

Lecture 3: Nero's Fire, the Deaths of Peter and Paul, and the Last Apostle

Dr. Nathan Busenitz · The Master's Seminary · 74 minutes

This lecture carries the first century to its close: how Paul's letters grew out of real journeys to real churches, why the prophecy of Agabus was not wrong, what Nero's fire changed for every Christian in the empire, how Peter and Paul died, and how the aged apostle John anchored the churches of Asia Minor to the very edge of the second century. The next generation of leaders will be his disciples.

STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01

Letters written into real history

Paul's epistles are not abstract theology dropped from the sky; they are personal letters from a pastor to churches he had planted, suffered for, and kept revisiting, with Colossians the one exception among churches he had not yet seen. Ephesians may even have been a circular letter, possibly the letter to the Laodiceans mentioned in Colossians. Reading each letter inside the history of Acts, Busenitz argues, is what makes the preacher's exposition live.

02

Mars Hill as a pattern for pagan audiences

In Athens, Paul models evangelism to hearers with no Scripture background, moving the way Romans 1 and 2 move: from God the Creator and the witness of conscience, general revelation, to the special revelation of the gospel, always arriving at Christ crucified and risen.

03

The third journey and the Ephesus years

The journeys begin and end at Antioch, the sending church. Apollos, mighty in the Old Testament Scriptures, becomes so influential at Corinth that a faction claims his name; church tradition has him later returning at Paul's direction and pastoring Corinth for decades. In Ephesus the gospel so damaged the idol trade that Demetrius the silversmith raised a riot, the gates of Hades being pushed back in the marketplace itself; Alexander the coppersmith of 2 Timothy 4 may have carried the same economic grudge.

04

Agabus was not wrong

At Caesarea, Agabus bound his own hands and said, thus says the Holy Spirit, the Jews will bind the man who owns this belt. Some modern writers claim the details failed, since Romans arrested Paul with chains, and build a case for fallible New Testament prophecy on this one text. Busenitz answers from Paul's own retellings: before Agrippa he says the Jews seized him, and in Rome he says he was delivered from Jerusalem into Roman hands. The mob bound him first; the Romans rescued him. No one in nineteen centuries accused Agabus of error, and prophecy that quotes the Spirit is either infallible or false.

05

Felix, Festus, and Agrippa

Paul spent two years held at Caesarea under Felix, then stood before Festus and Herod Agrippa II, son of the Herod who killed James. Agrippa's half serious words, in a short time you would persuade me to become a Christian, drew Paul's wish that all his hearers become as he was, except for the chains. Busenitz sees providence planting sympathy: a decade later, when Jerusalem fell, tradition says the city's Christians, warned beforehand, found asylum at Pella in Agrippa's territory.

06

To Rome: shipwreck and house arrest

Having appealed to Caesar, Paul sailed for Rome, was wrecked at Malta, shook off the snake, and arrived around AD 60 or 61 to two full years of house arrest, welcoming all, preaching unhindered. There he wrote the prison epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Romans had already been written from Corinth around AD 57, before Paul had ever seen the city, and its chapter of greetings, with no mention of Peter, shows Peter was not yet in Rome.

07

Why Acts ends where it ends

Acts stops at the house arrest because that is when Luke finished writing: the book was simply current. The consensus of evangelical scholarship holds Paul was released around AD 62, since Christians were not yet enemies of the state, and traveled for several years, a fourth missionary journey visible in the pastoral epistles: Ephesus and Macedonia in 1 Timothy, Troas and Miletus in 2 Timothy, Crete in Titus, and quite possibly the Spain of Romans 15, which Clement of Rome and the Muratorian fragment say he reached.

08

The great fire and Nero's scapegoat

In July of AD 64 fire burned Rome for five days, destroying or damaging half a city of a million people. Nero was away at Antium, the fiddling is myth, but his lavish new palace on the burned ground fed rumors that he had set the blaze, and he deflected the suspicion onto the Christians. Tacitus, no friend of the church, records coerced confessions and deaths dressed in mockery: believers wrapped in beast skins and torn by dogs, crucified, or burned as nightly illumination. From this summer forward, Christianity stood as an enemy of the state.

