

# Into the Hands of Nero

by Steve Gallagher

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*Paul's ministry in Rome was marked by his determination to reach out to Jews, his ability to preach and teach the gospel despite being under house arrest, and his writing of several epistles, including Philemon and Colossians.*

**Duration:** 52:43

**Scripture:** Ephesians 6:12, Philippians 1:21, Colossians 1:15

**Topics:** "Persecution And Faith", "Church Unity"

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## Description

This sermon delves into Paul's time in Rome, his interactions with Jewish leaders, the background of Nero's reign, and the significance of Paul's trials and writings during this period. It highlights Paul's unwavering faith, his boldness in sharing the Gospel even in the face of powerful opposition, and the impact of his letters to the churches. The sermon emphasizes the themes of standing firm in faith, the exalted position of Christ, the unity of the church, and the joy found in the Lord amidst trials and persecution.

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## Transcript

In 61 A.D., Paul finally achieved the dream, his dream of going to Rome. And the first order of business was to meet with the Jewish leaders there, which is typical of him. He always wanted to reach out to the Jews first.

So from Acts 28, 16 through most of the rest of the chapter, it's dealing with that. I'm not going to go over it. It's not high on my priority list here.

But I'll just say that he met with them, and, you know, the typical debating and pleading on his part and so on, and these Jewish leaders said that they had not even heard anything from Jerusalem about him, which is really hard to believe. I think what it is, they were determined that they were not going to allow him to create turmoil there in Rome. Why? Well, for one thing, ten years before this, something had happened.

You guys remember? Ten years before this, the Jews were expelled out of Rome because of a man named Crestus, which obviously is Jesus Christ, his followers who had gone to Rome and had started evangelizing, and the Jews got all upset, as they typically would do, and there was a riot, and so Claudius Caesar at that point just expelled them all out. So they didn't want that to happen again. You know, can you imagine just being thrown out of your city where your job is at, your home, all of that? So they were

going to be careful about that, and not only that, Paul was a Roman citizen, you know, and he already had a track record of appearing before numerous Roman officials favorably, and, you know, did they really want to put themselves at odds with a Roman citizen who had somewhat the favor of the Roman Empire? So, you know, and plus he was about to be tried by Caesar himself, and they just figured, you know what, it'd be better for us to just stay away from this guy and leave him alone, and that's what they did.

So a number of them no doubt got saved and joined the congregation there in Rome, but let's pick up the story in verse 30. It's not going to be a lot to read here. Acts 28.30, and he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters.

In other words, he was under house arrest and was welcoming all who came to him. That's amazing. Preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness unhindered.

So the final word in the book of Acts is unhindered, you know, and I don't know, to me that's just kind of a significant thing, that that is the final word in the book, that God had His way through all the battles, struggles, opposition, trials, suffering, God had His way, the gospel spread unhindered for the most part anyway. All right, but notice how abrupt the ending is here. I mean, what writer would end a book like this? You know, I mean, it's just like, it leaves you hanging, it's like, yeah, and I mean, typically you end a book by just kind of some summation or something like that, but this just is so abrupt.

You know, why didn't Luke talk about the trial, for instance? The guy is going to stand before Caesar Nero, why didn't he tell about that? After all the effort he put into telling about standing before Agrippa, he's not going to talk about standing before Nero? You know, why didn't he tell about what happened afterwards? What did happen with Paul? You know, where did he go? How did his life end? Why didn't Luke include all that? And it's probably because he had planned a third book. He had the Gospel of Luke, and then the Acts of the Apostles, and he probably planned on a follow-up book, but for whatever reason, it was never written. And it could be that the Lord just wanted to accomplish his purposes in another way, which he did.

And you'll see next week, when we get into those remaining years, that the Lord had his way of communicating what he wanted to communicate. But anyway, as far as Luke is concerned, he did accomplish his purposes because he presented the story of how Christianity began and how it entered into Rome. And to him, that was the major goal, two goals that he was trying to achieve when he set out to write this book.

