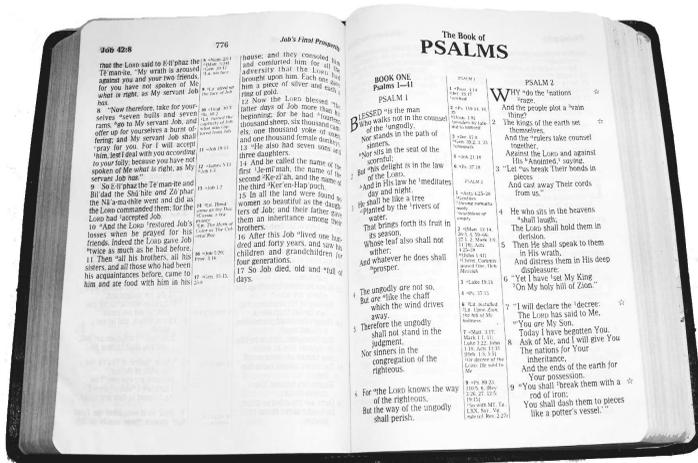


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



February 2022

Bible readings from Acts chapters 18 to 28

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I have many people in this city

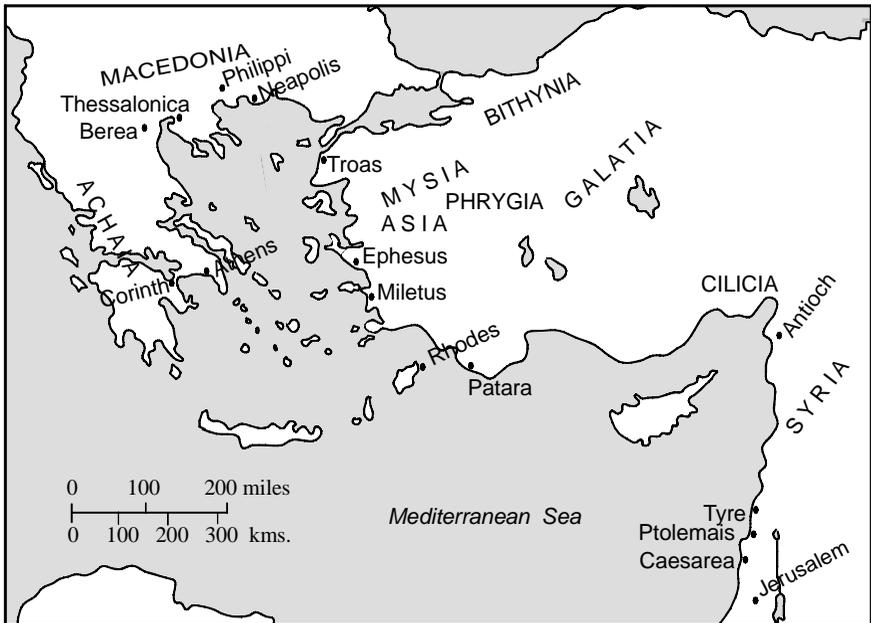
Paul left Athens, the cultural capital of Greece, for Corinth, the commercial capital (1). Corinth was 40 miles (64 kilometres) to the west of Athens and was located on a narrow strip of land which linked the province of Achaia with the rest of Greece. The city had become a very important trading centre and at the time of Paul's visit had a population of half a million people. Athens was full of idols but Corinth was full of immorality, and was notorious throughout the ancient world for its debauched and sleazy way of life.

Roman emperor, Claudius, had driven the Jews from Rome shortly before Paul arrived in Corinth in AD 51/52. Aquila and his wife Priscilla had been among those expelled but the Lord used this adverse circumstance to bring them into contact with Paul at Corinth (2–3). The couple were to become very close and special friends of Paul (Romans 16:3–5). Paul reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and after the arrival of Silas and Timothy from Macedonia, he testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. This led to strong opposition but Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and many other Corinthians were saved (6–8).

The Lord spoke to Paul in a vision at night, saying, *'Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you ... I have many people in this city'* (9–10). There were people, as yet not saved, marked out for salvation. God had choice vessels to pluck from Corinth's cesspool of wickedness (cp. 1 Corinthians 6:9–11: *'And such were some of you'*). Paul was encouraged and he remained in Corinth for eighteen months, teaching the Word of God (11).

The truth that God chose sinners to salvation before he made the world (Ephesians 12:3–7) has encouraged many preachers since Paul's day, among them great Christians such as John Calvin, David Brainerd, George Whitefield, William Carey and C.H. Spurgeon. We do not know who the elect are among those with whom we meet day by day. **Let us persevere in our evangelism, trusting that God has *'many people'* where we live, who are presently indifferent to the gospel.**

Paul's Third Missionary Journey (Acts 18:23 to 21:15)



1. Paul leaves Antioch for his third missionary journey, travelling to Galatia and Phrygia where he strengthens all the disciples (18:23).
2. He travels on to Ephesus, where he spends three years in evangelism and teaching (19:1–41 (cp. 20:31)).
3. Paul sends Timothy and Erastus into Macedonia (Acts 19:22).
4. Following the riot in Ephesus, Paul leaves to go to Macedonia (20:1–3).
5. After staying three months in Greece, Paul travels from Philippi to Troas (20:4–5).
6. Paul and his companions spend seven days in Troas, before leaving for Miletus (20:5–16).
7. After meeting the Ephesian church elders in Miletus, Paul sails for Tyre (20:17 to 21:3).
8. The apostle and his companions spend seven days in Tyre before boarding their ship for the last leg of their journey. They travel on to Ptolemais and Caesarea, and then to Jerusalem (21:4–15).

I will return again to you, God willing

Today's reading covers the final stage of Paul's second missionary journey and the beginning of his third. Jewish opposition to the preaching of the gospel had previously taken the form of stirring up mob violence or seeking to have the apostles punished by the civil magistrate. The Corinthian Jews went a step further. They went to the higher court of the provincial magistrate, accusing Paul of propagating a religion not allowed by Roman law. Gallio, the proconsul, concluded that Paul's message was a form of Judaism (which was protected by Roman law). He told Paul's accusers that he had no interest in intervening in a Jewish religious dispute, and he drove them out of the court. Following Gallio's snub to the Jews, the Gentile crowd assaulted Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, *but Gallio took no notice of these things* (12–17). God had told Paul in his vision that he was in sovereign control of his life to protect him (10). This is seen in the Gallio incident.

