

Survey of Biblical History – Part 1: Creation to Christ

#26 – THE END OF THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

Paul's First Roman Imprisonment (Acts 28:17-31 - AD 60-62)

Paul spent 2 years under house arrest in his own rented quarters. When he first arrived he called for the Jewish leaders in Rome to explain why he was there, using the opportunity to preach the gospel. Paul received many visitors during his imprisonment who kept him informed of what was happening in the churches he planted. He wrote four letters during this time, including Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and a personal letter to Philemon a slave owner whose slave Onesimus had run away but came to Christ through Paul's preaching. Paul urged Philemon to be reconciled to him. It appears Paul was released and the charges before Caesar were dropped against him (Phil. 1:19, 25, 26). This likely meant Christianity now enjoyed legal status in the Roman Empire and was no longer regarded as a sect of Judaism.

Paul's Ministry is Completed (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus - AD 63-67)

After Paul's release he continued to travel, strengthening existing churches and planting others. Since Luke ends his account in Acts abruptly, we are less certain of when and where he traveled. He intended to travel to Spain, but it appears this never happened. 1 Timothy was written while Paul was in Macedonia. He left the young pastor Timothy to lead the Ephesian church which struggled with doctrinal issues and the need for leadership. Timothy was to be involved in raising up elders and deacons. Paul and Titus, another protégé, ministered together on the island of Crete sometime after Paul's release from prison. Paul wrote Titus the same time he wrote 1 Timothy. It deals with the same issues. The churches on Crete needed leadership and Titus is instructed to appoint elders. However, Paul was eventually arrested again and went back to Rome (2 Tim. 1:8, 17). We do not know why he was arrested, but it was likely tied to rising persecution under the Emperor Nero. Since Paul was a crucial leader of Christianity, he was a primary target. Paul's first Roman imprisonment was a house arrest where he was allowed some freedom. Paul's second imprisonment involved being chained in a cold dungeon (2 Tim. 1:16; 2:9; 4:13) and he anticipated being executed (2 Tim. 4:6). Paul wrote his last letter, 2 Timothy, from here asking Timothy to come to him as quickly as possible. Whether Timothy made it or not is unclear. Early Church tradition indicates that Paul was martyred by Nero around AD 67 along with Peter.

The Neronian Persecution (AD 64-68)

1. The Final Years of Peter (1 & 2 Peter)

Peter traveled almost as widely as Paul did in his final years of ministry, but we have little information on when and where. It appears that Peter was in Rome shortly after it burned in AD 64. The Romans believed Nero set the city on fire for sinister purposes and Nero later blamed the fire on Christians. This effectively deflected criticism of himself since Christians were already despised by the Romans. This led to an unprecedented outbreak of persecution for the Church. Peter wrote 1 Peter in response to this outbreak of persecution which affected believers beyond Rome in Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia Minor and Bithynia (1 Pet. 1:1). In order to keep his location a secret Peter referred to Rome with the code-word Babylon (5:13). A short time later, it seems that Peter was in Rome again, but this time imprisoned as was Paul and facing his execution. He appears to have written 2 Peter at this time, warning the churches of Asia Minor of false teachers. According to early Church tradition, Peter and his wife were martyred by Nero at roughly the same time Paul was. Peter reportedly watched as his wife was crucified calling out to her, "Remember the Lord." Peter requested to be crucified upside down, believing that he was not worthy to be crucified upright as his Lord was.

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2. The Jewish Revolt (Hebrews & Jude - AD 66-70)

Nero committed suicide in AD 68, but persecution continued for a while longer. Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish believers who were contemplating abandoning Christianity and returning to their roots in Judaism to avoid further persecution. Evidence suggests it was written to believers in Rome (Heb. 13:24), perhaps after Peter and Paul had been martyred. The author had connections with Paul as Timothy is mentioned (13:23) who himself was imprisoned at this time, but not when Paul was martyred (see 2 Timothy). However, the letter was written before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Another one of Jesus' earthly brothers, Jude, wrote his epistle during this time. Jude's letter deals with the same problem of false teachers that 2 Peter did and even quotes from that letter (Jude 1:17-18; cf. 2 Pet. 3:3). The whole period between AD 66 and 70 was a turbulent time, known as the first Jewish Revolt. Political mistakes by Palestinian governors began escalating and resulted in organized resistance to Roman rule. Then the Jewish leadership sought to install a revolutionary government. Nero sent Vespasian to quell the revolt until Nero's death. Afterwards, he retreated given political uncertainty regarding Nero's successor. Through political intrigue, Vespasian became the new Emperor. He then left his leading general, Titus to finish the job of quelling the Jewish revolt. In August of AD 70 the city of Jerusalem fell including the destruction of the temple which has never been rebuilt. The last of the rebels regrouped in the mesa-top fortress of Masada, holding out for 3 years and committing mass suicide just before the Romans completed their siege.

The Last Apostle - John (AD 70-96)

The ministry of the other apostles is unclear in the latter years of the 1st century before their deaths, except for one, the Apostle John. John's brother James was the first Apostle to die, John was the last. His ministry marks the end of the Apostolic era of the Church and of New Testament revelation.

1. John's Ministry in Ephesus (1,2,3 John - AD 90-95)

Tradition indicates that John lived in Ephesus in his later years and wrote his 3 epistles from there around AD 90-95 to other believers in Asia Minor where he exercised Apostolic oversight. During this time John was fighting a new heresy that eventually developed into Gnosticism (from the Greek word for knowledge). Gnosticism believed that salvation or enlightenment was gained through access to special or secret knowledge that only a few could attain. They emphasized spiritual realities over material substance, believing the latter to be evil.

2. John's Visions on Patmos (Revelation - AD 94-96)

John wrote Revelation toward the end of Domitian's reign as the Roman emperor (AD 81-96). Domitian instigated an organized persecution against Christendom that was unprecedented. Nero's persecution was limited to a few areas and not nearly as widespread as Domitian's. John's influence in Asia Minor led authorities to exile him to the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea about 75 miles southwest of Ephesus. There he received a series of remarkable visions that laid out details of the culmination of God's plan for history. Although the book is mostly prophetic in nature, it served as a letter to 7 churches in Asia Minor that John would have had oversight for. They were Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (each ordered in a clockwise postal circuit geographically). John received and recorded the visions all in one day ("Lord's day" [Sunday] - 1:10). After the death of Domitian, John returned to Ephesus where it is said that he was carried to church meetings in his extreme old age and constantly repeating for all to hear, "Little children, love one another." He died sometime around the turn of the century which ended the Apostolic Age of Christianity and setting it on a course to shape subsequent history.