

“So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed (i.e., miraculous church growth in Ephesus). After these things were ended, PAUL PURPOSED IN THE SPIRIT, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, TO GO TO JERUSALEM, saying, After I have been there, I MUST ALSO SEE ROME.” Acts 19:20,21.

(This purpose of Paul in the spirit to go to Jerusalem, and thereafter to see Rome, marks the beginning of the end of Paul’s life on this earth. And Paul is repeatedly warned not to go.) To wit:

“And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there; Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years, I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified. ...And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all. And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul’s neck, and kissed him. SORROWING MOST OF ALL FOR THE WORDS WHICH HE SPAKE, THAT THEY SHOULD SEE HIS FACE NO MORE. And they accompanied him unto the ship.”
(Acts 20:22-38)

Drawing ever nearer to Jerusalem and Roman arrest, imprisonment, trials, kangaroo courts, really – and mad Nero’s decapitation – the apostle Paul is truly a remarkable study in Christian dedication and steadfast devotion to the uttermost; to wit:

“According to my earnest expectation, and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death. FOR ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST, AND TO DIE IS GAIN. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labor; yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a DESIRE TO DEPART, AND TO BE WITH CHRIST; WHICH IS FAR BETTER. Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith; That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again.” (Phil. 1:20-26)

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” (Psa. 116:15)

Beloved, it is likely also that Paul was by then an old man; having referred to himself in his letter to Philemon as *“Paul the aged,”* and adding the afflictions of old age to his numerous infirmities of the flesh; to wit:

“Yet for love’s sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as PAUL THE AGED, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 9)

In short, the apostle Paul was the victim of a malicious and cruel persecution. The Jews had caused his arrest and trial before a provincial Roman governor. From that Roman governor he appealed his case to Caesar, and was subsequently sent to Rome. From there he was permitted to abide as a prisoner in his *“own hired house,”* but was chained to and guarded every hour by a Roman soldier. Afterwards he was kept in a filthy dungeon without sunshine, comforts of any kind, and without adequate fresh food or water – where he remained until the day and hour of his execution – probably by decapitation and probably on Nero’s orders. And so, what began some years earlier in Ephesus, with Paul purposing in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome – even if it meant his death – has now ended with Paul’s bloody head, severed from his body, rolling around in a filthy Roman dungeon. Like the illegal arrest, trial, and crucifixion of the dear Lord, Paul’s experiences in the Roman judicial system – as faithfully recorded by the Holy Ghost – and very much like the American judicial system – also reflected nothing but a string of outrageous and fraudulent episodes. Let us consider a few of them, in the context of this sermon.

“Now when we had discovered Cyprus, we left it on the left hand, and sailed into Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unlade her burden. And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days; WHO SAID TO PAUL THROUGH THE SPIRIT, THAT HE SHOULD NOT GO UP TO JERUSALEM.” (Acts 21:3,4)

Now, Beloved, we have a situation here, that is easy to understand; but what do we learn from it? The Holy Spirit is evidently telling Paul to go to Jerusalem, and, maybe to Rome. And, at the same time, it is equally clear that the Holy Spirit is telling other good people to tell Paul NOT TO DARE GO TO JERUSALEM AND ROME. And this scenario is repeated several times – maybe many times – very dramatically; for example; to wit:

“And the next day we that were of Paul’s company departed, and came unto Caesarea; and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven, and abode with him. And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy. And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judea a certain prophet, named AGABUS. And when he was come unto us, he took Paul’s girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also TO DIE AT JERUSALEM FOR THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS. And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done. And after those days we took up our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem.” (Acts 21:8-15)

Bang! Suffice it here to say, that Paul had scarcely opened his mouth and the Jews were all over him; one riotous situation after another; until finally – get this – the Roman soldiers took Paul into a kind of protective custody FOR PAUL’S PROTECTION, and if you read the account, it certainly looks like the chief captain was acting in good faith; to wit:

“And there arose a great cry; and the scribes that were of the Pharisees’ part, arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God. And when there arose a great dissension, the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces of them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them, and to bring him into the castle. And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul; for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.” (Acts 23:9-11)

(Stop right here, for a powerful point to be made. You see what a casual kind of thing it was for Paul to be taken into Roman custody? In the heat of the moment, and for Paul's protection – which he was probably glad to have. Many times when unruly mobs of so-called counter-protesters surround us by the thousands, we welcome such protection – if only to escort us safely to our cars. But note, that having taken custody of Paul – and through a series of corrupt Roman judges and other officials – the Pagan Roman Empire retained custody of the innocent apostle until they executed him some seven years later, at which time Paul published these immortal words; to wit: ***“For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”*** 2 Tim. 4:6-8.)

