



Lesson 43b – Paul and Nero

What is written below is well agreed upon by Biblical Scholars of every flavor although there is nothing solid to point to as to what happened between Paul's first trial before Nero and Paul's death decree after a second trial. What is below is what can be found in the book Acts of the Apostles by Mrs. Ellen White.

At Liberty

While Paul's labors in Rome were being blessed to the conversion of many souls and the strengthening and encouragement of the believers, clouds were gathering that threatened not only his own safety, but also the prosperity of the church. On his arrival in Rome he had been placed in charge of the captain of the imperial guards, a man of justice and integrity, by whose clemency he was left comparatively free to pursue the work of the gospel. But before the close of the two years' imprisonment, this man was replaced by an official from whom the apostle could expect no special favor.

The Jews were now more active than ever in their efforts against Paul, and they found an able helper in the profligate woman whom Nero had made his second wife, and who, being a Jewish proselyte, lent all her influence to aid their murderous designs against the champion of Christianity.

Paul could hope for little justice from the Caesar to whom he had appealed. Nero was more debased in morals, more frivolous in character, and at the same time capable of more atrocious cruelty, than any ruler who had preceded him. The reins of government could not have been entrusted to a more despotic ruler. The first year of his reign had been marked by the poisoning of his young stepbrother, the rightful heir to the throne. From one depth of vice and crime to another, Nero had descended, until he had murdered his own mother, and then his wife. There was no atrocity which he would not perpetrate, no vile act to which he would not stoop. In every noble mind he inspired only abhorrence and contempt.

The details of the iniquity practiced in his court are too degrading, too horrible, for description. His abandoned wickedness created disgust and loathing, even in many who were forced to share his crimes. They were in constant fear as to what enormities he would suggest next. Yet even such crimes as Nero's did not shake the allegiance of his subjects. He was acknowledged as the absolute ruler of the whole civilized world. More than this, he was made the recipient of divine honors and was worshiped as a god.

From the viewpoint of human judgment, Paul's condemnation before such a judge was certain. But the apostle felt that so long as he was loyal to God, he had nothing to fear. The One who in the past had been his protector could shield him still from the malice of the Jews and from the power of Caesar.

And God did shield His servant. At Paul's examination the charges against him were not sustained, and, contrary to the general expectation, and with a regard for justice wholly at variance with his character, Nero declared the prisoner guiltless. Paul's bonds were removed; he was again a free man.

Had his trial been longer deferred, or had he from any cause been detained in Rome until the following year, he would doubtless have perished in the persecution which then took place. During Paul's imprisonment the converts to Christianity had become so numerous as to attract the attention and arouse the enmity of the authorities. The anger of the emperor was especially excited by the conversion



of members of his own household, and he soon found a pretext to make the Christians the objects of his merciless cruelty.

About this time a terrible fire occurred in Rome by which nearly one half of the city was burned. Nero himself, it was rumored, had caused the flames to be kindled, but to avert suspicion he made a pretense of great generosity by assisting the homeless and destitute. He was, however, accused of the crime. The people were excited and enraged, and in order to clear himself, and also to rid the city of a class whom he feared and hated, Nero turned the accusation upon the Christians. His device succeeded, and thousands of the followers of Christ—men, women, and children—were cruelly put to death.

From this terrible persecution Paul was spared, for soon after his release he had left Rome. This last interval of freedom he diligently improved in laboring among the churches. He sought to establish a firmer union between the Greek and the Eastern churches and to fortify the minds of the believers against the false doctrines that were creeping in to corrupt the faith.

The trials and anxieties that Paul had endured had preyed upon his physical powers. The infirmities of age were upon him. He felt that he was now doing his last work, and, as the time of his labor grew shorter, his efforts became more intense. There seemed to be no limit to his zeal. Resolute in purpose, prompt in action, strong in faith, he journeyed from church to church, in many lands, and sought by every means within his power to strengthen the hands of the believers, that they might do faithful work in winning souls to Jesus, and that in the trying times upon which they were even then entering, they might remain steadfast to the gospel, bearing faithful witness for Christ.

The Final Arrest

Paul's work among the churches after his acquittal at Rome, could not escape the observation of his enemies. Since the beginning of the persecution under Nero the Christians had everywhere been a proscribed sect. After a time the unbelieving Jews conceived the idea of fastening upon Paul the crime of instigating the burning of Rome. Not one of them thought for a moment that he was guilty; but they knew that such a charge, made with the faintest show of plausibility, would seal his doom. Through their efforts, Paul was again arrested, and hurried away to his final imprisonment.