Paul left Corinth and set sail for Syria. Cenchrea is just a few miles from Corinth and while there, he took a vow and had his head shaved (18; cp. 21:23–24). Priscilla and Aquila were with the apostle on his journey and he left them at Ephesus. While there, Paul visited the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews who asked him to stay longer, but he did not consent. He was determined to be at Jerusalem for the *feast* (probably the Passover). He promised to return to them, *God willing* (19–21). **We must always have a submissive attitude to the will of God.** We ought to say, *'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that'* when making our plans (James 4:14–15; cp. 1 Corinthians 4:19; 16:7).

After Paul landed at Caesarea, he went up to greet the church (at Jerusalem) before going to his home church in Antioch. He spent some time there before beginning his third missionary journey. He visited the churches in Galatia and Phrygia to strengthen the disciples (22–23). Paul was not only a great missionary and evangelist. He also had the heart of a concerned pastor (cp. 2 Corinthians 11:28).

They took him aside

Aquila and his wife Priscilla were used by God to point Apollos to a clearer understanding of Christ and we can learn much from the way they dealt with this man. Apollos was an eloquent and fervent preacher, well-versed in the Old Testament Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord (the teaching of the Lord Jesus as known by the twelve disciples before the death and resurrection of Christ). He spoke and taught accurately the things he knew, though he only knew repentance and baptism as taught by John the Baptist (24–25). He did not know that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on believers nor of Christian baptism (cp. 19:1–7).

Aquila and Priscilla heard him preaching in the synagogue and recognised that his message lacked the gospel of Christ as taught by the apostles. They did not rudely accost him to put him right. *They took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately* (26). Apollos was convinced and later went to Corinth where he was used of God. There, *he greatly helped those who had believed through grace for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ* (24–28).

Apollos was probably helped as much by the kindness of Aquila and Priscilla as by their better understanding of Scripture. **We must not write off those who are untaught or ignorant, but seek to help them by being Christlike in our attitude towards them.** Thomas Scott (1747–1821) was the curate in John Newton’s neighbouring parish. He was opposed to Newton’s evangelical faith but was eventually won to Christ through Newton’s godliness and patience. Scott was soon preaching in Newton’s pulpit in Olney and he was used by God to write a commentary on the whole Bible. He tells his story in an autobiography, ‘THE FORCE OF TRUTH’ which is still available (published by Banner of Truth Trust). The great Baptist missionary, William Carey wrote of him, ‘If there be anything of the Word of God in my soul, I owe much of it to his preaching.’

Reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom

Paul travelled from Galatia and Phrygia and came to Ephesus where he was to remain for three years (20:31). He met twelve disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus. John had taught the people about the Holy Spirit (cp. Matthew 3:11) but these men were vague in their understanding about him. Paul told them about the Lord Jesus of whom John had spoken, and they were baptized in his name, receiving the Holy Spirit. Paul laid hands on them so that they received supernatural spiritual sign gifts (1–7). These signs were the evidence of apostolic ministry (2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3–4). They ceased with the passing of the apostles and are not available today.

About eighteen months had passed since the apostle had promised the Jews in Ephesus that he would return to them (18:19–21). He now returned to the synagogue, *and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God* (8). Some believed but others were hardened and Paul withdrew from them. He then reasoned every day for two years in the school (the lecture-room) of Tyrannus (9). Notice the word *‘reasoning’* in verses 8 and 9. **True Christian teaching does not by-pass the human mind. True preaching and teaching not only stirs the heart but also makes us think and it persuades us.**

The Word of the Lord was heard over all the province of Asia at this time (9–10). Paul’s method was to reason and to persuade from the Scriptures. He did not seek to communicate the gospel through drama (which was very popular in those days), but through the preaching of God’s Word. Let me ask you who are preachers, ‘How are you communicating truth to your hearers? How much persuasion is there in your preaching? Are you really concerned for the plight of those who are lost? Seek at all times, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the gospel with urgency and persuasion (cp. 2 Corinthians 5:11).’ Richard Baxter, the great 17th century pastor declared, ‘I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.’

So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed

Ephesus was the most important city in the Roman province of Asia (now western Turkey). It was a great trading centre and place of pilgrimage to the shrine of the goddess Diana. The city was also a centre of superstition and much occult activity. *God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul.* Handkerchiefs or aprons which had been in contact with his body were placed on the sick who were then healed or delivered from evil spirits (11–12). Some claim to do the same thing today to heal those who are sick, but their so-called ‘blessed cloths’ promote superstition and raise false hopes.

Some itinerant Jewish exorcists observed the power of the Lord Jesus when they heard Paul preach and cast out evil spirits. They took it upon themselves to use the name of Jesus in their exorcism. Seven sons of a Jewish chief priest were among these itinerant healers. They attempted to cast out a demon in the name of Jesus. This evil spirit knew of Jesus and his power and recognised that these men were not servants of Christ. The possessed man attacked the would-be exorcists and tore off their clothes and wounded them before they fled from the house. Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus were filled with fear and magnified the name of the Lord Jesus when they heard of this incident (13–17).

Many of the new believers in Ephesus confessed their past sins. Those who had been involved in occult practices brought their books which taught these evil things, to be burned (18–19). They were very valuable and could have been re-sold, but the only fit place for them was the bonfire. I remember visiting a new believer when I saw a statue of Buddha on his shelf. I pointed out that it must be destroyed, even though it had been given to him by his young son when he was interested in eastern religions. He destroyed the image after I left his house. We must not hold on to items associated with false religion or the occult when we come to faith in Christ! *So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed* (20). **Let us pray that God’s Word will grow mightily and prevail in our neighbourhood and throughout the rest of the world.**

There arose a great commotion about the Way

Paul planned to leave Ephesus and go to Greece, visiting churches in Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. He also desired to visit Rome after that. He sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia while he remained in the province of Asia (21–22). Ephesus, the centre of the worship of the fertility goddess Diana, was to witness a mighty advance of the gospel, which spread throughout the region. The temple dedicated to Diana (Greek name is ‘Artemis’) contained a meteorite which was revered as an image of the goddess which had been sent from heaven. The temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and was the largest building in the old Greek empire.

