

Who was Aristarchus in the Bible?

Aristarchus, whose name means “best ruler” or “best prince,” was a fellow worker with the apostle Paul. He is first mentioned in the book of Acts during the riot in Ephesus. Both Gaius and Aristarchus, described as “Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia,” were seized by the angry mob (Acts 19:29). Paul’s preaching had upset Demetrius and other metalworkers who made idols of Artemis for a living (Acts 19:21-27). It seems the mob couldn’t find Paul, so they seized Paul’s fellow workers instead. Aristarchus and Gaius were in a precarious position until, two hours later, the city clerk was finally able to persuade the crowd to disperse.

Aristarchus is described as a Macedonian who lived in the capital city of Thessalonica (Acts 27:2). Nothing is known about Aristarchus’ background or how he became a Christian, although some commentators have suggested he could have been a Jewish convert to Christianity. In any case, Aristarchus was a faithful companion to Paul and accompanied the apostle on a few journeys. After the riot in Ephesus, Paul headed for Greece and decided to return through Macedonia after a stay of three months (Acts 20:1-3). Many men accompanied Paul on this journey back through Macedonia, including “Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica” and others (Acts 20:4).

Later, Aristarchus traveled with Paul on his initial voyage to Rome, although it is unknown whether Aristarchus journeyed all the way to Rome at that time (Acts 27:1-2). Paul later indicated in his letter to the Colossians that Aristarchus was with him at some time during his first Roman imprisonment: “Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, as does Mark, Barnabas’s cousin” (Colossians 4:10, HCSB).

The last time Aristarchus is mentioned in the Bible is in Paul’s short letter to

Philemon. In the greeting section of Paul's letter, he wrote, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers" (Philemon 1:23-24). Clearly, the apostle valued Aristarchus' work as his companion in Christ, as Aristarchus faithfully served the Lord.

Nothing is known of what became of Aristarchus; the Bible is silent about the rest of his life. Tradition places Aristarchus as bishop of Apamea, Syria, although nothing is mentioned in Scripture of this position. Aristarchus' martyrdom under the reign of Nero is also part of church tradition.

Although Scripture mentions Aristarchus only a few times, and his background and later life are unknown, we know that Aristarchus was a faithful follower of Christ and served alongside Paul. The few biblical references to Aristarchus remind Christians that a believer does not need to be "high-profile" in order to accomplish great things. We may not be very visible to others in serving Christ, but we are still seen and valued by the Lord (see Colossians 3:23-24).