All right, so Paul spends two years under house arrest, but he doesn't spend that time alone. He had a number of attendants who were with him some amount of that time or all of that time. Timothy, of course, his beloved son in the faith, his right-hand man.

He was always right there to do his bidding, to help him in any possible way. Paul had a father-son relationship with Timothy. They were very, very close.

And then he had Luke, who was his historiographer and his personal physician. And that's a nice thing to have when you've been beaten half to death like he had been. Then there was Aristarchus, who had traveled with Paul to Jerusalem.

He was with that band that went to Jerusalem. And then he came on the ship all the way to Rome with him. So he would have been with Paul through that whole journey, you know, with the shipwreck and all

that stuff.

He had to swim for his life as well. And of course, Luke had been also. Tychicus brought him news from Ephesus, and Epaphras came to consult him about some heresies that had cropped up in the Lycus Valley.

The Lycus Valley being the place where Hierapolis, Colossae, and Laodicea, those three cities are kind of close to each other. And so he shows up at some point, Epaphroditus came at one point later, as we'll get into, from Philippi, Mark, John Mark, you know, the two of these guys were reconciled at some point, probably when Paul was there in Jerusalem or maybe even in Caesarea, somehow he and Mark reconciled, praise the Lord. And as we'll find out later, Paul had some nice things to say about him.

And Demas was also on hand, and he was one of his attendants at that time. And of course, the ever-present Roman soldier who he was chained to at all times. Let me read what Coney Barrehausen said about this, pretty well written.

The soldier to whom he was chained today might have been in Nero's bodyguard yesterday. If there were any of these soldiers not utterly hardened by a life of cruelty, their hearts must surely have been touched by the character of their prisoner, brought as they were into so close a contact with him. They must have been at least astonished to see a man under such circumstances so utterly careless of selfish interests and devoting himself with amazing energy to the teaching of others.

Strange indeed to their ears, fresh from the brutality of a Roman barrack, must have been the sound of Christian exhortation, of prayers and of hymns. Stranger still, perhaps, the tender love which bound the converts to their teacher and to one another and showed itself in every look and tone. We're told that Paul's preaching was subjected to no restraint whatever.

Who could see without emotion that venerable form subjected by iron links to the coarse control of the soldier who stood beside him? How often must tears of the assembly have been called forth by the uprising of that fettered hand and the clanking of the chain which checked its energetic action? You know, and it's so true. Can you imagine these Roman soldiers who, you know, they were at the beck and call of Nero and they were sent on all kinds of missions to assassinate people, to, you know, serve in the army and be at war in different places. You never knew what you were going to be assigned to.

But they had this rotating shift and, you know, there was always at least one soldier with Paul, there in his rented quarters, and for them to come out of that brutal environment and then to sit in the midst of worship services. I mean, they're looking at this man whose face must have glowed with the love of God, you know. And the blind are being healed and the lame are made to walk and the demon-possessed are set free and people who have been involved in all kinds of sin, you know, habitual sin are being delivered and changed and transformed.

And the love, the atmosphere of love that they are seeing in that place. You know, it had an effect on them. In fact, in Philippians 1, I won't read it now, but he says, he tells the Philippian church that news about him has spread all the way through the Praetorian Guard, you know.

So, he definitely had an effect on Rome during his time there. But these weren't the only companions. There were also, as Luke tells us, there were also people coming freely, you know.

So, believers there in Rome were coming to visit him and who knows how many unsaved people looking for something in life and, you know, come in there. Most of these Christians, at least in Rome, were slaves. There was a million slaves in Rome during this time, a million.

Most of them came from all over the empire where Rome would go and conquer some nation and haul off slaves, you know, as they were about to do a few years later in Jerusalem. All those Jews that came out of Jerusalem were taken in chains to Rome and became slaves there. So, that was typical.