The Word of God prevailed over occult practices and idolatry (19, 26–27). Writing to the Corinthian church from Ephesus, Paul said, ‘*A great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries*’ (1 Corinthians 16:8–9). The success of the gospel threatened the livelihood of the Ephesian silversmiths who made and sold images of the goddess Diana. They instigated *a great commotion about the Way* (23). They stirred up a mob against Paul and they seized two of Paul’s companions. They chanted for two hours, ‘*Great is Diana of the Ephesians*’ (24–34).

Paul wanted to address the angry crowd but he heeded the pleading of his friends not to do so. The town clerk told the crowd that they would be in danger of having to account to the Roman authorities if they persisted in their disorderly conduct. He pointed out that if Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen had a case against anyone, they could pursue it through the courts of law and they dispersed peacefully (30–41).

The early Christians were known as belonging to ‘*the Way*’ (9,23; cp. 9:2; 24:22). They taught that there is only one way to God the Father – through the Lord Jesus Christ (4:12; cp. John 14:6; 1 Timothy 2:5). **All religions do not lead to God! To believe that they do is to be in spiritual darkness and great error.** No other gospel is acceptable (cp. Galatians 1:6–9). Let us be faithful in pointing people to the Lord Jesus.

He ... encouraged them with many words

After the uproar ceased, Paul travelled from Ephesus to visit the churches in Macedonia where he *encouraged them with many words* (1–2). He was concerned to strengthen them and to build them up in the faith (cp. 15:41; 18:23). Paul was more than a great evangelist; he was also a faithful pastor and teacher of the Word of God (27, 31–32). As we read of Paul's ministry, we will see that there is a repeated emphasis on the teaching of God's Word. We all need the *comfort* ('encouragement') of the *Scriptures* (Romans 15:4) but we must know our Bibles if we are to encourage ourselves and one another!

Paul then travelled south from Macedonia to Greece where he spent three months mainly at Corinth. While there, he wrote his letter to the Romans (cp. Romans 15:25–26). He changed his plan to sail from Corinth to Jerusalem because of a Jewish plot against him and returned through Macedonia to Troas (3–6). Paul had organised a collection for the poor Christians at Jerusalem and some of the men from the donating churches went with Paul to take their gift (24:17; Romans 15:25–27; 1 Corinthians 16:1–5). Luke, whom God inspired to write the Acts of the Apostles, joined Paul at Philippi (notice the word 'us' and 'we' (5–6).

The early church met on the first day of the week to worship God and to break bread, meeting around the Lord's Table. The early Christians called the first day of the week, 'The Lord's Day' (7; cp. 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10). **Do you love to gather with the people of God each Lord's Day in order to worship God and to hear his Word being preached?** Paul preached until midnight at Troas and a young man named Eutychus sank into a deep sleep during the meeting. He fell to his death from his precarious seat but Paul embraced his lifeless body to raise him from the dead. The happy church listened as Paul *talked a long while, even till daybreak* (8–12). He would have been encouraging them *with many words!*

Nor do I count my life dear to myself

Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost and did not have time to visit Ephesus (13–16). When he arrived at Miletus, he sent for the elders of the Ephesian church and reminded them of his life and ministry among them (17–36). We tend to think of the success of the apostle in planting many churches and of the thousands saved through his ministry but there was a price to pay. This faithful man had humbly served the Lord *with many tears and trials* through opposition to his ministry by unbelieving Jews (19).

The apostle had kept back nothing in his ministry that was helpful but had proclaimed it publicly and from house to house (20). He speaks of two vital elements in his preaching of which he had testified:

- *Repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ* (21). We are all sinners and sin is rebellion against God. True repentance involves sorrow for sin and confession to God. We cannot be saved unless we repent of our sin and trust in the Lord Jesus.
- *The gospel of the grace of God* (23–24). Grace is favour bestowed upon us that we do not deserve. The free and sovereign grace of God is a glorious theme. Let us proclaim it and rejoice in it.

Paul was full of foreboding about his visit to Jerusalem. He felt compelled to go there though the Holy Spirit had warned him that imprisonment and trouble lay ahead of him. He told the Ephesian elders, *‘But none of these things move me, nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy’* (24). Paul here describes the Christian life as a *‘race’* which he was determined to finish with joy (cp. 2 Timothy 4:7). He had a different set of values to the world around him. Not for him a half-hearted devotion to Christ! **He had sacrificed his own self-interests for those of his Lord and Saviour.** His main aim in life was to live for Christ (Philippians 1:21).

*May the mind of Christ my Saviour
Live in me from day to day,
By his love and power controlling
All I do and say.*

(Katie B. Wilkinson)

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock

Paul was able to testify to the Ephesian elders that he was innocent of the blood of all men because he had not *shunned to declare ... the whole counsel of God* (26–27). He had been fearless in his preaching and would never compromise his message to please men. If any of his hearers went to a Christless eternity, they could never blame Paul for not warning them of the consequences of rejecting the gospel.

Elders have an awesome responsibility to God for the well-being of every church member and they must give account for their souls (Hebrews 13:17). The Holy Spirit makes them overseers to shepherd the church of God. The apostle urged these elders, ‘*Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock*’ (28). Paul warned them that ‘*savage wolves*’ would come into the church to attack the flock (29; cp. Matthew 7:15–20). They must watch because some of their own number would depart from the truth and divide the church (30–31). **These are frightening warnings! If Satan could cause havoc in a church built on three years of Paul’s ministry, let us not imagine that we will be immune from the attacks of the devil.** Seek to be built up by the Word of God’s grace; it will help protect you from ‘*savage wolves*’ (32). Your pastor and church leaders are special targets for Satan’s attacks. How should you pray for them?

