

Living with a madman

By Dean Merrill

How would you have liked to live during the time of the Book of Acts? Most Christians, especially Pentecostals, relish the thought of hearing Paul preach in person and seeing God do signs and wonders to impress the Roman world.

But we would not have been very impressed with the Roman government in those days, especially starting in A.D. 54 (about the point of Acts 19 and following). That was the year a new emperor came to the throne: a 16-year-old boy named Nero.

Paul was just finishing his third missionary journey. He headed for Jerusalem, got arrested, languished in local prisons for a couple of years, and finally appealed to the "supreme court" of his day—Nero's court. That earned him a very rough ride across the Mediterranean toward Rome.

These years gave us the vast majority of Paul's epistles—probably all of them except Galatians and the two Thessalonians written earlier. These are also the years when Peter wrote (or dictated) his first letter. Perhaps

the Book of James was sent out in the early part of this period. We have a wealth of both history and correspondence to give us the temperature of Early Church thinking.

Nero started things off with a bang by poisoning his

14-year-old stepbrother. He carried on a couple of public affairs. In time, he had his ambitious mother murdered. He got married, but had his first wife murdered as well.

His erstwhile tutor, the wise philosopher Seneca, who had been trying to keep a lid on the young man, eventually threw up his hands in dismay. Nero was known for cavorting in the streets of Rome at all hours of the night and early morning. He loved to race chariots and also fancied himself a great actor; the theater crowds obligingly applauded even as they winced at his lack of talent.

When Rome went up in flames in A.D. 64, Nero pointed to the Christians as a handy scapegoat, which unleashed vicious persecution. It is generally believed that both Peter and Paul lost their lives around this time.

Meanwhile, Nero ran the empire into serious debt; his gifts to various friends each year mounted up to five times the cost of maintaining the Roman army. When the Senate finally began laying groundwork to impeach him, Nero, then 30, slit his own throat.

How did the early Christians react? What was their view of an immature, immoral, ruthless megalomaniac at the head of their government?

Listen to Paul: "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority. ... This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:1-4, NIV).

Listen to Peter: "For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. ... Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king" (1 Peter 2:15,17).

In the face of outrageous behavior in high places, they calmly talk of prayer, respect and forbearance. *Don't you see the moral collapse? Aren't you outraged? Paul, you hold the privilege of Roman citizenship; do something about this.*

Listen again to the rugged fisherman: "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called" (1 Peter 3:9).

Hear the perspective of the one-time Pharisee activist: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (Ephesians 4:31). "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

Christian people and groups in our time are engaged in titanic struggles against flesh and blood. The enemies are clearly named, along with their phone numbers, addresses, fax numbers and photographs.

Paul and the other apostles seem to stand quietly by, wishing we would realize who the real enemies are. They are not flesh-and-blood creatures, however misguided. The real enemies are Satan and his minions, who have won over the minds and values of many who temporarily hold power. That is not to say anything insulting about those particular leaders; they are fallen creatures like millions of others in the world. It is instead to say that we will get a lot further if we focus on the true fountainhead of all sin and rebellion against God. And he doesn't live on Pennsylvania Avenue. ■

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