And a large segment of the population there were slaves. And of course, they are probably much more open to the gospel and to hearing what this man has to say. And in Philippians 4, Paul mentions Nero's, you know, people from his household, from his palace, which were slaves that, you know, they were there with him.

So, anyway, he was having his effect. Let me just read another passage here from Coney Barrenhausen. But if Nero's soldiers seem out of place in such a scene, still more repugnant to the assembled worshippers must have been the instruments of his pleasures, the ministers of his lust.

How deep their degradation was, we know from authentic records. The ancient historians have polluted their pages with details about the services required from the attendance of Nero. Suffice it to say that the members of his household were the instruments of vices so monstrous and so unnatural that they shocked even the men of that generation, steeped as it was in every species of obscenity.

This guy's writing this in, what, 1880 or something. Can you imagine what he would think if he saw the American church and what we have to live in. But, anyway, let me continue.

But we must remember that many of those who took part in such abominations were involuntary agents forced by the compulsion of slavery to do their master's bidding. And the very depth of vileness in which they were plunged must have excited in some of them an indignant disgust and revulsion against vice. Under such feelings, if curiosity led them to visit the apostles' prison, they were well qualified to appreciate the purity of its moral atmosphere.

And there it was that some of these unhappy bondsmen first tasted spiritual freedom and were prepared to brave with patient heroism the tortures under which they soon were destined to expire in the gardens of the Vatican. So, you know, it's just an interesting sight into the world that Paul lived in during his time there in Rome. So he's ministering to all these different people, and no doubt also, you know, corresponding with different churches and so on.

In fact, probably the most important thing that came out of his time there in Rome were the three epistles and the one personal letter that he wrote that became part of the New Testament canon. Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians were apparently written in late 62 AD, probably in the fall or maybe early winter or something. And then a few months later, Paul wrote Philippians right before he went to trial before Nero.

So I want to spend most of the rest of this time going over these books, again, from the perspective of Paul's background and what's happening in his life. Let's start with Philemon. Onesimus was a runaway slave.

He had stolen some money from his master and had gone who knows where, but anyway, he ended up in Rome and probably ran through his money. He was probably destitute. Perhaps some Christians took him

in.

Who else would, you know, care about a runaway slave? So they probably took him in, but then they took him to, you know, attend one of Paul's meetings. Anyway, we know that Paul leads him to the Lord. Here's another trophy of God's grace.

So Onesimus comes to the Lord and hangs around Paul. He's just like a little puppy dog probably, just wanted to be with Paul. He saw the Lord in him, and there was something about Paul that, you know, he just wanted to be in that place.

So Onesimus becomes another aid to Paul during his time there. Philemon was a member of the church at Colossae, and it's even possible that Onesimus had met Paul before. Maybe Philemon had gone to Ephesus at some point on business.

You know, he's obviously a businessman, so he may have gone up to Ephesus, and maybe that's where he got saved. I don't know. But anyway, it's possible that Onesimus had even seen Paul before, but surely he probably had been introduced to Christianity in the home of Philemon before this.

One way or another, we do know this, that the Holy Spirit pursued him all the way across the Roman Empire and caught up to him in Rome and brought him into the kingdom. Praise the Lord. So even though Onesimus had become a helpful or useful helper to Paul, he, you know, he had a duty to send Onesimus back to his master.

So the letter of Philemon is simply him writing on behalf of Onesimus, and he's going to send Onesimus back with Tychicus, and they're going to make that trip all the way over to Asia, which means what? They have to go past the Adriatic Sea, and then the Aegean Sea, and all the way across there, and then down into the inland there where Colossae was at. Let me read what Farrar said. Had Philemon been a heathen, to send Onesimus to him would have been to consign the poor slave to certain torture, to possible crucifixion.