- That God will keep them pure in doctrine and life.
- That they will have God-given wisdom and discernment.
- That they will stand firm in the face of discouragement or temptation to compromise.

Paul reminded the elders of his own example among them and told them that they must support the weak, for the Lord Jesus had said, ‘*It is more blessed to give than to receive*’ (33–35). Have you discovered this to be true in your own experience, or are you more interested in taking than in giving? Paul knew that he would not see these men again and he knelt down and prayed with them all. There were many tears as they parted (25,37–38).

The will of the Lord be done

Paul loved to be with the Lord's people. His ship was delayed at Tyre while its cargo was being unloaded so he found believers in the port and stayed with them seven days (1–4). The children would never forget the time when they and their parents knelt on the shore and prayed with Paul and his companions before they departed (5–6). They then sailed to Ptolemais where they left the ship. They stayed with Christians at Ptolemais for one day, and arrived at Caesarea the following day, where they stayed with Philip the evangelist (7–8).

Do you seek out other believers when you are on holiday or away on business? Are you interested enough to learn about churches you visit so that you can encourage them and pray for them. You will need to find out what good churches there are in the area you are visiting before you leave home.

The Holy Spirit again warned Paul both at Tyre and at Caesarea that he would be arrested and imprisoned if he went to Jerusalem (4, 11). Was he disobeying God in his determination to go there? Such a thought is out of the question for Paul was always careful to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit (see 16:6–7; 20:22–23). The Christians at Caesarea wrongly interpreted the Spirit's warnings as a direction that he should not go to Jerusalem. He answered, *'What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus'* (12–13). He was so devoted to Christ that he was ready to die for him! He was sure that it was God's will for him to go to Jerusalem and this was later confirmed. God was leading him through Jerusalem to Rome (23:11).

Paul and the Christians at Caesarea were submissive to the will of God and said, *'The will of the Lord be done'* (14). **As we face the future with all its uncertainties and when faced with difficulties, let us always make our choices saying, 'The will of the Lord be done.'**

You see, brother

Some of the Christians from Caesarea went with Paul and his companions to Jerusalem where they were warmly received by the church. They met with James and the elders of the church the following day when Paul gave them a detailed report of God's blessing upon his ministry among the Gentiles (15–19). *They glorified the Lord* for all that he had done through the missionaries but they had reservations. They feared that Paul's work among the Gentiles could cause problems with legalistic Jewish Christians. They said, '*You see, brother*' and went on to explain their problem (20). Many thousands of Jews had embraced the Christian faith but had held on to their zeal for the ritual and ceremony associated with the law. These people had heard rumours that Paul was teaching Jewish Christians to forsake the law of Moses and all their cherished traditions (21). It does not appear that they had checked the reliability of these reports.

Paul's ministry had been greatly blessed by God and he had with him representatives from those churches consisting of Jewish and Gentile believers. They had brought with them gifts to support the poor Christians in Jerusalem having given at great cost to themselves (cp. 2 Corinthians 8:1–5). One can only wonder what they thought of the attitude of the Jerusalem church leaders towards Paul.

Paul was not given an opportunity to answer the malicious rumours, because the leadership of the church had already devised a plan for him to prove that he followed the rules and kept the law (24). James also made it clear that Gentile Christians should not have to observe such a practice (25). Paul himself had made it quite clear to the Galatians, that we are not justified by keeping the law, but by faith in Christ (Galatians 2:16). He was willing however, to forgo his liberty to win the Jews to Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19–22). He was a most gracious man and agreed to comply with their plan. **Some Christians have scruples that are based on a misunderstanding of Scripture. We must be gracious towards them but beware of allowing them to bring us into barrenness and bondage.**

Away with him!

Paul agreed to the request of the Jerusalem elders and submitted to Jewish purification ceremonies with four men from the church. From this time everything seemed to go wrong. The apostle was seen by some of his Jewish enemies from the province of Asia in the temple as he was ending his purification ritual. They wrongly assumed that he had taken Trophimus, a Gentile Christian, into the temple (which was out of bounds to Gentiles). They stirred up the crowd and he was dragged out of the temple (26–30). The angry mob set upon Paul and would have killed him but for the intervention of Roman soldiers who took him into custody. Paul was taken prisoner just as the Holy Spirit had warned, but the Lord was working out his purposes through these events.

There was such a commotion that the Roman commander could not ascertain the reason behind the attack on the apostle (31–38). The Jews were motivated by such hatred for Paul that they cried out, '*Away with him!*' (36). They were not prepared to listen to his message and some of them may have been among those who used similar words against the Lord Jesus, '*Away with him! Crucify him!*' (John 19:15).

If we behave like those Jews who attacked Paul and reject the Lord Jesus now, we should not be surprised when he rejects us on the great day of judgment. He will then say, '*Depart from me, you cursed into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels*' (Matthew 25:41). **There is no neutral ground with the gospel. We are either for Christ and the message of the gospel, or against.** Have you welcomed Christ into your life as your Saviour and Lord? If you have not, I urge you to do so now, before it is too late.

Paul asked the Roman commander, '*May I speak to you?*' The Roman agreed, asking the apostle if he was the Egyptian who had led an insurrection. Paul denied this, telling him that he was a Jew, a citizen from Tarsus. He then asked for permission to address the crowd and his request was granted (37–40).

Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized

Paul had been accused of being an enemy of the Jews (21:28) and he was determined to refute this lie. He was respectful towards them, addressing them as *'Brethren, and fathers'* (1). He spoke to the people in Hebrew and this helped calm them. Paul affirmed his own Jewish pedigree saying, *'I am indeed a Jew.'* He told them of his training in Jerusalem at the feet of the great teacher Gamaliel and of his own zeal in persecuting Christians (1–5).

