

TRAVEL AND TRANSPORTATION IN THE WORDS OF ST. PAUL

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Among full-time missionaries and Christian evangelizers who dedicate themselves to the preaching of the Gospel today, it is often not uncommon to find that many have traveled to dozens of countries and spoken to millions of people in their efforts to preach the Gospel, given that modern means of transportation and communication are as developed as they are. Compared to these statistics, even the impressive missionary life of St. Paul may seem but little. From early Church testimony, we learn that St. Paul likely traveled as far as Spain during his lifetime;¹ however this was only 2,783 miles from his hometown of Tarsus. This is approximately the same distance as it is between Maine and California, which a modern-day evangelizer could easily travel in a matter of hours in the course of one weekend out of the year to speak at a conference. Although they encompass a relatively small geographic area of the world, St. Paul's journeys were much more intrepid and daring than any missionary journey that is made today when one considers the difficulties, inconveniences, and dangers involved in any one of them. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul provides an invaluable glimpse into his missionary travels, his "frequent journeys" as he calls them (2 Corinthians 11:26 NAB). He testifies that these journeys took place "in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fastings, through cold and exposure" (2 Corinthians 11:27). They also took place on the sea, as his three shipwrecks and spending a day and night on the deep prove (2 Corinthians 11:25). In this paper, we shall explore in greater detail what St. Paul's journeys looked like in the modes of transportation available to him in the first-century Jewish-Roman world.



The wisdom of God is perfect, surpassing the logic of men. However, one historical advantage to the "fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4) and the location wherein the Incarnation, life, and death of Jesus took place was that the Roman occupation of Israel and the surrounding Mediterranean world opened up opportunities for travel such as had perhaps never been seen before its time. In the conquest of their Empire, the Romans built an extensive road system—approximately 63,000 miles long—which extended from modern-day Spain to Iran.² The roads were built to reach from city to city in the most direct way possible, as they were principally built for the travels and conquests of the Roman armies and government officials.³ St. Paul likely made many of his land travels on foot to preach the good news over these roads, which were well-maintained and largely safe, given the presence of the Roman armies in the surrounding regions. It is to this type of travel that we now turn.

Walking was the most ordinary means of transportation available to the common man in the first century. Only the wealthy could afford travel in carriages or chariots (as is seen in Phillip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch from the Court of the Candace in Acts 8:26-40). Thus, the majority of men made their journeys of travel, trade, or—when the Christians arrived on the scene, evangelization—on foot. While animals such as donkeys or mules were common companions in travel to carry supplies, they are never mentioned in St. Paul's letters or in the Acts of the Apostles as companions on his journeys. This is because such animals were only used by those too weak to walk, such as the elderly, women, or children.⁴ Horses, on the other hand, were not such common travel companions, as they were only used by those who could afford them: the wealthy or the army. Because St. Paul traveled with his co-workers and brothers in the ministry, it is likely that, following the instructions of the Lord Himself, they traveled lightly, "tak[ing] nothing for the journey but a walking stick—no food, no sack, no money in their belts" (Mark 6:8). What little supplies they needed, they could have carried themselves; thus, they most likely would not have needed animals for the majority of their travels. The same Gospel continues, "They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic" (Mark 6:9). St. Paul could have averaged 20 miles of walking per day, depending on the weather and terrain through which they were crossing.⁵ For this reason, one can see why the Apocryphal Acts of Paul describes St. Paul as having a "good state of body,"⁶ despite the fact that his opponents in Corinth described his bodily presence as "weak" (2 Corinthians 10:10). If sandals were necessary for the Apostles' missionary travels throughout Israel, how much more so would they have been for the thousands of miles that St. Paul walked on his missionary journeys?

Such poverty in mission was an exercise of abandonment to the providence of God to provide for their needs and protect them along the way. Wild animals and robbers were real dangers in first-century travel, particularly along the secondary roads of the Roman Empire, which St. Paul and his companions would also have often traveled upon. Jesus Himself mentions robbers in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and St. Paul attests to their presence in 2 Corinthians 11; thus, their danger was both known and real.

This is because,

In the civil wars that ended less than a century before Paul's time, brigandage became chronic and remained so into the first century. The Roman army's policing activity was confined to the main roads. Once off them, the traveler, who had no option but to take his money with him, was fair game for robbery and possibly murder. That's why few traveled alone, and most were armed at least with a staff.⁷

