

Introduction to the Letters of Paul

Intro: We may better appreciate the books of the N.T. when we understand the historical framework into which they may be placed. This is especially true of the letters of Paul, which were written during various times of his preaching life. In this lesson we will be taking an overview of Paul's life with emphasis upon the chronology and circumstances of Paul's letters.

Paul's letters are generally divided into three groups

Travel letters (1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans)

Prison letters (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon)

"Pastoral" Letters (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus)

Additional notes:

1. Some attribute "Hebrews" to Paul.
2. The so-called "pastoral" letters receive their name from the emphasis upon the evangelistic work of Timothy and Titus. These appear to have been written by Paul after his release from imprisonment or during a second imprisonment in Rome.

Overview of Paul's Life until the first preaching journey

Event	Scripture ref.	Date	Basis for date
Paul's conversion	Ac. 9:1-22	36 A.D.	2 Cor. 11:32 & Josephus
Damascus & Arabia	Gal. 1:15-17	37-39 A.D.	Gal. 1:18 & Ac. 9:23-25
Jerusalem	Ac. 9:26-30	39 A.D.	"15 days" (Gal. 1:18)
In Syria, Cilicia	Gal. 1:21	39-43 A.D.	Inferred from known dates
In Antioch with Barnabas	Ac. 11:25-26	43-44 A.D.	"whole year" Ac. 11:26
Relief for Judea	Ac. 11:27-30	A.D. 44	Josephus & "Death of Herod" (Ac. 12:23)

Overview of Paul's travels from the first preaching trip until the Jerusalem meeting (Paul & Barnabas)

Places traveled	Scripture Reference	Date	Basis for Date	Key Events
Salamis (Cyprus)	Ac. 13:1-12	45 A.D.	Death of Herod (A.D. 44)	Sergius Paulus converted; Elymas blinded
Antioch (Pisidia)	Ac. 13:13-52	45 A.D.		Jews reject the word, Some Jews & Gentiles are saved, Paul & Barnabas driven away by unbelieving Jews
Iconium, Lystra, Derbe	Ac. 14:1-20	45 A.D.		Timothy converted (Ac. 16:1), Churches established, Jews attempt stoning in Iconium, Paul & Barnabas worshipped as gods in Lystra, Paul later stoned
Return trip through same cities	Ac. 14:21-24	46 A.D.		Elders appointed, churches strengthened by teaching
Perga	Ac. 14:25	46 A.D.		Gospel preached, results unknown
Antioch	Ac. 14:25-28	47-49 A.D.	"A long time (Ac. 14:28)	Further edification of church at Antioch
Jerusalem	Ac. 15:1-35	A.D. 49	Gal. 2:1 "after 14 years" (Conversion 36 A.D.)	Meeting at Jerusalem to clarify obligations of Gentile converts

Note: Thus far we have not seen any letter-writing activity recorded. Did any of these churches receive letters from Paul? Are these some of the churches Paul would later refer to as the "Galatians" (churches in Lystra, Derbe, Iconium, etc.) or does he have other converts in mind from a later preaching trip?

Overview of Paul's second preaching trip (Paul & Silas)

Places traveled	Scripture Reference	Date	Basis for Date	Key Events
Syria & Cilicia	Ac. 15:36-41	A.D. 49	Estimated from Jerusalem meeting in A.D. 49 & "some days" (Ac. 15:36)	Strengthening churches in Syria, Cilicia (those established by Paul, Gal. 1:21?)
Lystra & Derbe	Ac. 16:1-5	A.D. 49		Timothy joins Paul in preaching
Phrygian & Galatian region	Ac. 16:6	A.D. 49		Churches established? The "Galatians" of Paul's letter?
Philippi (Macedonia)	Ac. 16:7-40	A.D. 50		Macedonian call at Troas, Conversion of Lydia, jailor, persecution forces a departure
Thessalonica	Ac. 17:1-9	A.D. 50		Church established, Paul & Silas sent away because of persecution
Berea	Ac. 17:10-14	A.D. 50		Church established, Silas & Timothy remain to teach
Athens	Ac. 17:15-34	A.D. 50		Paul preaches at Areopagus, Church established
Corinth	Ac. 18:1-17	A.D. 50-52	"a year and six months (Ac. 18:11), Claudius reign (41-54) & decree (Ac. 18:2); Gallio proconsul (51-52)	Crispus & other converted, Paul spends "many days"
Ephesus	Ac. 18:18-21	A.D. 52		A brief visit to synagogue
Antioch	Ac. 18:22	A.D. 52		A short trip to Jerusalem, "some time" in Antioch