What accounted for the change that transformed this zealous Jew who hated Christians, into someone who propagated the faith that he once so vehemently despised? Paul told them how the risen Lord Jesus Christ had met with him while he was on an errand of persecution and had turned his life around. He recalled how he had been struck with blindness by the blazing light from heaven and how he had heard the voice of the Lord Jesus. He then asked him, *'What shall I do, Lord?'* He then said that he had been told to go on to Damascus where he would be told what to do. He told them how Ananias who was highly respected by the Jewish community in Damascus had been sent to him by God (6–12).

Ananias had first prayed for him that he would receive his sight and went on to tell him how God had chosen him to *know his will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of his mouth.* Paul would be a witness to all that he had seen and heard (13–14).

Ananias then asked Paul, *'Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized'* (16). Though baptism is not essential to salvation, it is commanded by the Lord (2:38; Matthew 28:19). **Have you been baptized? If you love the Lord, you will gladly obey him.**

Paul related some details in his testimony which are not recorded in Acts chapter 9. Here, he spoke of his return to Jerusalem where he went into the temple to pray. The Lord told him, *'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning me'* (17–18).

And they listened to him until this word ...

Paul told the crowd how God had spoken to him when he was praying in the temple and told him to go to the Gentiles (17–21). The very mention of the fact that he, a Jew, had gone to the Gentiles, was enough to enrage the crowd: *And they listened to him until this word* (22). Those who are blinded by prejudice will not listen to sense and reason. We must not despair, however, for the Holy Spirit is able to bring fanatics to repentance; Paul himself was once a fanatic.

The Roman commander gave orders for Paul to be brought into the barracks to be scourged. He could not understand why the crowd were filled with such hatred for the apostle and hoped to elicit a confession of some wrongdoing from him. Scourging was a terrible punishment in which the victim was flayed with a multi-thonged whip. The thongs were knotted with pieces of metal or bone which tore apart the flesh of the victim. Paul rightly insisted on his rights as a Roman citizen who was not to be scourged without a fair trial and guilty verdict (25–29). It is important to understand that ‘turning the other cheek’ does not mean that we have to accept injustice when there are lawful processes that we are able to use to defend ourselves.

The commander’s attitude to Paul changed as soon as he found that the apostle was a Roman citizen and he was afraid because he had him bound with straps and was ready to scourge him (25, 29). He had paid a great price to purchase his citizenship but Paul had been a citizen from birth (28). **Roman citizenship carried great privileges but every Christian is far more privileged.** We are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20) and this citizenship has been purchased for us at great cost. The Lord Jesus gave his life on the cross to save us and to make us his own (1 Corinthians 6:20). We have access to his throne of grace to *obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4:16). Let us come to him and bring our needs with confidence. He loves us and he is not deaf to our cries!

Let us not fight against God

The Roman commander summoned the chief priests and the Sanhedrin (the ruling religious council) to come to him the next day to present their case against Paul (22:30). The Jewish historian Josephus observed that Ananias the high was a very wicked man. Paul began his defence, saying, *‘Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day’* (1). Ananias ordered those who stood by him to strike the apostle in the mouth which was contrary to the law (3). Paul warned Ananias that God would strike him because he (Ananias) was seeking to condemn him according to the law while breaking the law himself. (1–5). *‘Whitewashed wall’* was a way of describing a hypocrite. The tombs hewn in the rocky hillsides of Judea were often painted with whitewash on the outside. They glistened in the sun, but inside them were the rotting corpses of the dead.

When Paul stated, *‘I am a Pharisee’* (6), he was pointing out his orthodoxy as a Jew and his belief in the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees held strongly to this truth which was denied by the Sadducees. The two groups on the Sanhedrin then engaged in an unholy squabble in which the Pharisees expressed their support for Paul. The so-called religious council then behaved like a violent mob and the Romans again rescued Paul from his enemies (7–10).

The Pharisees on the council warned the high priest and his fellow-Sadducees, *‘Let us not fight against God’* (9). Paul’s words to Ananias, *‘God will strike you’* (3) proved to be prophetic. In AD 66, Ananias was assassinated by Jewish zealots because of his pro-Roman sympathies. When rulers *take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed* (the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ) *he who sits in the heavens shall laugh* (Psalm 2:2,4). ***If God is for us, who can be against us?*** (Romans 8:31).

The Lord stood by him

The Holy Spirit had repeatedly warned Paul on his third missionary journey *that chains and tribulations* awaited him (20:23). Why did God allow Paul to suffer so much? He not only allowed these things to come upon the apostle but also ordained them to happen (9:15–16). It is a mistake to imagine that God keeps bad things from happening to the believer. Paul was a great Christian but he was human. He would have felt the pressure and weariness of false accusation, riot and mob-violence and needed to be encouraged. The night following his rescue from the mob, *the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Be of good cheer, Paul’* (11). God promised that just as he had testified for him in Jerusalem, so he would also bear witness in Rome. **When we are under pressure, we must never forget that God is with us. He always stands by us and he will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).**

The next day, more than forty fanatical Jews vowed that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. They had devised a scheme in which the Roman commander would be asked to send Paul to the Sanhedrin for further questioning. They would then ambush him together with his escort and kill him (12–15). God has his own ways of protecting his servants. Paul’s nephew heard of the plot and reported it to him. When the commander heard the young man’s story, he wrote a letter to the Roman governor Felix and sent Paul away at 9 o’clock in the evening, protected by four hundred and seventy soldiers (16–23). Paul was escorted to Caesarea by the horsemen the next day. Paul was escorted to Caesarea by the horsemen the next day and they gave Felix the letter from Claudias Lysias. The Roman governor told Paul that he would hear his case when his accusers had come (31–35).

God used a young man to thwart the satanically inspired plot against Paul. *The Lord stood by him.* Christian, are you facing difficulties and pressures that are dragging you down? Do you feel that you are unable to cope? Remember, the Lord stands by **you**, and cast *all your care upon him, for he cares for you* (1 Peter 5:7).

