

# From Easter to Pentecost and Beyond: A Church-Wide Study in the Book of Acts

Clarksville First United Methodist Church  
April 8 — May 12, 2020  
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## Week 5 Gospel to Rome Wednesday, May 6

### Introduction

In Acts 23:11, Paul received a vision that he would go to Rome. In another vision this week, in 27:21, this is reinforced when he is told he will be on trial before Caesar. This is the capital of the Roman Empire, called *caput mundi* in the antiquity, “the head of the world.” To this very nerve center is where an apostle will travel with the good news, having travelled Palestine, Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. Appropriately, this week is called “gospel to Rome,” even though it is with Paul as a prisoner rather than in his itinerant ministry. We call this episode his fourth missionary journey.



### Questions

A student this week inquired about my use of the term “beheaded” to describe James’ death by Herod Agrippa I in Acts 12:2. There, it simply reads he was “killed by the sword” which isn’t necessarily beheading—the student is right. There was a Roman style of execution (such as in gladiator games) to thrust the sword downward into the left shoulder to reach the heart. Jews were thought to practice this rather than beheading when they could execute in their history. Yet, beheading was seen as a merciful execution in antiquity and it was very common. Church tradition in figures like Clement of Alexandria (c. 200) says that James was beheaded. I tend to assume beheading without thinking, but one is right to think about the other style. Truth is, the bible doesn't say and it's hard to know for sure.

### Reading

## Acts 24-28



### Quiz

After you have read the chapters, if you want to engage in a self-assessment—a quiz over the reading—it’s here as an option for you. The questions might include important facts or trivial facts from the reading. The answers are at the end of this module under the title, “Answers to the Quiz.”

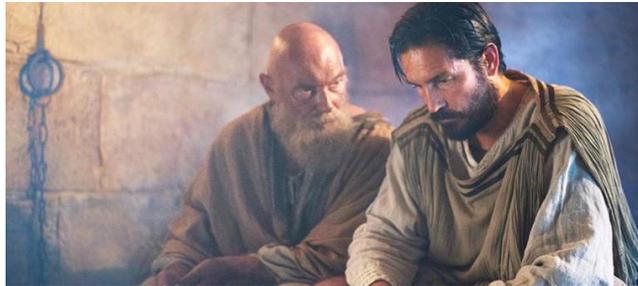
1. Where is Paul on trial at the end of last week to start this week?
2. Who succeeded Felix as governor of Judea and Samaria?

3. Why did the Jewish leaders want Paul to be transferred to stand trial in Jerusalem?
4. To whom did Paul appeal during his Caesarean trial?
5. What was King Agrippa's ultimate response to Paul's sermon and testimony?
6. Who was the centurion responsible for escorting Paul in his fourth missionary journey?
7. Where does Paul prophetically warn the sailing crew to winter?
8. On what island did Paul shipwreck on his fourth missionary journey?
9. To what city is Paul sent for trial to end the book of Acts?
10. What did the Jewish leaders in Rome report about the accusations from Jerusalem concerning Paul?

Bonus: Name all four Roman and Jewish officials before whom Paul testified on trial leading to his fourth missionary journey.

### Overview of Section

Last week, we left Paul on trial for heresy, charged by the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem. Flashing back, remember Jesus' birth was in the days of Herod the Great, who ruled over all of Palestine under Roman authority. Upon his death, his kingdom was split into three parts to be ruled by his three sons. One son was Antipas, uncle of Agrippa; they sequentially both ruled over Galilee. Agrippa executed James and was stricken down by God. Another son of Herod the Great was Archelaus, who reigned over Judea and Samaria, and who God warned Joseph about in a dream to avoid his region (Matt. 2:22). This son was such a poor administrator that Rome removed him and placed a Roman procurator or governor over the regions of his former kingdom. As a result, Jesus appeared before the Procurator Pilate and the visiting King Herod Antipas. Likewise, Paul appears before the Governor Festus and the visiting King Agrippa II. **It** can be confusing.