09

Peter's last years and letters

Peter had ministered from Jerusalem, visited Antioch (including the earlier visit where Paul confronted his withdrawal from Gentile tables), and passed through the churches of Asia Minor before coming to Rome after Paul's release. From there, Babylon in his own figure of speech, he wrote 1 Peter to steady the suffering churches he had just served, and 2 Peter to warn of false teachers within. Around AD 67 he was arrested with his wife; she was executed first, and he, counting himself unworthy to die as his Lord did, was crucified upside down, as Jesus had foretold in John 21.

Paul's second imprisonment and death

Rearrested in the changed empire, Paul was no longer under house arrest but in the Mamertine dungeon, joined underground to Rome's sewers, where he wrote 2 Timothy, alone, finished, awaiting the crown. As a Roman citizen he was beheaded rather than crucified, in late 67 or early 68, shortly before Nero's own death. Busenitz pauses on the fact that both Peter and Paul commanded prayer for governing authorities while Nero held the throne.

Hebrews, and the fall of Jerusalem

Hebrews fits the tail of the persecution, around AD 69, and before the temple fell, which its author would surely have mentioned. Asked who wrote it, Busenitz answers, the Holy Spirit; the human author sounds like Paul or someone near him, though the note that Timothy had been released is hard to fit inside Paul's lifetime. In AD 70 the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, and the church was not there: tradition records the believers had fled to Pella under Agrippa's protection.

John: the last apostle

After the deaths of Peter and Paul, John moved to Asia Minor and spent some three decades among its churches, with Timothy pastoring Ephesus under his apostolic oversight. His letters and his Gospel come from the 80s, the Gospel written deliberately to supplement the three already in circulation, not to contradict them. Exiled to Patmos in the regional persecution at the end of Domitian's reign, he received the revelation of Jesus Christ, was released after Domitian's death, returned to Ephesus, and died around the turn of the century, the oldest and last of the apostles.

Heresy stirring, and the gospel past the empire's edge

Already in 1 Timothy Paul names what is falsely called knowledge, an early scent of Gnosticism, and John's first letter insists that whoever denies Christ came in the flesh speaks with the spirit of antichrist, a direct answer to Gnostic denial of the incarnation. Meanwhile the gospel was traveling: reliable tradition carries Thomas to India, where the Mar Thoma church still traces its lineage to him, and Armenia's church claims apostolic roots; Mark, by tradition, planted the church of Alexandria and preserved Peter's preaching in his Gospel; and Onesimus, the runaway slave of Philemon, may as pastor of Ephesus have gathered Paul's letters, providence preserving the very texts we read.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Acts 17 · Acts 21 · Acts 26 · Acts 28 · Romans 15 · Romans 16 · Galatians 2 · 2 Timothy 4 · Titus 1 · Hebrews 13 · 1 Peter 3 · John 21

KEY TERMS

The prison epistles

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, written during Paul's two year Roman house arrest.

The pastoral epistles

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, written in the years after Paul's release, the last from the Mamertine dungeon.

The fourth missionary journey

Paul's travels between his release around AD 62 and his rearrest, reconstructed from the pastorals, Romans 15, Clement of Rome, and the Muratorian fragment.

The great fire of Rome

The five day fire of July AD 64 that Nero blamed on the Christians, turning the church into an enemy of the state.

The Mamertine prison

The Roman dungeon, joined to the city's sewers, where Paul wrote 2 Timothy awaiting execution.

Pella

The town in Herod Agrippa II's territory where, by tradition, Jerusalem's Christians found asylum before the city fell in AD 70.

Fallible prophecy

The modern claim that New Testament prophecy could err, resting almost entirely on Agabus; Busenitz argues Scripture knows only infallible prophecy or false prophecy.

Babylon

Peter's figure of speech for Rome, the corrupt imperial power, in his first letter.