But Philemon was a Christian, and the gospel of Christ, by Christianizing the master, emancipated the slave. Paul felt quite sure that he was sending back the runaway to forgiveness, in all probability to future freedom. So Paul appeals to Philemon's good heartedness, and of course we don't know exactly what happened, but I'm sure that Philemon did the right thing.

But that wasn't the only business Paul had with Colossae. The church at Colossae, well as I said, Philemon was there, but there started to develop problems there. Epaphras, who was one of those guys who got saved in Ephesus and went out as an evangelist, you know, preaching in different cities, he probably preached in Laodicea and Hierapolis and Colossae, and he began these little home groups, if you will, in these different cities or towns.

Colossae was nothing but a little town, I mean I've been there, and it's a beautiful, I don't know if you'd call it a stream or a river, it goes right through there, and there's woods around, it was one of the most beautiful places I was at in Turkey. And you know, the mound that is there is still covered with shards of pottery, ancient pottery, you know, dated back to this time. Why didn't you grab a piece? Because I didn't want to go to a Turkish prison, that's why, not a place to go.

But anyway, you saw it laying all over the place, and anyway, what had happened was some people had arrived there, Colossae, even though it was a small town, was right on one of the main Roman roads, and

so they probably had a lot of traffic coming and going, and perhaps different people would come in to participate in the meetings there, and so these guys show up with these strange new teachings and start influencing the other members of the church in Colossae. Now I need to take a step back for a second, and I want to talk about Gnosticism for a minute, because whatever these teachings were, it's clear that there was a Gnostic influence involved there. Gnosticism at this point, in the early 60s, had not really taken form yet, or if it had, it certainly wasn't very widespread, because Paul doesn't mention any of this elsewhere, really, but 30 years later, when the Apostle John is writing his epistles, now John is clearly dealing with the Gnosticism that has swept through the church by that point.

Just think of it as, well, I don't know how many years to go back, go back 10, 15 years. Who ever heard of the emergent movement back then? No one. It was nonexistent, but all of a sudden, where did this come from? All of a sudden, it's everywhere, and we're still in it today.

These heretical teachings of the emergent movement that have swept through the body of Christ. Well, that's basically what happened with Gnosticism in Christianity. You remember in Athens, someone there had accused Paul of being a seed spreader, they called it, and what they meant by that is people who would pick up these ideas from different sources and just kind of conglomerate them into some new philosophy or some new way of thinking or some new explanation for the universe or whatever.

These philosophers in Athens, they had seen it all, they had heard it all, and they had become very cynical for good reason. That's what it seems like. Whoever came up with this Gnosticism did that.

They developed ideas from Eastern religions, they pulled some things off Judaism, maybe. Definitely, it became very tied in with Christianity and Christian beliefs. So that's what Gnosticism was, it was just an accumulation of different things who someone came up with under satanic inspiration, but the main belief of Gnosticism was that matter is evil.

This pulpit is evil. This building is evil. We are evil.

Anything that's something you can touch and feel is evil. The only things that are pure are the unseen realm, and their idea of the unseen realm would be different than what you and I believe, but anyway, they believed that there was a supreme being they called God, but that God, being perfect and being holy, could not have any interactions with matter or with human beings because he was too holy to have this interaction. Well, you can see it's a corruption of good Judaistic teachings about the holiness of God.

It's a corruption of that, and so what this God did is he created these spiritual beings which were called aeons, and they would be comparable to what we know as angels, but they were like these apparitions, and they would show up and communicate these high lofty truths about Gnosticism, and that became the pathway to salvation, not through moral being, you know, I mean a moral behavior or not through obeying God's law, not through coming under the direct leadership and rule of the Lord, or being born again, or, you know, they would kind of incorporate those things, but it was all through the lens of this Gnostic viewpoint. So Jesus Christ himself was just another aeon, and that's why when John is saying, isn't it in the first chapter, that we have seen him, we have felt him, we touched his body, you know, in other words, he wasn't some kind of an apparition that just would come in and leave and stuff like that, no, he was an actual human being. He was the incarnate word of God, John said in his gospel.

