

Why was Paul in prison?

Paul was in prison several times during his ministry, and, almost everywhere he went, there were people who wanted him in prison. It all began when Jesus confronted Saul the Pharisee on the road to Damascus and completely changed the course of Saul's life (Acts 9:1-20). God had chosen Saul, better known to most by his Roman name Paul, for a special mission: to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Romans 11:13; Galatians 2:8). Fulfilling this calling would mean enduring much suffering (Acts 9:16), including beatings, shipwreck, stonings, and arrests for simply preaching the gospel (2 Corinthians 11:24-27). We know of three times Paul was imprisoned. Given that Paul was active in ministry for thirty-five years, he certainly could have been arrested and imprisoned at other times as well. Paul's arrests were a result of his being faithful to God's call on his life, not of committing evil.

Paul's first recorded arrest took place in Philippi in Macedonia during his second missionary journey, sometime around AD 51. A demon-possessed slave girl kept following Paul and Silas and shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved" (Acts 16:17). The girl was disruptive and annoying, and finally Paul turned to her and commanded the demon to leave her. The girl's owners were furious that their source of income through soothsaying was gone, so they dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities and accused them of causing public riots. The magistrate, going against Roman law, had them beaten and thrown into prison without a trial (Acts 16:23-24).

But during this imprisonment, the Lord caused an earthquake. Paul's and Silas's chains came loose, and the prison doors swung open. When the jailer saw the doors open, he assumed the prisoners had escaped and, knowing he would be held responsible, drew out

his sword to kill himself. But Paul called out to him, assuring him that all of the prisoners were still there. The jailer was so overcome with gratitude that he took Paul and Silas into his home and tended their wounds. Paul spoke to him about Jesus, and the jailer and his entire household received Jesus as Lord and were baptized (Acts 16:31-34). Paul's first imprisonment resulted in glory for God and the salvation of many.

Paul's second recorded arrest, which took place in Jerusalem, was prophesied beforehand (Acts 21:11); even with the warning, Paul chose to continue toward the capital. James and the elders of the church in Jerusalem greeted him warmly. They also informed him of Jewish believers who thought Paul was teaching other Jews to reject their Jewish heritage. Hoping to demonstrate this was not true, and at the advice of the elders, Paul joined four men in their purification rights. This required a visit to the temple. But some non-believing Jews from Asia recognized Paul in the temple and stirred up the crowds against him, shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place" (Acts 21:28). None of this was true, but, nonetheless, the people rioted and tried to kill Paul. Paul was quickly arrested by the Romans and put in jail. This occurred sometime around AD 57.

The commander of the regiment in charge of Paul allowed him to speak to the crowd. Acts 22 records Paul's sermon, which included his own personal testimony of encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus. The crowd shouted for Paul's death (Acts 22:22). The Roman commander sent Paul to the barracks with orders that he be flogged and interrogated (Acts 22:24). Unbeknownst to the commander, Paul was a Roman citizen, and therefore it was illegal for him to be flogged without having been found guilty. On this

occasion, Paul spared himself a beating by bringing the fact of his Roman citizenship to the attention of a centurion. Alarmed, and still unsure why the Jews were accusing Paul, the commander decided to send Paul to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body (Acts 22:30).

The next day, Paul made his defense before the Sanhedrin, saying he was on trial for his hope in the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees held to the doctrine of resurrection, but the Sadducees did not; thus, Paul leveraged the disagreements within the Sanhedrin to defend his belief in the gospel (Acts 23:6-8). Some of the Pharisees rose to Paul's defense, and the ensuing dispute within the Sanhedrin became so violent that the Roman commander ordered Paul to be taken back to the barracks for his own safety. "The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome'" (Acts 23:11).

While Paul was in prison in Jerusalem, some of the Jews conspired to assassinate him, but the plot was discovered by Paul's nephew, who warned the Roman commander. Paul was then taken by night under heavy guard to Caesarea where his imprisonment continued. Paul soon stood trial before the governor Felix. Felix was seemingly convicted by the message of the gospel but responded in fear rather than repentance (Acts 24:25). Felix kept Paul in prison for two more years, hoping for Paul to offer a bribe (Acts 24:26). As a favor to the Jews, Felix left Paul in prison when he was succeeded by Porcius Festus around AD 59 (Acts 24:27).

In Jerusalem, the chief priests and Jewish leaders, who still hated Paul, presented their case against him before Festus and asked that Paul be transferred to Jerusalem. In reply, Festus invited some of the Jewish leaders to come to Caesarea where Paul was

being held. Another trial followed, but none of the charges could be proved. Festus wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, so he asked if Paul would go to Jerusalem to stand trial there. Paul refused, appealing to Caesar instead. Before Paul could be sent to Rome, King Agrippa arrived in Caesarea. Festus asked for Agrippa's advice, and Paul stood before Agrippa—another opportunity to share the gospel (Acts 26). Because Paul had appealed to Caesar, he was then sent on to Rome around AD 60 (Acts 27).

Although a prisoner in Rome, Paul was allowed to live in a house and receive care and provision from friends and family (Acts 28:30-31). He was under this house arrest for two years. Paul “welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” (Acts 28:31). It was during this house arrest that Paul wrote the books of Ephesians, Philemon, Colossians, and Philippians. Again, God did not waste His servant’s suffering but inspired Paul to write part of what would become our New Testament. Paul was released from this imprisonment sometime around AD 62.

Paul’s last arrest, which is not detailed in Acts, occurred somewhere around AD 66. Once again, he was held under Roman guard, but this time he was confined to a jail cell. From there, Paul penned his second letter to Timothy (2 Timothy 2:8-9). In the last of Paul’s “prison epistles,” his tone is weary, and he realizes the end of his earthly ministry is coming soon (2 Timothy 4:6-8). He encourages Timothy to keep the faith (2 Timothy 1:13; 2:2; 4:2) and to come to see him if at all possible (2 Timothy 4:9, 13). Paul was feeling lonely as many of his co-workers had gone elsewhere for ministry; at least one had even deserted Paul (2 Timothy 4:10-12, 16-18).

In prison, Paul wrote with hopeful confidence, “I have fought the good fight, I have

finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7-8). He claimed, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (2 Timothy 4:18). At the end of his third imprisonment, Paul was martyred by the Roman Empire. He was, indeed, brought safely to be with the Lord (Philippians 1:21-23; 2 Corinthians 5:8). No more would evil men attack him. He would never see a prison again.

Paul’s life after conversion is a picture of total devotion to the purposes and plans of God. His words in Galatians 2:20 explain how Paul viewed his life: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Paul could endure imprisonment as an innocent man because he counted his life as nothing (Acts 20:24; Philippians 3:7-10). Even though treated unjustly by the nation and people he loved, Paul continued to preach the gospel and used every opportunity to share the truth of Jesus, even with prison guards (Philippians 4:22).

Paul was in prison because people “loved darkness instead of light” (John 3:19) and they “suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Romans 1:18). Paul’s accusers did not want to hear the message of salvation, so they imprisoned and eventually killed the messenger. Jesus warned us that we should not be surprised when the world hates Christians because it hated Him first (John 15:18; 1 John 3:13). May we all embrace suffering for Christ with the grace and humility that the apostle Paul showed.