A conscience without offence toward God and men

Ananias the high priest came to Caesarea with a delegation to give evidence against Paul before the Roman governor. Felix was a cruel tyrant but he would not have been convinced by the nauseating flattery of the orator Tertullus (1–4). The orator accused Paul of being the *ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes* and a troublemaker who had tried to desecrate the temple; he even accused the Roman commander Lysias, of *great violence* (5–7).

Paul's sincerity in answering his accusers vividly contrasted with their hypocrisy. He told Felix that he had come to Jerusalem twelve days earlier to worship God and to bring alms and offerings. The charges against him of profaning the temple or causing trouble were quite untrue. He had not disputed with anyone in the temple, nor was he guilty of inciting crowds in Jerusalem or in the synagogues. He challenged his accusers to prove their case against him; there had been no trouble in the temple until he had been seen by some Jews from Asia who had stirred up the crowd against him (10–18; see 21:27–30).

Paul did confess to worshipping God as a Christian, *according to the Way which they call a sect* and to his belief in *a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust* (14–15). Every person who has ever lived will be raised at the second coming of Christ to be judged by God. Paul ended his defence by saying that he was really being tried for his statement concerning the resurrection of the dead (21).

Paul stated, *'I myself always strive to have a conscience without offence toward God and men'* (16). Man's conscience has been affected by Adam's fall into sin; it can be hardened so that it does not trouble us when we sin (cp. 1 Timothy 4:2). Our consciences are purged when we are saved (Hebrews 9:14) but we must regulate them by the Word of God. **Let us always strive 'to have a conscience without offence toward God and men.'** **It is an evidence of true godliness.**

Felix was afraid

Felix now had *a more accurate knowledge of the Way* and he postponed making any decision about Paul until he had seen Lysias the commander but he allowed the apostle to have liberty and visits from his friends (22–23). The Roman governor was living in an adulterous relationship with Drusilla, the daughter of Herod Agrippa I (whom an angel of God had struck down in judgment; 12:23).

Paul did not water down his message when Felix later sent for him to hear more *concerning the faith in Christ* (24). *He reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come* with this wicked man. His powerful witness had such an effect, that *Felix was afraid* (25). Felix needed to know about a righteous God who was offended by his sin, and who would surely judge him.

The Roman answered Paul, *‘Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you.’* Though he was filled with fear, he sent for Paul and heard him often, but he was more interested in obtaining a bribe from Paul rather than obtaining peace with God (26). Though Felix knew Paul to be innocent, he left him captive, *wanting to do the Jews a favour* (27). this gesture did him no good at all. Secular historians inform us that Felix was recalled to Rome by the emperor Nero in AD 59 after the Jews had complained about Roman atrocities. He was disgraced and probably escaped execution through the influence of his brother Pallas, who was a favourite of Nero.

If your heart is not right in the sight of God, do not wait for a convenient time to come to Christ. The Lord may not grant you a convenient time. *Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation* (2 Corinthians 6:2). **Felix saw the gospel as bad news because it made him feel uncomfortable. For those who repent of their sin, however, the gospel is the most wonderful news, offering free forgiveness, peace with God, eternal life and everlasting joy!**

Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favour

Paul had been a prisoner for two years when Felix was recalled to Rome (24:27). He was succeeded by Porcius Festus. Three days after his arrival in Caesarea, the new governor went to Jerusalem to meet the leaders of the Jews (1–2). They sought to have Paul brought to Jerusalem with a view to standing trial but their real intention was to lie in wait and to kill Paul as he was escorted from Caesarea. Festus told them that they should first send representatives to Caesarea where they would be able to present their case against Paul (3–5).

Festus remained in Jerusalem for ten days before returning to Caesarea. He heard the charges against the apostle the day following his return. Paul's opponents laid many serious complaints against him which they were unable to prove (6–7). They repeated their charges of heresy, sacrilege and sedition which Paul strongly denied (8; cp. 24:5–6). Festus did not want to offend the Jews from the beginning of his rule. *Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favour*, asked Paul if he would be willing to go up to Jerusalem to be tried (9). He knew, and Paul knew, that they were unable to prove their case against him. Festus wanted to please the Jews in order to obtain their cooperation.

Paul knew his fellow-countrymen better than Festus. He was aware that they would attempt to kill him if he travelled to Jerusalem and he exercised his right as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar (9–11). This meant that he would have to go to Rome for the personal decision of the emperor upon his case. Paul should not have been obliged to resort to such an appeal because Festus knew that he was innocent (10).

Paul exercised the civil right that he was able to claim according to the laws of Rome. This principle applies to Christians in the 21st century though many believers are denied this and are ruthlessly persecuted in many lands. **We must not give in to the pressures put upon us by those who hate the Bible and its teaching.**

Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive

Herod Agrippa II was the son of Agrippa I, who had James, the brother of John, killed (12:1–2) and had himself so dramatically died at Caesarea (Acts 12:23). He was the great-grandson of Herod the Great who had sought to kill the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 2:13). He paid a courtesy visit to the new governor, accompanied by his sister Bernice (13); Drusilla, wife of Felix was their sister (24:24). Bernice lived with her brother after she was widowed and after the break-up of her second marriage.

Paul's appeal to Caesar left Festus with a problem. He was required under Roman law to send a written account of the charges against Paul, but he did not possess any convincing evidence. He enlisted the help of Agrippa who had an intimate knowledge of the Jewish faith and culture (26–27). Agrippa told Festus, *'I would like to hear the man myself'* and Festus readily agreed with his request (22). Gordon Keddie writes, that Festus had unwittingly set the stage *'for one of the greatest defences of the Christian faith the world has ever heard'* (ACTS – YOU ARE MY WITNESSES, page 397 (Welwyn Commentary Series).

The next day, Paul was to speak to his most distinguished audience – the governor, King Agrippa and his sister, high-ranking army officers and the most prominent men of Caesarea (23). They were sinners with the same spiritual needs as every other human being. Only the gospel which Paul proclaimed could meet their needs. Festus may have had problems in understanding the Jew's case against Paul but he was left in no doubt concerning Paul's message about Christ. *'Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive'* (19).