On his second voyage to Rome, Paul was accompanied by several of his former companions; others earnestly desired to share his lot, but he refused to permit them thus to imperil their lives. The prospect before him was far less favorable than at the time of his former imprisonment. The persecution under Nero had greatly lessened the number of Christians in Rome. Thousands had been martyred for their faith, many had left the city, and those who remained were greatly depressed and intimidated.

Upon his arrival at Rome, Paul was placed in a gloomy dungeon, there to remain until his course should be finished. Accused of instigating one of the basest and most terrible of crimes against the city and the nation, he was the object of universal execration.

The few friends who had shared the burdens of the apostle, now began to leave him, some by desertion, and others on missions to the various churches. Phygellus and Hermogenes were the first to go. Then Demas, dismayed by the thickening clouds of difficulty and danger, forsook the persecuted apostle. Crescens was sent by Paul to the churches of Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia, Tychicus to Ephesus. Writing to Timothy of this experience, Paul said, "Only Luke is with me." 2 Timothy 4:11. Never had the apostle needed the ministrations of his brethren as now, enfeebled as he was by age, toil, and infirmities, and



confined in the damp, dark vaults of a Roman prison. The services of Luke, the beloved disciple and faithful friend, were a great comfort to Paul and enabled him to communicate with his brethren and the world without.

In this trying time Paul's heart was cheered by frequent visits from Onesiphorus. This warmhearted Ephesian did all in his power to lighten the burden of the apostle's imprisonment. His beloved teacher was in bonds for the truth's sake, while he himself went free, and he spared himself no effort to make Paul's lot more bearable.

In the last letter that the apostle ever wrote, he speaks thus of this faithful disciple: "The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain; but, when he was in Rome, he sought me out very diligently, and found me. The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day." 2 Timothy 1:16-18.

The desire for love and sympathy is implanted in the heart by God Himself. Christ, in His hour of agony in Gethsemane, longed for the sympathy of His disciples. And Paul, though apparently indifferent to hardship and suffering, yearned for sympathy and companionship. The visit of Onesiphorus, testifying to his fidelity at a time of loneliness and desertion, brought gladness and cheer to one who had spent his life in service for others.

Paul Before Nero

When Paul was summoned to appear before the emperor Nero for trial, it was with the near prospect of certain death. The serious nature of the crime charged against him, and the prevailing animosity toward Christians, left little ground for hope of a favorable issue.

Among the Greeks and Romans it was customary to allow an accused person the privilege of employing an advocate to plead in his behalf before courts of justice. By force of argument, by impassioned eloquence, or by entreaties, prayers, and tears, such an advocate often secured a decision in favor of the prisoner or, failing in this, succeeded in mitigating the severity of the sentence. But when Paul was summoned before Nero, no man ventured to act as his counsel or advocate; no friend was at hand even to preserve a record of the charges brought against him, or of the arguments that he urged in his own defense. Among the Christians at Rome there was not one who came forward to stand by him in that trying hour.

The only reliable record of the occasion is given by Paul himself, in his second letter to Timothy. "At my first answer," the apostle wrote, "no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion." 2 Timothy 4:16, 17.

Paul before Nero—how striking the contrast! The haughty monarch before whom the man of God was to answer for his faith, had reached the height of earthly power, authority, and wealth, as well as the lowest depths of crime and iniquity. In power and greatness he stood unrivaled. There were none to question his authority, none to resist his will. Kings laid their crowns at his feet. Powerful armies marched at his command, and the ensigns of his navies betokened victory. His statue was set up in the halls of justice, and the decrees of senators and the decisions of judges were but the echo of his will.



Millions bowed in obedience to his mandates. The name of Nero made the world tremble. To incur his displeasure was to lose property, liberty, life; and his frown was more to be dreaded than a pestilence.

Without money, without friends, without counsel, the aged prisoner stood before Nero—the countenance of the emperor bearing the shameful record of the passions that raged within; the face of the accused telling of a heart at peace with God. Paul’s experience had been one of poverty, self-denial, and suffering. Notwithstanding constant misrepresentation, reproach, and abuse, by which his enemies had endeavored to intimidate him, he had fearlessly held aloft the standard of the cross. Like his Master, he had been a homeless wanderer, and like Him, he had lived to bless humanity. How could Nero, a capricious, passionate, licentious tyrant, understand or appreciate the character and motives of this son of God?

