

When we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

Three days later he called together the local leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, he said to them, “Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, yet I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. When they examined me, the Romans wanted to release me, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to the emperor—even though I had no charge to bring against my nation.

For this reason I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is for the sake of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.”

They replied, “We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken anything evil about you. But we would like to hear from you what you think, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”

After they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.

Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe. So they disagreed with each other; and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,

‘Go to this people and say, You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.’

Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”

He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

There are moments in life when you hear the word of God and you know it. It sometimes happens in sermons; but just sometimes.

There are times when you are in the presence of one who speaks the word of God; truth from the heart, out of experience, conviction, passion and wisdom. Moments like these are not forgotten (I have one to share with you from about 16 years ago now...) When was the last time that you knew you were in the midst of the presence of the Holy Spirit?

Moments like these are part of what make up Holy Scripture. The Bible is not just made up of miraculous events; healings, dramatic moments of travel and travail, but also

quieter times when the presence of God is made plain and people are aware that they are part of something much larger, greater, more powerful, more gracious and holy than themselves alone. Then the Spirit of God is present. It happened long ago and it still happens today.

Such is the case in our reading from Acts. It is not so much a travelogue or a dramatic event as it is a testimony to the quiet power and presence of God in the life of a small community of faith, one that defied all the odds against it.

There was no obstacle that could prevent the continued spread of the Gospel, or the mission of Paul, for that matter. Neither distance, nor storms, shipwrecks, snakebites or imprisonment could hinder the Word.

It seems that the Apostle Paul had a visit to Rome in his sights for some time. He was a traveling man, and this was a must-see destination, not for the sights, but for the importance the city held in the Roman Empire.

Rome was a city with more than a million residents. Beyond being the capital of the Empire, there were over 50,000 Jewish residents there, with synagogues too numerous to count. He traveled there with a clear mission and at his own expense.

He went there to appeal to Caesar, but his message reached far beyond the ears of the Emperor.

The story of Acts concludes around the year 62 AD, and the underlying backdrop is one of relative tolerance between the Empire and this new religion, the Way, or “Christ-followers”- ‘Christians.’ Our scene for today takes place during the somewhat peaceful reign of Emperor Claudius. This is not yet Nero’s Empire, when, following the huge fire that engulfed much of the city (most likely at Nero’s own instigation), persecution of Christians became blood sport. The point Luke tries to portray in this narrative is that Christianity and the ways of the Empire can be in conversation with each other peaceably, or at least not at severe conflict with one another. Paul is held captive in Rome, but is very lightly guarded, not chained to a wall in a dark dungeon.

He is allowed guests and visitors, those with inquiring minds who wish to hear more of both this “Jesus of Nazareth” who he met in a blinding vision, and the new Way that life could be lived and understood in light of “Christ’s” life.

This new ‘philosophy’ was attracting followers, and Paul was proving to be one of its most articulate defenders. To some he seemed to be preaching truth, to others, they heard nothing to attract them, and dismissed him. The brief passage from Isaiah cited here points to how Luke saw Paul as a light sent both to Gentiles and Jews, that they might accept Jesus as Messiah and Savior. That Paul acknowledges that more Gentiles will hear and listen than Jews is part of the legacy left behind by Luke, but there is more.

The last words of Acts are “with all boldness and without hindrance.” On the face of it, these words don’t make much sense, given the fact that Paul is held under house arrest, guarded by a Roman Centurion. On the other hand, it is clear that Luke has no reason to characterize Acts as a ‘Book of Martyrs,’ chronicling the deaths of all the disciples, one by one.

The apostle James, Jesus’ brother, had been executed in Palestine not long before, and it caused revolts in Jerusalem and sent shockwaves back to Rome.

James was a highly respected and beloved leader, recognized by Jews and Christians. Emperor Claudius may have exercised caution with this new potentially volatile religious prisoner, Paul, and allowed him to live for the sake of an awkward peace.

In all of this, Luke leaves us with an unfinished book and an unanswered question. What finally happened to Paul? We hear the end of the story with Paul holding forth under house arrest, teaching and proclaiming the word of God. But what happens next? What ever happened to Paul?

Don’t you want to know?