Paul spoke plainly so that unbelievers could clearly understand what he was saying. The message has not changed and God has not changed! Those we meet day by day are sinners who need to hear the gospel (see 1 Corinthians 15:1–4). **How great is our desire to tell them about our glorious Lord and Saviour?**

I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision

Paul addressed his distinguished audience and begged King Agrippa, who was an expert in Jewish affairs, to hear him patiently (1–3). He told them how he had been a strict Pharisee whose hatred for Christians had driven him on a mission of relentless persecution. He had set out to persecute the Christians in Damascus, having the authority of the chief priests (4–11).

Paul told Agrippa that as he approached Damascus at midday, a brighter light than the sun shone around him and his companions and he heard a voice from heaven speaking to him in Hebrew. The voice was that of Jesus, who then commissioned him to preach to both Jews and Gentiles, *‘to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive the forgiveness of sins’* (12–18).

He was able to say, *‘I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision’* (19). Paul could not remain silent about the great truths of the gospel. He was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. He had declared to Jews and Gentiles that they *should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance* (20). It was for these reasons that the Jews had seized him in the temple and had tried to kill him (21)

The risen Christ had appeared to Paul and had completely transformed his life. He fearlessly challenged Agrippa as he testified and asked him, *‘Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?’* (8). He again proclaimed that Jesus died and rose from the dead. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus is not a message to be reserved for Easter; it should be our constant theme and a source of great rejoicing.

Paul pointed out that the prophets and Moses (in the first five books of the Bible) had spoken of the Messiah who would suffer and rise from the dead and would proclaim light to both Jews and Gentiles (22–23). We have a glorious gospel to proclaim!

This thing was not done in a corner

Shortly before his death, Paul wrote to Timothy, ‘Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, for which I suffer trouble as an evil-doer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained’ (2 Timothy 2:8–9). The truth of these words is illustrated in our reading. Paul was a prisoner, but the Word of God flowed out of his mouth as he presented the gospel to the most distinguished company in the land (29).

Festus recognised that Paul was not a fool, but a very learned man. When he heard the apostle speak of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, however, he interrupted him. He said that *much learning* was driving Paul mad but God’s servant responded by stating that he spoke *the words of truth and reason* (24–25). Paul was not mad because Festus was having problems with the challenge of the gospel. He told the governor that King Agrippa was fully aware of the impact of the Christian message on many thousands of Jews who had heard it and had followed Christ. *This thing was not done in a corner* (26).

We are sometimes accused of being ignorant or stupid because we believe that the Bible is true, that God created the world in six days, that we are all sinners who need to be saved from coming judgment, that the Lord Jesus died to bear the punishment of sinners, and that he rose from the grave. The gospel is foolishness to the unbeliever, but *the foolishness of God is wiser than men* (1 Corinthians 1:23–25). The hearts of those who are lost are darkened and they are spiritually ignorant (Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:17–19). **Do not allow yourself to be intimidated into silence by scoffers, but speak words of truth and reason. Pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten them so that they will come to faith in Christ. Pray that God will be pleased to use your witness as you depend upon him.**

You almost persuade me to become a Christian

We are repeating yesterday's reading to focus upon the word 'persuade'. Paul was not put off by the scorn of Festus and he went on to challenge Agrippa, 'Do you believe in the prophets? I know that you do believe' (27). The king said, 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian' (28; The ESV is probably a better translation: 'In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?'). The apostle reasoned with Agrippa and sought to persuade him to come to Christ for salvation. Persuasion is essential in preaching and in witnessing. This concerns me very much because there are some whose 'preaching' lacks any element of persuasion. They ramble on while their hearers understandably wander in their thoughts. Others are very orthodox and ordered in their presentation; they have excellent material in their sermons, but they appear to be detached from their message and do little to persuade their hearers.

Our preaching and witnessing must be soaked in prayer, and come from a heart throbbing with love for God and for those who are lost, if we are to persuade unbelievers that our message is true and relevant (see notes on Acts 19:8–10). Paul was in chains, but he was more concerned for the salvation of his hearers than his own needs as a prisoner (29).

Agrippa's words, 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian' show that he obviously felt the strength of Paul's persuasion (28). He was not persuaded enough, however, to accept the cost of submitting to the lordship of Christ. He stood up and called a halt to the proceedings and later concluded that Paul had done nothing worthy of death or imprisonment (31–32).

I know of men and women who have attended church for many years and have heard good preachers but they remain in their sins. If you are not a Christian, I urge you to seek the Lord with all your heart. You can have no hope for the future if you do not enjoy peace with God. **It is not good enough to be almost persuaded! You must be fully persuaded and committed to Christ. Where do you stand?**

Take heart, men, for I believe God

Paul knew that God wanted him to go to Rome (24) and so did Satan, who did everything he could to frustrate God's purpose. The voyage was beset from the beginning by high winds and dangerous seas (4,7–10). The ship had left Fair Havens to sail to a sheltered port further along the coast of Crete (see map, page 27) and conditions appeared favourable at first (13). A terrifying storm arose soon afterwards, which became so severe that they were obliged to throw cargo overboard to lighten the ship. The storm continued for *many days* and any hope of survival was lost (14–20).

An angel visited Paul at night and assured him, telling him that he must be brought before Caesar and that God would preserve the lives of all who were sailing with him. Paul told of the angel's visit and of his message from God. He then said, '*Take heart, men, for I believe God.*' He reassured them that they would all survive when the ship ran *aground on a certain island* (20–25). Paul belonged to God and served him (23). **When we belong to God, no harm can come to us except by his permission. Even in the most distressing times, we know that nothing can separate us from his love (Romans 8:35–39).** Have you been beset by fear or anxious thoughts? Take those cares to God in prayer; he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).