Note: Here we may establish the date of the first two epistles of Paul, **First & Second Thessalonians**. While Paul was at Athens, Timothy joined him, having come from Berea (Ac. 17:15). Paul sends Timothy to be with the Thessalonians (Cf. 1 Thes. 3:1-6). Now upon Timothy's return Paul writes this letter from Corinth. We may assume that the second letter was written not long afterward during Paul's stay at Corinth (cf. 2 Thes. 3:1-5).

Overview of Paul's third preaching trip until his imprisonment in Rome

Places traveled	Scripture Reference	Date	Basis for Date	Key Events
Galatian & Phrygian region	Ac. 18:23	53 A.D.		Strengthening disciples
Ephesus	Ac. 19:1-41	53-56 A.D.	"two years in school" (Ac. 19:10); "three years" (Ac. 20:31)	Twelve disciples taught, teaching in Tyrannus' school, first letter to Corinth , Demetrius challenges Paul
Macedonia	Ac. 20:1	56 A.D.	After Pentecost (1 Cor. 16:8);	Generosity of Macedonians toward needy in Jerusalem, exhortation to churches, second letter to Corinth
Corinth (Greece)	Ac. 20:2	57 A.D.	"three months" (Ac. 20:3)	Letter to Romans, Galatians? , Jewish death plot on Paul's life causes him to change travel plans, final arrangements for collection for needy in Jerusalem
Troas & Miletus	Ac. 20:3-38	57 A.D.	Paul wanted to arrive "by Pentecost" (Ac. 20:16)	Paul breaks bread with church, Eutychus raised, farewell to Ephesians elders at Miletus
Tyre, Ptolomais, & Cseasarea	Ac. 21:1-14	57 A.D.		Agabus warns of Paul's capture in Jerusalem, visit with Phillip
Jerusalem	Ac. 21:15-23:22	57 A.D.		Paul is captured in temple by unbelieving Jews, gives defense before Sanhedrin
Csaesarea	Ac. 23:23-26:32	57-60 A.D.	"two full years" (Ac. 24:27)	Defenses before Felix & Drusilla, Festus, King Agrippa & Bernice
In the Mediterranean	Ac. 27:1-28:15	60 A.D.	Festus succeeds Felix in 60-61 A.D. (Josephus, Seutonium, Tacitus)	Shipwreck, Miracles on Malta, Paul arrives in Rome
Rome	Ac. 28:16-31	60-63 A.D.	"two full years" (Ac. 28:30)	Interview of Jews of Roman synagogue, Paul stays as prisoner in rent quarters, Letters to Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians

Summary

The **first letter to the Corinthians** was written from Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8) around 56 A.D. The **second letter to the Corinthians** from Macedonia (cf. 2 Cor. 7:5, Ac. 20:1, 2 Cor. 8:1 & others) after the ordeal of persecution mentioned in Ac. 19 (Cf. 2 Cor. 1:8) the same year.

The letter to the **Romans** appears to have been written from Corinth around 57 A.D. This is inferred from Paul's statement of travel plans (Rom. 15:25-29) and the mention of Gaius, one of the converts in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:14, Rom. 16:23) and Erastus (Rom. 16:23) whose name has been found on inscriptions in Corinth.

The letter to the **Galatians** is the most disputed of all the travel letters. First there is some question about who the Galatians are. The answer to this question, of course, affects the second question, "when was the book written?". It seems most likely that the Galatians are the people of churches of Lystra, Derbe, Iconium and that the letter was written from Antioch in 49 A.D. or possibly while Paul was in Ephesus or Corinth on his third journey (57 A.D.)

From his imprisonment Paul wrote four letters to various churches. Primarily they focus his concerns on the work he had done in Asia Minor. Three of the letters relate to that work, **Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon**. Paul also mentions another letter to the **Laodiceans** (Col. 4:16), which could be the epistle to Ephesians in our present N.T. or another letter of unknown contents. One letter was written to the **Philippians** in response to a contribution from the church at Philippi. All of these letters may be dated from 60-63.