

FOREWORD

AURELIUS

Corinth, Greece

On this third day before the ides of June, 811 years following the founding of Rome, I, Aurelius Maximus, legionnaire of the Roman Empire, testify that the words you are about to read are those of Paul the Apostle. Although the script is clearly my own rather than his, the document was dictated to me during our teacher's last night on earth. Where I felt it necessary to do so, I have inserted my own commentary, merely to clarify sections that otherwise might seem out of place or confusing.

There are legitimate reasons that the followers of Paul might find the provenance of this document suspect. First, this letter is dated four weeks after Paul's second letter to Timothy, the last one that he would write. Just as significant, I am known only to my fellow Christians here in Corinth. The rest of my brothers and sisters in Christ, those of you whom I will never meet, must make your own decision as to the veracity of my testimony.

No one knew of the crippling arthritis in the fingers and hands of Paul; he kept it even from Luke, his best friend. But the pain and deformities in his fingers became so severe during the writing of that second letter to Timothy that he was forced to ask my help in constructing its final sentences. Paul's handwriting had become indecipherable—a magnificent irony, and one that could be concocted only by Our Lord.

I was a Roman centurion before my tribune assigned me the shameful and odious role of primary jailer for Paul of Tarsus at Rome's Mamertine Prison, during his last nineteen months on this earth. I write this foreword to explain to you very briefly how and why a Roman soldier

assigned to guard one of the foremost enemies of Nero came to write his last letter. Or, more accurately, how our Lord, Our Savior, used this very humiliation to bring me to my knees through his servant, Paul the Apostle.

It was during Mercedonius—Leap Month—813 AUC, that I was transferred from the battlefield of the Judean Wars to guard duty at Mamertine Prison. It was an assignment customarily reserved for foreign mercenaries, hastily and poorly trained battle fodder, rather than native Roman legionnaires.

The suddenness of my demotion, followed by my return to a Rome I no longer recognized, nearly destroyed me. I had been a centurion since the age of twenty-two and had expected to live out my years as a warrior or die honorably on the battlefield.

Although it had been three years since the Great Fire, my native city remained shattered, ruined. Yes, of course, I knew about the week-long fire; we all did. And I thought I was prepared for its aftermath. But nothing could have girded me for such massive devastation.

This Rome was unrecognizable—nothing like the beautiful, vibrant, and cultured center of learning I had grown up in. Even after three years, most of its formerly magnificent temples remained in ruins; there had been no attempt to rebuild them. As I walked the streets, now populated by Idumeans, Hispanians, Numidians, Franks, Syrians, Egyptians, and slavish people from all ends of the Empire, I seldom heard Latin spoken. These hordes teemed into the city for the free food, housing, and depraved entertainment provided by Nero as he fought to maintain control of the senate.

The reasons for my tribune's decision to send me on this mission are irrelevant to my purpose here; what matters is the fact that I craved a way to externalize my humiliation; to find someone worthy of my enmity. I discovered him in Paul the Apostle, enemy of the Empire.

My treatment of Paul during the first few weeks of my assignment was reprehensible. The iron chains I fashioned around his torso were unnecessarily constraining—at times, inhibiting his breathing and reopening poorly healed lashing scars. I delighted in inventive methods to provoke him and cause him pain. Frequently I taunted him by pouring his tiny portions of food and water onto the ground a tantalizing distance from his lips. Tormenting him with deprecations of his inane savior, Jesus, became a favorite activity.

After nine days of all but starvation and intense thirst, Paul spoke his first words to me—in calm, flawless Latin. “I wonder why such a fine-looking specimen of a man has come to *detest* himself to such a degree that he causes himself such agony?”

How can you ask such a thing? You, in chains, me, your captor?

Why does the look in your eyes make me want to drop to my knees and sob like a child of three years?

Why don't you hate me?

The strange light that emanated from his eyes had not diminished despite his emaciation and parched, cracked, and bleeding lips. In fact, the fire had intensified. And there was a quality about him that defied description ... a stillness having nothing to do with his chains. The man had an inner serenity that no execrable words or deeds of mine could disturb. When I finally looked into his eyes for the first time, instead of a mirror of my own rage and hatred, I saw what I could only interpret as love. For me.

How can this man look at me with the tenderness of a mother gazing upon her infant?

My jaw dropped open. I could not hide my amazement.

“Who are you?” I asked him. “Why don't you detest me, as I do you?”

“You do not detest me,” he replied in a whisper—the most substantial voice he could manage to propel through his ravaged lips. I leaned down to hear him and found myself irresistibly drawn to this scarred shell of a man. “You hate yourself...what you have become,” he continued, not without difficulty.

The light in his eyes seemed to blind me. I wanted to spit in his face, curse him for speaking this way to his captor, but it was as if I had been struck deaf and dumb. My knees folded as if a pair of giant hands had applied such force to my shoulders that I had no choice but to kneel on the dirt floor beside him. Now, I was so close that I could see the pores in his skin.

He said nothing—merely pinned me with his gaze. After what seemed like hours but was probably just a few minutes, he laughed, then coughed violently. “You should probably give me some water,” he rasped.

Without a second thought, I jumped up, opened the door to his cell, and raced over to the enormous wooden barrel of water that sat outside the cells of the prisoners, but was meant for the guards. I grabbed a cup from the stack and filled it. Then I carried it back into Paul’s cell, where I crouched down beside my prisoner and brought the full container to his lips. As he struggled to make contact with the rim by leaning forward the few inches permitted by the heavy irons, I said, “Wait! Let me unchain you.” Unabashedly shirking my responsibility as his jailer, I carefully removed the chains around his chest and torso, feeling more excited than I had in many years.

Something is happening here. This man has wisdom and is willing to share it with me. I feel as if he can see into my soul!

Now you know how the process of my becoming a follower of the Way—becoming a Christian—began.

That Our Lord has trusted me with the task of recording the last words of the greatest man I have ever known, the prisoner who set me free, is a thing of such grandeur, splendor, and glory that I will spend all of my days attempting to prove myself worthy of His—and Paul’s—trust.

To God be the glory.

Paul—previously known as Saul of Tarsus—began his story with the prologue you will shortly encounter because he wanted his readers to understand instantly that this last is unlike all the other letters he has written and distributed to Christians throughout our world. Perhaps more than many of us, Paul understood how readily we confer honor and respect upon men undeservedly. Profoundly aware of the awe he inspired in Corinth, Ephesus, and Antioch, Paul hoped that this last letter would convey his truth. It tells the tale of the worst, most vicious persecutor of Christ, a man who committed the most heinous acts against other men. If Saul of Tarsus, who struck abject terror into the hearts of the followers of Christ, can be reborn as Paul the Apostle and be used by Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to bring about His Kingdom here on earth, surely, you—a far less depraved sinner than he—can move mountains.