The ship's crew were seeking to escape in the ship's skiff and Paul warned the centurion that this must be prevented and the sailor's plan was thwarted (30–32). Those on the ship had not eaten for fourteen days and Paul encouraged them to eat and *gave thanks to God* in their presence before they began to eat (33–36). Paul was a wonderful witness to all on the ship when they were terrified and without hope Satan was bent on Paul's destruction even after he survived the shipwreck. The soldiers wanted to kill all the prisoners (including Paul), to prevent any attempt to escape. The centurion, wanting to save Paul, rejected their plan, and ordered that all who could swim should jump overboard to reach land (42–43). **Never forget that the devil can only do what God permits him to do.**

He ... suffered no harm

Paul was no stranger to shipwreck, and peril had been his constant companion. He had written to the Corinthians more than ten years before this, ‘*Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and day I have been in the deep*’ (2 Corinthians 11:25–26). In all these dangers he knew the presence, encouragement and help of God.

The people of Malta showed *unusual kindness* to Paul and those who were shipwrecked with him (2). The bedraggled survivors received more help than they could have dared expect. Satan again sought to kill Paul through a snake-bite. The islanders thought that he must be a murderer and that justice had caught up with him, but they were amazed and thought he was a god when he *suffered no harm* (5–6).

Publius, one of the leaders of the people, also treated Paul and his companions kindly (7). The apostle prayed for his father who was healed of his fever and dysentery (8). We can be sure that Paul not only healed the sick, but also preached the gospel during his three month stay on the island (7–11). The people he met there would never be the same again!

Luke writes concerning the grateful people, *They honoured us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary* (10). It is interesting to note that Paul was quite happy to receive honour from the people. Jehovah’s Witnesses refuse to celebrate birthdays because ‘they exalt the creature, making him the centre of attention rather than the Creator.’ (‘THE TRUTH THAT LEADS TO ETERNAL LIFE’, page 146). What faulty reasoning! They would have had problems with Paul.

Satan will always seek to attack us if we are walking with God. Have you noticed this as you have read the book of Acts? Attacks, difficulties and suffering, but God always triumphs over the enemy of our souls. In Malta, Paul received *unusual kindness ... suffered no harm and was honoured ... in many ways*. **When God is for us and with us, what have we to fear (Hebrews 13:5–6)?**

When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage

The Romans escorting Paul and other prisoners spent three months in Malta before continuing their journey to Rome. They boarded a ship for Italy which landed at Syracuse in Sicily, staying there for three days. They then sailed north and reached Rhegium on the southern tip of Italy. They disembarked next day at Puteoli further along the west coast of Italy (11–13).

When he arrived in Italy, Paul and his companions *found brethren* at Puteoli. We saw in our reading from Acts 21:1–14 that Paul always sought out Christian fellowship on his travels. The centurion, Julius, continued to give Paul *liberty to go to his friends and receive care* (27:3), and the apostle was allowed to stay seven days with those Christians (14). When believers in Rome heard that Paul was heading for their city, some travelled the 43 miles (69 kilometres) to Appii Forum to meet him, others, the 33 miles (53 kilometres) to the Three Inns. The apostle knew many of the Christians in Rome, including Aquila and Priscilla who had worked with him (Romans 16:3–16). Though the Romans had good roads, they did not have the modern transport that we take so much for granted. Those believers were eager to see Paul and thought nothing of making the journey to see him. This token of love and concern was a great encouragement to the apostle. *When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage* (15).

All Christians need to be encouraged, even leaders like Paul! A thoughtful and kind deed, an encouraging letter, email or phone-call may mean very much to a hard-pressed believer. In what way do you seek to encourage others?

*Give me a faithful heart,
Likeness to thee,
That each departing day
Henceforth may see
Some work of love begun,
Some deed of kindness done,
Some wanderer sought and won,
Something for thee.* (Sylvanus O. Phelps)

Teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ

Paul was put under house arrest in Rome and three days after his arrival in Rome, Paul called the leaders of the Jews to meet him (17). He explained that though he was not guilty of any offence against the Jews or their customs, he had been treated as a criminal who should be put to death (18–19). He was in Rome because he had been compelled to appeal to Caesar. He was in chains *for the hope of Israel* (20; this is a reference to the Messiah; cp. Jeremiah 14:8). The hope of Israel does not lie in a future restoration of the nation to spiritual and political greatness, but in Christ, who alone saves from sins. In Christ, both Jew and Gentile are one; there is no difference; they both know a circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:28–29; Galatians 3:26–29). The church is *‘the Israel of God’* (Galatians 6:16).

The Jews in Rome were not aware of the charges against Paul but they arranged another meeting with him to hear about *this sect ... spoken against everywhere* (22). At this meeting, Paul *explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus ... from morning until evening*. Some were convinced but others did not believe (23–24). The apostle quoted from the prophet Isaiah to warn them about spiritual blindness and hardness of heart. He pointed out that salvation had been sent also to the Gentiles who were responding to the message of the gospel (25–29). However much God may be pleased to bless our witness, there will always be some who will reject the message of the gospel. We must persevere like Paul and never allow discouragement to silence us.

Paul was under house-arrest for two years, but he continued to serve the Lord, *preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ* (30–31; cp. Philippians 1:12–14). **He so loved Christ, he so loved people and wanted to win them to his Saviour, that he could not help but declare the gospel to sinners. Is it any wonder that God greatly blessed him and used him?**

After Acts chapter 28

Paul was imprisoned in his own rented house for two years (28:30). During this time (AD 60–62) he wrote his letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon and the Philippians. He was released from this imprisonment and was able to continue his missionary work for a year or two before being re-arrested.

William Hendriksen suggests in his commentary on 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus (pages 39–40) that after his release, Paul:–

- Journeyed to Asia Minor, leaving Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5).
- He then went to Colosse as planned (Philemon 22) and then to Ephesus, where he was joined by Timothy who had been at Philippi (Philippians 2:19–23).
- Paul left Timothy at Ephesus to go to Philippi as previously planned (Philippians 2:24; – though he was hoping to return to Ephesus; 1 Timothy 3:14–15). While in Philippi, Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy and also to Titus (approximately AD 63).
- He went from Philippi to Nicopolis to spend the winter and was joined there by Titus (Titus 3:12).
- He may have visited Asia Minor again and even Spain before his final imprisonment (cp. 2 Timothy 4:13; Romans 15:24). Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy from prison, shortly before he was executed.