So all of that was expressed by John later because of the way that Gnosticism has swept through the church. Anyway, the way this belief system worked itself out was in two main avenues, and they were

completely opposite. Most Gnostics followed the path of severe asceticism, you know, because matter is evil, we have to starve our bodies and, you know, go against our natural inclinations for anything that produces pleasure, you know, any appetites of your body, eating, any of that.

So there would be a lot of fasting, you know, doing without sex if you were married, all that kind of stuff, that line of thinking, this rigid lifestyle. The opposite was that some took was complete licentiousness, you know, the teaching there was since we're all evil anyway, what's the matter? So we might as well just indulge ourselves and give over and, you know, but still come into this deep about Gnosticism and so on. So anyway, that was kind of the teaching that eventually evolved over the years and swept the church.

But this was still an early time, and apparently whoever these guys were in Colossae were affected by some of these teachings or had some of these ideas that they combined with Judaism or Jewish ritualism and that sort of thing along with Christian ideas. And so they had their own form of it that they were introducing into the people there in Colossae. So Paul's method of dealing with this is he's writing a letter that he's going to send by Tychicus and Onesimus, and he's not going to just lay out, here's what Gnosticism is and why it's wrong and all that.

All he does is he presents the contrasting truth. Here's the lie, here's the truth, and he doesn't even talk about the lie, he just talks about the truth. Okay, and, you know, I remember being told in Bible school that that's a good way of handling heresy, and yeah, maybe it is.

But anyway, in chapter one, we are given some of the most amazing, actually chapter one and two, some of the most amazing statements about Jesus Christ. Why are we given those statements? Because they are trying to denigrate Jesus Christ into just another angel, kind of like the Jehovah's Witnesses in a sense. They're trying to minimize who he is.

And Paul says, no, he's the center of the Christian faith, you know, and he's exalted in the book of Colossians. Aren't you grateful now that those heresies kind of affected those people? Because some of these tremendous statements came about to refute those lies. Farrar says this, Christ is the eternal, pre-existing, yet incarnate word, the only potentate, the only mediator, the only savior, the head of the body, which is the church, and the source of its life.

And the expression of this truth was rendered necessary by error, you know. So we have that to thank for some of the beautiful statements we read in the book of Colossians about Jesus. Anyway, in chapter two, after Paul, you know, continues along that line of thinking about the Lord, then he starts dealing with some of these problems, you know, in a way.

He tells the Colossians, see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. So he sets this false teaching up as a complete opposition or contrast to what Jesus taught during his time. And then he goes on to ask them, if you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees such as do not handle, do not taste, do not touch? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

You know, let me put it to you the way that I've always said it, is you can't defeat the appetites of the flesh with the flesh. In other words, you will never, if you're addicted to some kind of vice, some vice or

whatever, you are never going to conquer that vice through the strength of your own flesh, because you don't have it in you. We're not strong enough in ourselves to do that.

There's something else that's got to take place. And of course, you know, the primary answer is the Lord living within us. All right, so then in chapter three, Paul gets more practical and he starts laying out, this is what Christian behavior should look like.

And as part of that, he's coming against the other message, which is that of licentiousness. So he's saying, no, you've got to live a godly, pure life. And then in chapter four, he wraps it up with some personal greetings and encouragements and so on.

So that is the book of Colossians. And if you read that book tonight, let's say, I think it would look completely different to you than the way you have seen it in the past. All right, now, you remember how, was it a couple of weeks ago, where we talked about how Romans and Galatians were closely associated with each other and that Romans was like this tremendous expansion of the ideas of Galatians.

Well, to a lesser degree, the same thing holds true of Ephesians and Colossians. Colossians is dealing with some issues. And so in Ephesians, Paul is writing a circular letter, more like a formal treatise.