### Chapter 24

Felix is governor of Judea and Samara—a Roman appointment over more tumultuous regions of Palestine. When we closed last week, Paul had stood before him when he postponed his trial. Chapter 24 opens with that moment in Caesarea.

The limited content of this chapter allows us the opportunity to dissect Paul's defense. The religious leaders as the prosecution bring in a ringer: Tertullus, "a certain orator" (v.1). He was likely skilled in courtroom presentation. He reported, "We have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world" (v.5). Paul counters with questions about why they have waited twelve days since his arrival to arrest him, if they were going to accuse him of plaguing Jews throughout the world. Why not arrest him in the temple days ago? Why not in the synagogue this week? It's because they accuse him simply for disagreeing with them about Jesus as the Messiah. "They cannot prove the things which they now accuse me of" (v.13), he remarks about their claim to his troublemaking in the Empire or the region. In the midst of logic, Paul also gives his heartfelt testimony of hoping in God, in the resurrection, and his striving "to have a conscience without offense toward God

and men” (v.16). He tells Felix that it’s simply “concerning the resurrection of the dead I am being judged by you this day” (v.21).

When Felix heard this testimony, “having a more accurate knowledge of the Way” (v.22), he declared he will render a decision soon. He never would. “After two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound” (v.27). However, the governor shows Paul some mercy during this time, in a sense favoring his innocence, when he “commanded the centurion to keep Paul and let him have liberty, and told him not to forbid any of his friends to provide for or visit him” (v.23). This surely gave Paul opportunity to disciple any willing to visit him in prison.

### Chapter 25

Now Paul stands before the Governor Festus. First, the governor travels to Jerusalem, where the religious leaders again want to put Paul on trial there so that they can ambush and kill him on the way. The governor refuses, inviting them to testify all over again. When they presented their case in Caesarea, they “laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove” (v.7). Like his predecessor, he wants to do the Jews a favor, so he asks Paul about standing trial in Jerusalem. He declines, insisting that he has not violated their law in Jerusalem, he currently stood before the Roman governor in Caesarea, and he probably was sick of being in prison. “I appeal to Caesar,” he declared (v.11). He used his option as a Roman citizen to appeal over the head of the governor’s jurisdiction to the emperor himself.

King Agrippa II and his wife Bernice came to Caesarea and asked to hear from Paul for themselves. This was due to his right of appointing the Jewish high priest that charged Paul, as well as being considered an expert on Jewish matters (26:3). Governor Felix used the excuse to hear Paul again “so that after the examination has taken place I may have something to write” to introduce the case to Caesar (v.26). The opening of the next chapter suggests that Paul welcomes the chance to defend himself on Jewish matters before a Jewish expert.



### Chapter 26

The apostle lays out for King Agrippa all of his story. He begins with his zeal as a Pharisee, appeals to the patriarchs “our fathers” (v.6), his persecution against the Christian faith, his conversion on the road to Damascus, and his consequential ministry centered on Jesus as Messiah spoken by the prophets and Moses. Finally, he identifies his own ministry as one to the gentiles, which Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6 foreshadowed about the proclaimed light to both the Jews and gentiles. It was all material that an informed Jew like Agrippa would know.

Then comes a profound moment. When the king says that Paul is too smart for his own good (v.24), Paul insisted that if the king believed the prophets, then the prophets point to Jesus. “Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘You almost persuade me to become a Christian’” (v.28). Privately afterwards, the king told the governor that Paul was undeserving of chains. Festus declared that Paul might be freed if he hadn’t appealed to Caesar. Yet, by making this appeal, the apostle likely knew that he would be going to Rome, which was a goal of his and the opportunity to share the gospel there.



