

Review: *Paul, the Apostle of Christ*
By Robert Dean, Jr.

This last week the film *Paul, the Apostle of Christ* opened. I was in Tucson speaking at Tucson Bible Church, pastored by my long-time friend John Hintz. With our wives we attended the opening show on Friday morning looking forward to a reasonable portrayal of the life of Paul. Knowing that Bible-based films are notorious for the factual inaccuracy, we set the bar of expectation low, but were still disappointed. There were some good points, but they did not outweigh the negatives.

The main story of the film focuses on a fictional scenario surrounding the actual imprisonment of Paul in the Mamertine dungeon in Rome which ended with his beheading. As such, the film also tells the story about the persecution of the Christians in Rome at that time. Luke is present and is able to bribe the guards to let him see Paul. Over the course of time, Paul tells him his story (as if Luke had not been with him through most of it), and Luke writes what is supposed to be the Acts of the Apostles. Within this telling there are a few flashbacks to Paul's pre-Christian days as a Pharisee who persecuted and murdered Christians, Paul's conversion, and the healing of his eyes by Ananias. Nothing about Paul's dramatic and influential ministry in the intervening years is told.

Positively, the film showed the unity of believers in Rome who were facing Nero's persecution, their Christian love and concern for one another, and respect for authority even when that authority was evil. Their care and love for one another was strongly portrayed, as well as a realistic portrayal of some who tried to take matters into their own hands. Of course, this latter was pure literary license, but knowing that Christians still have rebellious sin natures, we should not fault them too much for this.

Second, there was a lot of Scripture quoted (more about this later). Third, as a large group of Christians walked into the Coliseum to face certain death from wild animals, they exhibited a calm, relaxed mental attitude knowing that they would soon be face to face with the Lord in heaven. Fourth, Luke heals the prefect's daughter through surgery, not via a miracle, but as a result of prayer.

The negatives were important, but not as egregious as the notorious rewriting and completely erroneous recent telling of the Noah narrative. First, the film did exhibit the standard Hollywood low view of Scripture, by rewriting portions of Scripture and having Paul say things which he had written in earlier epistles, as if saying them at this point for the first time. At one point he says to Luke, "to live is Christ, to die is gain." Luke responds, "I like that" and Paul says, "Write it down," as if Paul had not already written this to the Philippian church in Philippians 1:21.

Another scripture error is that Luke most likely did the research and writing for Acts long before Paul's second imprisonment in the Mamertine dungeon, while Paul was under house arrest in Caesarea by the Sea awaiting his transport to Rome. A third example of a low view of Scripture is that at one point Paul states something about his second

imprisonment in Rome, but the film consistently confuses the two as if they were one and the same.

Second, the telling of Paul's conversion is unforgivably false and heretical. Saul of Tarsus had been killing Christians and is seen as already dealing with guilt. He is on his way to Damascus as bright light, which looks a lot like the sun, causes him to fall off his horse and roll around on the ground. It looks more like a heat stroke than anything else. There is no physical, resurrected, objective appearance of Jesus to Paul. One is left to wonder if he just had a heat stroke or a guilt-induced PTSD hallucination. Liberal theology which rejects the objective infallibility of Scripture, portrays Paul's conversion as merely psychological as a result of the oppression of his own guilt.

Third, the film's Paul has several conversations with the Roman prefect Mauritius which lead to an opportunity to make the gospel clear. Failed opportunity. Paul's description of conversion is again a psychologized version, where you just know it's true. But the "it" of the gospel is never explained.

Fourth, at the point where the Christians are about to enter the Coliseum the Christians in their community, Paul in prison, and Luke is elsewhere, all recite the Disciples Prayer (the "our Father"). What a gross misapplication, as is typical from theologies which think reciting that prayer is efficacious. Paul has some resounding prayers in his epistles from which the quotes could come, but these are ignored. The disciples' prayer, misnamed "the Lord's prayer," was given as a pattern for prayer, not something to be recited over and over like a Hindu mantra.

Fifth, while in the Mamertine dungeon Paul's sleep is interrupted by guilt-based flashbacks to his persecution of Christians before his conversion. This completely rejects what Paul wrote in Phil 3:13, "forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,"

And sixth, another error is that I found it moved slowly. Rather than truthfully telling the story of one of the most dramatic and exciting lives in history, they opted for a fictionalized account surrounding Paul's execution and made the story boring. I dozed off at least five times, someone else slept about an hour.

Conclusion: I recommend reading the Acts of the Apostles and not wasting time or money to see this film.

Paul was the apostle of Christ, the apostle of grace who taught again and again that the only true gospel was that Christ died for our sins and as he informed the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:31, the only hope of salvation is "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." Our justification is not based on works, but faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Gal. 2:16 "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified."

Paul never made the gospel ambiguous or psychological. Salvation is based on Jesus, the perfect God-Man who died on the cross to pay the penalty of sin for all mankind, that by faith, believing that Jesus is the Son of God who died for us, we have eternal life.