You know, in other words, it's not a personalized letter to the beloved people who he loves there in Ephesus, who he spent two and a half years with, building them up, pouring himself into their lives, as we read in Acts 20 and so on. You know, he's not writing a personalized letter to them, which is kind of surprising. But what he does is he writes a letter that is meant, right during the beginning of it, right from the start, it's meant to be just passed around to all the different churches that, you know, Paul had influenced and so on.

In fact, it says at the end of Colossians, I think, I'm not going to look it up now, but I think he says something about there, the letter from Laodicea read here as well. And many scholars believe that that's really the book of Ephesians that, you know, had gone to Laodicea to be read there in that church and then needed to go to Colossae and elsewhere. So in Ephesians, Ephesians is presenting things in a more general way, you know, and his main message, the thing he's emphasizing is the exalted position of the church.

And that is the message in the book of Ephesians, especially in the first three chapters. In those chapters, you know, he presents these lofty concepts and doctrines and ideas and so on. Then the last half of the book is, he becomes very practical and starts laying out how to live their lives, which is very similar to what we read in Colossians 3, you know, and you can compare the two, there's a lot of the same language, which is one of the reasons why we know they were written at the same time.

And another thing, too, I can mention about Ephesians is that some of the most profound statements about spiritual warfare are found in the book of Ephesians. You know, for instance, Ephesians 2.2, where Paul says the prince of the power of the air or atmosphere, this potentate, this, you know, spiritual being, this God of the world, he's mentioning him there as affecting the sons of disobedience. And then, of course, in chapter 6, he's talking about our, he's saying to them, our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places, therefore take up the full armor of God, he says.

You know, so why is that so much of an emphasis? Because Ephesus was the center of witchcraft and sorcery and satanic worship and so on. So you can see why he would want to touch on that in the book of Ephesians. Let me make a few comparisons of these two books, just like I did with Galatians and Romans.

Let me do it with these two. Colossians was called forth by a special need, whereas Ephesians was Paul just wanting to present some general truths about the faith. Colossians is specific and concrete, whereas Ephesians is more abstract and general in tone.

In Colossians, he's primarily occupied with refuting an error, but in Ephesians, he's absorbed with the rapturous development of an exalted truth. The main theme of Colossians is the person of Christ, but in Ephesians, the main theme is the life of Christ manifested through the church. And lastly, Christ's person is most prominent in Colossians, but Christ's body, the church of Christ, is the most prominent part in Ephesians.

All right, so those are a few comparisons of the two letters. So anyway, like I say, that was towards the end of 62 that he wrote those two epistles and that letter to Philemon, and several months passed. Well, during that time, Epiphraotes shows up from the Philippians.

Now can you imagine going into a city of however many million people there were, maybe 2 million, I don't know, in Rome in that time, and cities in that day were not like cities today. Well, maybe if you went into a third world country, it might be comparable. Go to Rio de Janeiro or some of these other cities that you just see all these shacks, just, you know, these shanty towns or like Mumbai and places like that, that would be comparable more to what Rome was like, except for the central part of the city, which were all these beautiful marble buildings and stuff, but the way people lived.

And try to go into a city like that and find one person. There's no white pages, you know, there's no email, there's no listings or directories or, you know, how do you find a Christian ministry, there's none of that. So who knows what Epiphraotes had to go through to track Paul down, but he did finally track him down, but in the process, he became deathly sick.

Maybe it was malaria or something like that, I mean, it seems like it was that kind of thing, because he was right on the edge of dying. And anyway, he finally finds Paul and he's coming there to bring a gift from the Philippians. God bless the Philippians, they were just loyal to Paul all the way through.

Anyway, they sent him not only to give him a financial gift, but also to render service to him, to just be a helper to him. So, one of the reasons Paul is writing to the Philippians is to thank them for the gift and to assure them, because apparently some misunderstanding has taken place, so he has to assure them that Epiphraotes, I can't pronounce that name right, Epiphroditus, had done exactly what they had asked him to do, and, you know, he held him in high regard and they should as well. And you see that in Philippians, him, you know, just sticking up for Epiphroditus.