### Chapter 27

With Luke’s highly detailed report, we have the exact path and the very centurion charged for his journey to Rome. We even have the number of the crew, “Two hundred and seventy-six persons on board” (v.37). Centurion Julius “treated Paul kindly and gave him liberty to go to his friends” in Sidon, northern Palestine (v.3). Sailing around Cyprus, they landed in Crete where Paul seems to prophesy to the captain, “I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not of only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives” (v.10). When their ship is threatened at sea, Paul remarks, “You should have listened to me” (v.21). This time they listen when Paul described the angel who guaranteed he would be brought before Caesar and that all would be safe. However, he ordered the crew to run aground on Malta, which they did. Paul leads them in a thanksgiving meal beforehand, where he is reminiscent of Jesus at the Last Supper.

When the crew aimed to kill the prisoners to prevent escape and to strengthen their own survival, Julius the centurion intervened. By now, they should have been listening to Paul on their own, given his prophetic display, but still God used this gentile to offer protection to the apostle. Equally important among messages is the vision of Paul by the angel that guaranteed his dream of going to Rome to testify of Christ would be a reality.

### Chapter 28

South of the tip of Italy, then further south past Sicily, lies the island of Malta. The tattered and torn crew landed here, greeted by natives who showed them kindness. As Paul gathered sticks and placed it on the fire, a snake emerged from the bundle and latched on to Paul’s hand. The natives suddenly became afraid, superstitiously assuming that Paul was a murder who was suffering a tragic of justice. When Paul did not suffer, they reckoned him instead to be a god.



The leading citizen of the land, Publius, received the visitors. It happened that his father was sick; Paul prayed for him and he was healed. This resulted in “the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed” (v.9). Three months later, they sail for Syracuse, Sicily. They went on to Rhegium and Puteoli, Italy. Disciples greeted Paul here, and he was allowed to stay seven days with them. “And so we came to Rome” (v.14). Paul had arrived at *caput mundi*, “the head of the world,” the capital of the Roman Empire, the Eternal City. Other brethren greeted him along the way before the captain of the guard there. Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him” (v.16). Another privilege he experienced upon arrival was that he was allowed to address the synagogue leaders in Rome who declared that they never received any letter to accuse him. This led Paul to live there for two years “in his own rented room,” preaching the gospel to the Jews and to gentiles there, as he “received all who came to him” (v.30). Then Acts ends.



The picture above is supposedly one of Paul’s chains, which hangs over his tomb in the Basilica St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome. While he was in chains, he also had a measure of freedom to engage the people he encountered. The Acts description of Paul’s liberty to have numerous visitors runs contrary to the verses in his later epistles about his suffering, such as, “The time of my departure is at hand” (2 Tim. 4:6). This tendency to freedom, the absence of any accusation among the Jewish leaders there, and other early church documents lead scholars to believe that Paul may have been released from Rome after Acts. Certainly there is a time later in Rome when he is imprisoned, suffering, and martyred. Next week, we’ll look at Paul’s possibilities beyond Acts.

### Commentary

- 25:2—The “high priest and the chief men of the Jews” take on a collective identity of their own in the gospel and Acts. Rarely are their individuals named, but they are a collection of religious scrutinizers in the ministries of Jesus, Peter, and Paul, ready to call out anyone guilty of blasphemy, heresy, law-breaking, or impiety. They are comprised of Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, lawyers, and socially influential individuals. In any verse, their unnamed collection could comprise any combination of religious leaders.
- 25:11—As a Roman citizen, Paul makes this appeal as his right. Roman law provided “rights and privileges including a fair public trial for a citizen accused of any crime, exemption from certain ignominious forms of punishment, and protection against summary execution.” (F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 39).
- 25:16—Notice Paul reminds the Roman court of the Roman practices that respects its citizens, of which Paul is one. It reinforces a respect that his audience would share with him.

