrest, and subsequent execution, see Keener 4:3767–3771. See Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1911), 489, for the reasons and circumstances under which Paul was rearrested and confined to “a gloomy dungeon,” undoubtedly referring to the Mamertine Prison described above.

20. The Greek word *doulos* is the usual word for a slave in the Greco-Roman world.