There are three prevailing theories about what finally happened to the Apostle Paul. Some say that he eventually travelled to Spain, as he had longed to do (he mentions this in his letter to the Romans, ch.15).

Some say that he was freed after his two years in captivity and traveled back to the churches he had founded, teaching, writing and leading a quiet life.

Most historians, though, say that he was caught up in the persecutions under Nero, beheaded after the fires of 64 AD, when Christians were cast as scapegoats of causing the fire. There are numerous legends about his death,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul the Apostle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_the_Apostle), "[San Paolo alle Tre Fontane](#)"

all which testify to Paul’s impassioned witness to Jesus as Lord and Savior, up to the end.

So it is Luke's editorial choice to leave us with this earlier scene of Paul holding forth, welcoming all, presiding over those who came to hear his message about God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

This is not the most dramatic of endings, but I think I know why Luke ended it this way. It's simply because this is how the church continues....

Rather than have Paul be a martyr, Luke remembers him as a teacher. Rather than Paul being just a memory, he remains a presence. Aware that there was a collection of Paul's letters circulating in churches near and far from Rome, Luke allowed Paul to live on, both with his letters and his written history of the good news in a way that he would continue to be able to 'host' his audience with his letters as he did those who visited him in Rome.

Paul could remain alive in the memory of the readers both as an author and as an enduring personal testimonial to the truth and meaning of God's word.

There are moments in life when you hear the word of God, and you know it.

There are times when you are in the presence of one who speaks the word of God; truth from the heart, out of experience, conviction, passion and wisdom. Moments like these are not forgotten. When do you last remember being in the presence of the Spirit of God? Here's a story I remember.

It was in early 2004; I don't remember the exact date, but it was still winter that I visited Ms. Mary Bell, the matriarch of Trinity Presbyterian Church, in Hendersonville, NC. This was about the same time I was about to receive a call from you here to be Pastor, and I knew I'd soon have to be telling those dear folks there that my time with them would be ending soon.

Mary Bell (she was never just "Mary," it was always Mary Bell, or formally, Mary Kellogg Bell) lived in a nice retirement center in town, in a simple four-room apartment. I had made an appointment with her and fully expected that she already knew what I had to tell her. (That's the way these things go, isn't it?) But that's not what she wanted to hear from me; she had something important to tell me.

So as I entered the room and sat down into a nice chair, she started, and she stared right through me. I was in my mid-40's, she was in her mid-80's, and she knew just what she was doing.

What she said was something very much like this: "It's been good to have you here with us, come down from the Nawth," (Mary Bell was born and raised in Georgia)... "but there are some things I must tell you before you are gone. My people did not always tell the truth, or live the truth, and they paid dearly for it."

She said this very matter-of-factly, with some urgency in her voice.

"You know who I mean." (I did know who she meant- it was about John Bell Hood, the famous Confederate commander who directed the battles of Atlanta and Nashville, to whom she was distantly related through marriage. She had spoken to me about him numerous times before. Theirs was a proud family with a sad legacy.) She said, "He was not a hero, he was a scoundrel. They all were. And I hope we've learned a lesson.... They said they fought for honor, but that was not true. That was a lie. They did not know what the truth was, and we suffered so for it.

We know the only one who told the truth; the only one who ever lived the truth, and who was the truth. It was Jesus. Follow Jesus. Do this and you will do well enough, by God and by others."

Mary Bell was preaching to me. It was not the first time, but it was the last. Whenever I think of Mary Bell, I see her staring right through me, and then 'presiding over the word.' And it's not so much her talking as it is the Spirit of God coming through her.

I wonder if you've ever experienced anything like that?... A moment in your life when you have been encountered, in person, by the living word, a host to the Gospel with words addressed just to you.

Have you?

Well, here it comes again... not just in words, but in actions...

What we do at this table and with this meal is sacred. It is telling Jesus' story over again, with more than words. It is taking Jesus' words to heart and making his words part of our lives. This meal embodies the truth of God's for us now and always. It is bigger than us, more gracious than we are, and extends farther into time and space than we are aware. Yet here and now we encounter God, receiving a blessing in our lives unmatched by

**anything else we ever experience. And for this we give thanks to God, in Jesus' name.
Amen.**