- 26:1—When Paul “stretches out his hand,” this is likely a salute to the king. He also acknowledges with respect the king’s position and recognizes his knowledge of Jewish matters. In Romans 13:1, Paul writes: “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.”
- 26:12-18—Paul again provides his conversion testimony to an audience. We hang on each insight he gives us, because we have such limited information on this powerful experience in Acts 9.
- 26:23—The claim that Jesus would be a light to the gentiles from the prophet Isaiah defends Jesus as Messiah, defends Paul as theologian on trial for heresy, embodies his own ministry appointed by God, and helps to illumine Christianity for the Jewish Agrippa.
- 27:1-41—Luke’s detail in the narrative almost encumbers the story with factoids. This seems to fit his desire to “give an orderly account” based on his “perfect [firsthand] knowledge” of what happened (Luke 1:3). In fact, the many details provide credibility to the historicity of the account.
- 28:3-5—The longer ending of Mark’s gospel, which is found in your King James Version but only in a footnote of your New International Version of the bible, provides a verse about snakes: “These signs will follow those who believe: In my name they will...take up serpents” (16:17-18). Paul’s episode and this verse from Mark is the biblical basis for some to practice snake handling in church as a symbol of Christ’s victory over Satan that comes to Christians. A closer look at this episode of Paul shows that he does not intentionally seek to handle serpents, but God simply protects him on this occasion.
- 28: 8—The details of “fever and dysentery” would be of particular interest for a medical doctor like Luke to report.
- 28:11—The name of Paul’s ship is the “Twin Brothers,” named for Castor and Pollux, sons of Zeus. Their constellation sits high in the winter sky, where you can look towards the north and still see two identical stars bearing their name.
- 28:16—There is a location in Rome across the Tiber River where the captain of the guard would have likely dwelt with troops quartered there. There is a tradition that Paul was held prisoner on the spot where the modern church called San Paulo della Regola is built, in this same area of Rome. The second century work called *Acts of Paul* described how he rented a granary for his meetings, and excavations behind that church evidence a granary. This is simply some historical evidence of Paul in Rome.
- 28:31—The apostle is still alive when the book of Acts ends. His fourth missionary journey was characterized by his imprisonment, but it held plenty of opportunity for him to preach the gospel. The Lord works in mysterious ways.

### **Application**

- It’s easy to wonder if God kept Paul anchored in Caesarea just for the purpose of the discipleship of believers, while surely Paul was eager to get out to continue his itinerant ministry. If you could visit someone famous or influential to you for two years, simply to learn more from him or her, who would it be?
- Have you ever written out your testimony just to be able to articulate it better? Paul delivered it so many times, it demonstrates how our story can win hearts who resonate with the experiences shared with their own story.
- How would you have handled Paul’s frustration with getting a vision from God when the crew of the boat wouldn’t listen to him? How do you handle frustration in the moment when you know something better is available to people?

- When Paul arrives in Rome, the Jewish leaders there don't know a thing about the charges that brought him there. Do you think that was a relief to Paul or a frustration for having suffering so much for a forgotten cause?

#### **Further Application**

- When Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea two years, it is reminiscent of Joseph and Daniel in the Old Testament who pined away in prison until the day God used them mightily in the court of the ruler. Have you ever wondered why God doesn't act fast enough when the work He wants to do is the work that you want to do?
- Do you think Paul was entirely sanctified? This is a Wesleyan doctrine that a person will yield themselves to the Spirit's work in their life that they will not sin willfully and have a life characterized by love. Reflect on your own sanctification.

#### **Answers to the Quiz**

1. Caesarea (23:23)
  2. Festus (24:27)
  3. So that they could see him ambushed and killed on the way (25:3)
  4. Caesar himself, a right he had as a Roman citizen (25:11)
  5. Paul "almost persuaded him to be a Christian" (26:28)
  6. Julius (27:1)
  7. Crete, but they sail on anyway (27:12)
  8. Malta (28:1)
  9. Rome (28:14)
  10. They neither received letters nor testimony against him (28:22)
- Bonus: Governor Felix, Governor Festus, King Agrippa II, High Priest Ananias