The vast hall was thronged by an eager, restless crowd that surged and pressed to the front to see and hear all that should take place. The high and the low were there, the rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, the proud and the humble, all alike destitute of a true knowledge of the way of life and salvation.

The Jews brought against Paul the old charges of sedition and heresy, and both Jews and Romans accused him of instigating the burning of the city. While these accusations were urged against him, Paul preserved an unbroken serenity. The people and the judges looked at him in surprise. They had been present at many trials and had looked upon many a criminal, but never had they seen a man wear a look of such holy calmness as did the prisoner before them. The keen eyes of the judges, accustomed to read the countenances of prisoners, searched Paul’s face in vain for some evidence of guilt. When he was permitted to speak in his own behalf, all listened with eager interest.

Once more Paul has an opportunity to uplift before a wondering multitude the banner of the cross. As he gazes upon the throng before him,—Jews, Greeks, Romans, with strangers from many lands,—his soul is stirred with an intense desire for their salvation. He loses sight of the occasion, of the perils surrounding him, of the terrible fate that seems so near. He sees only Jesus, the Intercessor, pleading before God in behalf of sinful men. With more than human eloquence and power, Paul presents the truths of the gospel. He points his hearers to the sacrifice made for the fallen race. He declares that an infinite price has been paid for man’s redemption. Provision has been made for him to share the throne of God. By angel messengers, earth is connected with heaven, and all the deeds of men, whether good or evil, are open to the eye of Infinite Justice.

Thus pleads the advocate of truth. Faithful among the faithless, loyal among the disloyal, he stands as God’s representative, and his voice is as a voice from heaven. There is no fear, no sadness, no discouragement in word or look. Strong in a consciousness of innocence, clothed in the panoply of truth, he rejoices that he is a son of God. His words are as a shout of victory above the roar of battle. He declares the cause to which he has devoted his life, to be the only cause that can never fail. Though he may perish, the gospel will not perish. God lives, and His truth will triumph.

Many who that day looked upon him “saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.” Acts 6:15.

Never before had that company listened to words like these. They struck a cord that vibrated in the hearts of even the most hardened. Truth, clear and convincing, overthrew error. Light shone into the minds of many who afterward gladly followed its rays. The truths spoken on that day were destined to



shake nations and to live through all time, influencing the hearts of men when the lips that had uttered them should be silent in a martyr's grave.

Never before had Nero heard the truth as he heard it on this occasion. Never before had the enormous guilt of his own life been so revealed to him. The light of heaven pierced the sin-polluted chambers of his soul, and he trembled with terror at the thought of a tribunal before which he, the ruler of the world, would finally be arraigned, and his deeds receive their just award. He feared the apostle's God, and he dared not pass sentence upon Paul, against whom no accusation had been sustained. A sense of awe restrained for a time his bloodthirsty spirit.

For a moment, heaven was opened to the guilty and hardened Nero, and its peace and purity seemed desirable. That moment the invitation of mercy was extended even to him. But only for a moment was the thought of pardon welcomed. Then the command was issued that Paul be taken back to his dungeon; and as the door closed upon the messenger of God, the door of repentance closed forever against the emperor of Rome. No ray of light from heaven was ever again to penetrate the darkness that enveloped him. Soon he was to suffer the retributive judgments of God.

Not long after this, Nero sailed on his infamous expedition to Greece, where he disgraced himself and his kingdom by contemptible and debasing frivolity. Returning to Rome with great pomp, he surrounded himself with his courtiers and engaged in scenes of revolting debauchery. In the midst of this revelry a voice of tumult in the streets was heard. A messenger dispatched to learn the cause, returned with the appalling news that Galba, at the head of an army, was marching rapidly upon Rome, that insurrection had already broken out in the city, and that the streets were filled with an enraged mob, which, threatening death to the emperor and all his supporters, was rapidly approaching the palace.

In this time of peril, Nero had not, like the faithful Paul, a powerful and compassionate God on whom to rely. Fearful of the suffering and possible torture he might be compelled to endure at the hands of the mob, the wretched tyrant thought to end his life by his own hand, but at the critical moment his courage failed. Completely unmanned, he fled ignominiously from the city and sought shelter at a countryseat a few miles distant, but to no avail. His hiding place was soon discovered, and as the pursuing horsemen drew near, he summoned a slave to his aid and inflicted on himself a mortal wound. Thus perished the tyrant Nero, at the early age of thirty-two.