So and also to mention that Timothy would be coming for a visit before long and that Paul hoped to be coming there to visit. I can't think of anywhere Paul would rather be than in Philippi, because those people just loved him and he loved them, you know. And also to deal with one small problem in the church.

There were a couple of women who had gotten into some kind of a squabble, walls had been built up and, you know, there were some issues. But here again, because of the problems, if you read Philippians 2, that glorious first half of that chapter where Paul is talking about the unity of the faith and have this mind

which was in Christ Jesus, praise the Lord for these two squabbling women, because Paul wrote those things to deal with that issue, and he mentions them by name later on in the book. But anyway, mostly Philippians is a positive letter.

You know, the main theme is the joy of the Lord, a word that's just mentioned over and over in the book of Philippians. But also he mentions Christ by various titles 51 times in 104 verses. So again, you know, Paul is constantly, I would like to say like we do here, at least we attempt to, constantly shifting the attention off of ourselves onto Jesus Christ, where it should be.

All right, so it's clear that he wrote this just before his trial. In fact, if you look at the first chapter, I'm going to read a few verses here, you can see, you get the sense that he's about to stand before Nero. Some would argue that he never had a trial, that he was just released and, you know, that's why Luke never mentions it in Acts, but we know that he did.

Why? Because an angel of the Lord had come to him when he was on his journey on the ship, remember, and told him, you will stand before Caesar. I don't think the angel would have been saying that if it didn't end up happening. So we know that he did stand before Nero.

All right, look at these verses, and I'm hoping they will take on new significance and new reality to you. Think now, you know, very shortly, he's going to be standing before Nero. Look at verse 21, for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

You know, that wasn't just highfalutin sounding preacher talk. He wasn't talking up here over his head or something. This was his reality.

He was very possibly facing death. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me, and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ.

Man, can you imagine? For that is very much better. Jesus was so real to him, but think to take away the veil of flesh, you know, the sinful nature, all the carnal life, and to be able to enter into that world, that realm where Jesus lives and dwells, and there is none of those issues. You know, that was real to Paul.

And he said to the Colossians, you know, a few months earlier, keep your minds above where Jesus is seated, remember? You know, it was very real to Paul, the heavenly realm. But anyway, verse 24, yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, and so on.

You know, so Paul saw that there was a good possibility that he could be put to death, but he was okay with that. You know, as far as from a selfish perspective, he's like, I'm ready. You know, I have fought the fight, as we would hear later, and he's ready to go and be with his wonderful, wonderful Savior.

But he knows the need. There is so much need in the body of Christ. There's just enemies coming from every direction, the Judaizers and other heretics now coming forth, and all the problems and squabbles, the pride, just all the issues that are starting to surface in the church, you know, across the empire.

He knows that they need him to stay, you know, on earth and to keep doing his best to influence all of them in the direction of the church. So anyway, Paul had reason to be concerned about Nero. Not only, I mean, let me say it this way.

At this point, Nero had not yet really gone south in his thinking, but he had already murdered his mother, he had murdered a couple of his wives. You know, he was capable of doing anything, and no one was standing. So you stand before this man, you don't know what's going to happen.

But on top of that, there was another issue. Nero had been married to a girl named Octavia, and somehow, you know, she fell out of favor or whatever, he got tired of her, and he met this girl named Poppea. And Poppea was very ambitious, and she wanted to take Octavia's place.

So she, you know, cuddles up to Nero and convinces him not only to divorce Octavia, but to have her killed. So she tells him, I want to see Octavia's head brought to me. And so that's what Nero did, he sent a couple of his guards out, maybe it was someone who had been, you know, sitting next to Paul during that two years, who knows.

One of those Praetorian guards went to where Octavia was, cut off her head, and brought it to Poppea. That's the way Nero was. But worse than that, Poppea had become a proselyte to Judaism.