COMPREHENSIONCHECK:FOURTEENQUESTIONS

1. Which letter did Paul write to a church he had never visited?
 - A. Philippians
 - B. Galatians
 - C. Colossians
 - D. 1 Thessalonians
2. On Mars Hill, where did Paul begin with hearers who had no Scripture background?
 - A. The law of Moses
 - B. Creation and the witness of conscience
 - C. The Psalms
 - D. The temple sacrifices
3. What stirred the riot in Ephesus?
 - A. A dispute over taxes
 - B. Paul's preaching collapsing the idol trade
 - C. A famine
 - D. Roman conscription
4. How does Busenitz answer the claim that Agabus got his prophecy wrong?
 - A. Agabus never claimed to speak for the Spirit
 - B. Luke corrected the prophecy later
 - C. Paul's own retellings confirm the Jews bound him before the Romans took him
 - D. The prophecy was symbolic only
5. What later mercy does tradition connect to Herod Agrippa II?
 - A. He funded the church in Rome
 - B. He granted Jerusalem's fleeing Christians asylum at Pella
 - C. He released Paul from prison
 - D. He rebuilt the temple

6. Which four letters did Paul write during his first Roman imprisonment?
 - A. The four Gospels
 - B. Romans, Galatians, and the Corinthian letters
 - C. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon
 - D. 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus
7. Why does the book of Acts end with Paul under house arrest?
 - A. Luke died
 - B. Paul forbade Luke to write more
 - C. That is when Luke finished writing; the account was simply current
 - D. The ending was lost
8. What did Nero do when suspicion for the fire fell on him?
 - A. He abdicated
 - B. He rebuilt the city at his own cost
 - C. He blamed and savagely persecuted the Christians
 - D. He fled to Greece
9. According to the account Busenitz gives, how did Peter die?
 - A. Beheaded as a citizen
 - B. Crucified upside down at his own request
 - C. In exile on Patmos
 - D. In the arena at Ephesus
10. Why was Paul beheaded rather than crucified?
 - A. He recanted
 - B. He was a Roman citizen
 - C. He was too old
 - D. Nero pardoned him partially
11. Why is Hebrews dated before AD 70?
 - A. It quotes Nero
 - B. Its author would surely have mentioned the temple's destruction had it happened
 - C. John cites it in Revelation
 - D. It was found in Jerusalem's ruins
12. Why is John's Gospel so different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke?
 - A. It contradicts them
 - B. It was written first
 - C. He wrote later, deliberately supplementing what they had recorded
 - D. It was written in Hebrew
13. Which apostle does reliable tradition carry to India?
 - A. Andrew
 - B. Thomas
 - C. Philip
 - D. Bartholomew

14. Who may have first gathered Paul's letters into a collection, in God's providence?

- A. Onesimus, the runaway slave who became a pastor in Ephesus
- B. Apollos
- C. Tacitus
- D. Timothy

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 C · 2 B · 3 B · 4 C · 5 B · 6 C · 7 C · 8 C · 9 B · 10 B · 11 B · 12 C · 13 B · 14 A

TALKITOVER

1. Peter and Paul told churches to pray for their rulers while Nero was killing Christians. What does that demand of our praying in an election season, and what does it forbid?
2. Busenitz argues a prophecy quoting the Holy Spirit cannot contain errors. Why does it matter whether prophecy is infallible, and how does that shape your response to modern claims of new revelation?
3. John spent thirty quiet years steadying churches after the famous apostles were gone. What does faithfulness in an unglamorous, long season look like for you?

ONEVERSETOCARRY

Peter's charge from his first letter, written under Nero's shadow: always be ready to give a defense for the hope that is in you.

GOFURTHER

The lecture leans on Tacitus's Annals for Nero's persecution and cites Philip Schaff on the flight to Pella; both passages are quoted in the lecture itself for anyone who wants the sources firsthand.

Lecture by Dr. Nathan Busenitz, from The Master's Seminary's public channel. Study notes written from the lectures themselves and reviewed by Medina Community Church. medinacommunitychurch.org/historical-theology-1-3