This same abandonment to the providence of God was an opportunity to evangelize those whose hospitality he received in the towns and villages he entered during his travels. The inns at the posts along the Roman roads were by reputation not the cleanest or safest of places; thus, it is likely that St. Paul and his companions, when possible, spent the night at the homes of fellow Christians or acquaintances. He mentions this in his letter to Philemon, when he asks that a guest room be prepared for him, hoping in the freedom that he prays the Lord will grant him (Philemon 1:22). If they entered an unfamiliar city, however, it was common practice of that time to introduce oneself to others of the same profession or religion, and hope for hospitality to be extended in the course of conversation.⁸ The book of the Acts of the Apostles recounts the hospitality of those who opened their home to him: recent converts, such as Lydia (Acts 16:15), fellow tentmakers and Jews in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:2), and Mnason of Jerusalem, "a disciple of longstanding" that the disciples in Caesarea led him to (Acts 21:16). However, there were many nights in which such hospitality could not be found, nights that he spent "in cold and exposure:" exposure to the elements, exposure to wild animals, and in cases where he was unwelcome ("dangers from my own race," as he testifies in 2 Corinthians 11:26), exposure to the anger of the people to whom he preached. Perhaps this is also where his comment regarding "hunger and thirst" and "frequent fastings" comes from—nights spent without the means available to nourish himself properly after such a long journey, nourishment that the hospitality of good-hearted individuals would have afforded him.

As the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters attest, he also traveled quite frequently by sea. Travel by ship was available, but by no means advanced or smooth—it was simply faster, if the conditions were right and the crew was obedient to the laws of nature. Ships from that time had not yet developed the proper technology to sail against oncoming winds; thus, all ships that sailed across the Mediterranean were trade ships bearing cargo, designed to work with the wind at their back. For this reason, they did not venture out into the waters past September 1, when the winter storm season began.⁹ St. Paul, as a prisoner headed for Rome, experienced the consequences of trying to risk success on the sea during the winter months. In chapters 27 and 28 of the Acts of the Apostles, a detailed account is given of their long and tiresome voyage, which shipwrecked and waited out the winter on the Island of Malta. Luke recounts, "Much time had now passed and sailing had become hazardous because the time of the fast had already gone by, so Paul warned them, 'Men, I can see that this voyage will result in severe damage and heavy loss not only to the cargo and the ship, but also to our lives'" (Acts 27:9-10). After being caught up in a winter storm, forced to throw cargo and some tackle overboard, St. Paul stated, "Men, you should have taken my advice and not have set sail from Crete and you would have avoided this disastrous loss" (Acts 27:21). This story proves how dangerous travel on the sea could be. However, when the captains cooperated with nature, the experience was generally safe and an obviously quicker way to travel from place to place.

This did not mean, however, that it was comfortable and leisurely. In the first century, passenger ships were not yet invented. If one wanted to obtain a ride by sea, he would have to do so "camping out," so to speak, on a freight ship en route to the trade destination to which—or close to which—he was headed. To do so, one had to head down to port with all supplies needed for a one or week's voyage: mattresses, food, tents, etc. Then, he had to find a ship that was headed in his same direction, strike up a deal with the captain, and wait for the day of departure. This could be a matter of days—or longer—depending on the signs for which the captains were watching, such as dreams or omens. Finally, when they were ready to depart, the party would board the ship and be assigned a place on deck where they could "pitch camp" for the night.¹⁰

While this is but a glimpse into the reality of the travel and transportation employed by St. Paul in his first century world, it certainly leaves one with a greater appreciation for the great lengths to which he went for the sake of the Gospel. The zeal which filled his heart, which led him to proclaim, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" was clearly manifested in the courage, perseverance, fortitude, and self-denial necessary to lead the missionary life that St. Paul lived. Though the realities of transportation and travel may make missionary journeys much different today, may the same zeal which filled the heart of St. Paul enflame the hearts of all of those who love and live for the glorious Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 1 Clement 5:7. See George T. Montague, *First and Second Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 19.

2 David Landis, "Travel, Transport and Movement in the First Century," at Nazareth Village (8 June 2014), at www.nazarethvillage.com.

3 Meander Travel, "Travel and Transportation in St. Paul's Time," at Meander Travel (8 June 2014), at www.meandertravel.com.

4 Merilyn Hargis, "On the Road: The Inns and Outs of Travel in First-Century Palestine," at Christian History (8 June 2014),

at www.christianitytoday.com.

5 Marilyn Hargis, "On the Road."

6 John McRay, Paul: His Life and Teaching (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 39.

7 "The Incident on the Damascus Road that Would Change Everything," in The Christians: Their First Two Thousand Years, ed. Ted Byfield (Alexandria, VA: Christian History Project, 2003), 104, at www.christianhistoryproject.org.

8 Meander Travel, "Travel and Transportation in St. Paul's Time."

9 Jay King, "Down to the Sea in Ships: Transportation and Voyaging by Sea in Roman Times," at Jay's Roman History (9 June 2014), at www.jaysromanhistory.com.

10 "First Century Sea Voyagers Never Traveled Light," in The Christians: Their First Two Thousand Years, ed. Ted Byfield (Alexandria, VA: Christian History Project, 2003), 178, at www.christianhistoryproject.org.

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