And Josephus tells us that she had really used her position of influence to try to sway him towards having favor on the Jews. And so here is, you know, the Apostle Paul, the great enemy of the Jewish nation, about to stand trial before Nero, and he's got her in his ear right then at that time, when she's in her, you know, strongest point of influence in his life. So finally the day of trial arrives, and, you know, Paul enters this great, magnificent ornament, however you say it, hall, this magnificent temple, it had to be, not temple, but, you know, whatever you want to call it, palace or whatever.

And it's lined with dignitaries, it would be comparable to Billy Graham going before, you know, on trial, let's say, before Obama and Biden and the U.S. Congress. And he's got to defend his faith in front of that group of people, you know, all those intimidating leaders of the Roman Empire, except in this case, there's nothing to stop them from just having him tortured to death or whatever. You know, so that's what Paul's going into.

He goes in there in chains, probably chained to a guard. He's got it, he's probably, you know, somewhat ragged or whatever. I mean, definitely not dressed up.

And he shows up and there's Nero up on his throne and looking all whatever. But Paul looks at him and probably just with pity, because he sees what this man is. I mean, have you ever, you guys, especially you that have been involved following the Lord on a serious level for a period of time.

You look at some people, even though they may have an exalted position in earth, like we've had football players, baseball players. We've had, you know, doctors. I don't know how many doctors have come through here, lawyers, whatever.

But yet when you get into their life, you see what a mess and how weak their character is, how lacking, how empty. And you look at them with eyes of pity. You know, you're not intimidated by them as a person.

And, you know, so I'm sure that that's how Paul was. And because of the way that Paul composed himself and handled the situations in front of Festus and Felix and Agrippa and other situations, I just don't think that he would have done anything different with Nero. You know, I'm sure, even though we don't have an account of it, I'm sure he got in that place.

He sees the most powerful, influential man of the entire world sitting there in front of him. What do you think Paul's going to do? Shake and quiver? No way. He is full of passion.

He's fearless. He is going to pour out his heart. He's got one shot at it.

I remember, you know, this is no comparison in a certain way, but, you know, I stood on national television with the Oprah Winfrey show, and they're basically kind of throwing their criticisms at me. But man, it was my opportunity and I was not going to be stopped. And so, you know, I got to share my testimony to millions of people that day, however many years ago that was.

And, you know, so if I could do it, how much more would Paul do it? He would not be intimidated or back down when he was given an opportunity like that. So I'm sure he poured his heart out. Who knows, probably with tears and passion, just basically pleading with these men to humble themselves before God and repent of their sins and their idolatry, their wickedness, and, you know, turn their lives over to the Lord.

This must have seemed absolutely bizarre to these people, but I don't doubt that some of those people were affected and their lives changed that day. But not Nero. Nero turned away, rejected it, and from then on, it seems that his life went downhill.

Because then he started getting into increasingly more bizarre behavior. Chuck Smith believes that when Nero turned away from the truth that day, that Paul presented to him, that he became demon-possessed, you know, and I, yeah, I think he probably already was to some extent before that, but there was definitely a new opening for the enemy to come in and possess him, and I don't doubt that that's true. Anyway, a year later, in 64 AD is when that horrific persecution broke out in Rome against the Christians, and Nero started really giving over to the enemy that was lodged within him.

So you know that if Paul would have been there in 64 AD, he would have been the first one to go. So I don't know, you know, we'll talk about it next week, you'll have to come back next week and find out what happened to Paul, but he was probably elsewhere. So next week, what we're going to do is talk about that period of time after he was released that day, because, you know, even though Nero was being influenced by Poppe, and even though these Jewish accusers were trying to sway him to kill Paul, or whatever they were trying to do, God overruled the situation, because he was not yet ready for Paul to come home.

He had more work for him to do, and that's what we'll get into next week. Okay? So God bless you. We'll wrap up the book of Acts next week.

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