The Roman chief captain who originally seized Paul and reported to Felix, the Roman governor, said that Paul had done nothing ***“worthy of death or of bonds.”*** To wit: ***“And he wrote a letter after this manner: Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix sendeth greeting. This man was taken of the Jews, and should have been killed of them; then came I WITH AN ARMY, and rescued him, having understood that he was a Roman. And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council; Whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, BUT TO HAVE NOTHING LAID TO HIS CHARGE WORTHY OF DEATH OR OF BONDS.”*** Acts 23:25-29. Whereupon Felix agreed to hear Paul's case, and after a few preliminary remarks, the apostle denied all accusations of the Jews about him being a trouble maker or any kind of criminal; and challenged his accusers to produce proof; to wit:

“Neither can they prove the things whereof they now accuse me. But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets; and have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust. And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men. ... Touching the resurrection of the dead I am called in question by you this day. And when Felix heard these things, having more perfect knowledge of that way, he deferred them, and said, When Lysias the chief captain shall come down, I will know the uttermost of your matter.” (Acts 24:13-22)

Beloved. This was yet another outrageous abuse of judicial power. This very same chief captain – Claudius Lysias – in his initial report – completely exonerated Paul, saying, ***“Whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds.”*** Acts 23:29. Furthermore, the Holy Ghost gives His Elect knowledge of the real reason why Felix continues Paul's case indefinitely; to wit: ***“Go thy way for this time, when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee. HE HOPED ALSO THAT MONEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN GIVEN HIM OF PAUL, THAT HE MIGHT LOOSE HIM; WHEREFORE HE SENT FOR HIM THE OFTENER, AND COMMUNED WITH HIM.”*** Acts 24:25,26. Meanwhile, the blessed sovereignty of our Father in governing all things shines through what would otherwise be gloom and despair because of Paul's imprisonment. Some of the best preaching in the Bible comes from Paul the prisoner of Jesus Christ, a solid fact that sweeps all sorrow away; for example; to wit:

“And after certain days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, which was a Jewess, he sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way. ... But after two years Porcius Festus came into Felix' room; and Felix, willing to show the Jews a pleasure, left Paul bound.” (Acts 24:25,27)

Now when Festus was come into the province, one of the main interests or attractions of the man seems to have been *“Paul the aged, and the prisoner of Jesus Christ.”* And then came king Agrippa, also fascinated with Paul, known throughout the Roman world as Paul, the Lion of God. On the king’s arm was his fashion-plate wife, always on the hunt for exotic entertainment; to wit:

“And after certain days king Agrippa and Bernice came unto Caesarea to salute Festus. And when they had been there many days, Festus declared Paul’s cause unto the king, saying, there is a certain man left in bonds by Felix. ...Therefore, when they were come hither, without any delay on the morrow I sat on the judgment seat, and commanded the man to be brought forth. Against whom when the accusers stood up, they brought none accusation of such things as I supposed. But had certain questions against him of their own superstition, and of one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. ...Then Agrippi said unto Festus. I would also hear the man myself. Tomorrow, said he, thou shalt hear him. And on the morrow, when Agrippa was come, and Bernice, with great pomp, and was entered into the place of hearing, with the chief captains, and principal men of the city, at Festus’ commandment Paul was brought forth. And Festus said, King Agrippa, and all men which are here present with us, Ye see this man, about whom all the multitude of the Jews have dealt with me, both at Jerusalem, and also here, crying that he ought not to live any longer. But when I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death, and that he himself hath appealed to Augustus, I have determined to send him. Of whom I have no certain thing to write unto my Lord. Wherefore I have brought him forth before you, and specially before thee, O king Agrippa, that, after examination had, I might have somewhat to write. For it seemeth to me unreasonable to send a prisoner, and not withal to signify the crimes laid against him.” (Acts 25:13-27)

And so you see, Beloved, Paul was caught up in typical Roman jurisprudential quicksand, which made a mockery of truth and justice. And I must tell you, that, based on years of first-hand experience, it is my opinion that American jurisprudence is worse than that of ancient Rome. From the time that Paul was taken into custody by chief captain Claudius Lysias, Paul was doomed. Nevertheless, like the members of WBC, Paul was on a mission with a message for his King. In Paul’s view of things, Caesar and all his underlings were Paul’s prisoners! Not the other way around! Therefore, when king Agrippa said to Paul with a throne room filled with dignitaries – Thou art permitted to speak for thyself – the king did not know what he was getting into. Paul told the king about meeting the Lord Jesus and receiving his commission on the Damascus road; to wit:

“And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet; for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, ... And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad. But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds. And when he had thus spoken, the king rose up, and the governor, and Bernice, and they that sat with them. And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This man doeth nothing worthy of death or bonds.” (Acts 26:15-31)

I love you. Amen.