



*The Life & Early Letters
of
St. Paul
a four-week Bible Study
Ron Ryan, D. Min.*



Schedule

Thursday, April 30

Introduction: & Overview

Paul: rabbi, convert, apostle, martyr

Paul's letters: the churches & the problems

Thursday, May 7

1 Thessalonians & Galatians

Thursday, May 14

1 & 2 Corinthians

Thursday, May 21

Philippians & Philemon

*Participants are encouraged to read each
letter before the session.*

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Lord God,
through your Son, Jesus Christ,
you revealed the Good News
to the Apostle Paul,
and called him to proclaim
the Gospel to the nations.
Help us to be newly inspired
by the message he proclaimed.

Through the study of his writings
may we come to a deeper understanding
of this saving message,
and a deeper relationship with your Son.

May his passion for the truth
inspire us to live
as authentic disciples of our Lord.

May his example help us to build
communities of faith, hope and love
through our commitment and sacrifice.

As your Holy Spirit filled St. Paul,
may your Spirit enlighten and empower
our words and actions.

We ask this through Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

St. Paul, Apostle and Martyr,
pray for us.



Saint Paul: Rabbi, Convert, Apostle, Martyr

The person of Paul the Apostle takes center stage in much of the New Testament. Half of the book of Acts of the Apostles is dedicated to him; seven of his own letters reveal his thoughts on a variety of topics; and six others so closely reflect his thought and practice that they are included under his name. Paul's interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection shaped the early Christian community's understanding of the Gospel, leading to its definitive split with Judaism, and laying the foundation for a universal church.

Biographically speaking, we know more about the Apostle Paul than we do about Jesus himself. We are told he was born in Tarsus around the year 5 AD of a Jewish family with Roman citizenship. It appears that he received a broad classical education and, at some point, was tutored in the Pharisaic tradition of Judaism as well, spending some time in his teens or early twenties in Jerusalem. While he apparently did not witness Jesus during his public ministry, he became acquainted with the community of Jesus' disciples within a few years after Jesus' resurrection. His religious zeal made him one of the community's most vocal opponents. But sometime around the year 35 AD he had a spiritual experience—a revelation of Christ—that led to his conversion. Leaving his familiar surroundings, he spent several years in Arabia before returning to Damascus. In 38 or 39 AD he went to Jerusalem where for the first time he met with Peter and James. After this he retired to his hometown of Tarsus.

Acts 11 reports that it was Barnabas who sought out Paul and brought him to Antioch in Syria about the year 44 AD. Two years later these two, accompanied by John Mark, set out from Antioch on a missionary journey. They traveled first to Barnabas' native Cyprus, then on to Asia Minor, and then further inland before returning to Antioch. Along the way they would preach to the Jews, but found that Gentiles were also open to their message.

Upon their return, a strong disagreement arose regarding the missionaries' approach to Gentile converts. The "Judaizers" insisted that Christians must embrace the Mosaic Law, including circumcision and dietary rules, while Paul and Barnabas did not require these for Gentile converts. A delegation was sent to consult with the Apostles and other leaders of the Jerusalem church. This "Council of Jerusalem" (c. 49 AD) decided not to impose the burden of the Law on Gentile converts, thus giving approval to Paul's missionary endeavors.

Encouraged by his reception in Jerusalem, Paul set out the following year on another journey, returning to Asia Minor, then moving into Galatia and Phrygia. Crossing the Aegean Sea, he set foot for the first time on European soil, visiting Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth. Crossing back to Asia Minor, he stopped in Ephesus, Caesarea and Jerusalem before returning to Antioch.

A third journey undertaken around 54 AD brought Paul once again through Galatia and Phrygia to Ephesus, where he remained for three and a half years, some of which may have been spent in prison. While there, he learned of troubles in the Corinthian community. Crossing to Macedonia, he made his way south to Corinth. Assured that the problems were corrected, he resolved to visit Rome, and composed a letter of introduction to the Christian community there. But before undertaking this trip, he decided to take up a collection from the relatively prosperous churches in Greece and Asia Minor, and to deliver it in person to the church in Jerusalem.

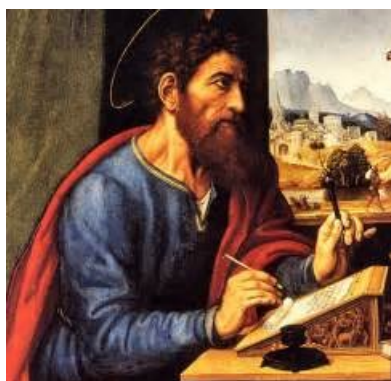
While the surviving letters of Paul cannot provide us with information beyond this point, Acts of the Apostles recounts Paul's arrival in Jerusalem, where disagreement with certain Jewish leaders led to a public disturbance and Paul's arrest. He was taken to Caesarea where he was held for two years (58-60 AD). Invoking his rights as a Roman citizen, Paul eventually appealed his case to the Emperor. After a long sea journey and shipwreck, he arrived in Rome, where Acts of the Apostles abruptly ends.

Nothing is known for certain about the remaining years of Paul's life, but tradition tells us that he was martyred during the persecution of Nero in 64 AD. As a citizen, he could not be crucified. Instead, he was beheaded by sword outside the walls of the city. Writing about the year 95 AD, Clement of Rome states that St. Paul "traveled to the extreme west," which has led many to conclude that in his final years he took another missionary journey to Gaul and Spain. Whether or not Paul ever traveled so far, it is certain that his thought, his writing and his vision continues to impact the church around the globe.

A Timeline of the Life of Paul

All dates are approximate

- ▶ 8 AD Born (in Tarsus?)
- ▶ 34 Actively persecutes Jerusalem Christian community
- ▶ 35 Experiences risen Christ; converts to Christianity
- ▶ 35-38 Sojourns in Arabia
- ▶ 38 Returns to Damascus
- ▶ 39 Abruptly leaves Damascus; travels to Jerusalem where he meets with Peter and John; resettles in Tarsus
- ▶ 44 Brought by Barnabas to Antioch
- ▶ 46 Undertakes first missionary journey with Barnabas and John Mark; visits Cyprus and southern Galatia
- ▶ 49 Returns to Antioch; Council of Jerusalem
- ▶ 50 Embarks on second missionary journey; visits Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Beorea, Athens, Corinth, where he spends 18 months. While there, writes *1 Thessalonians*. Crosses back to Asia Minor, stops at Ephesus, Caesarea and Jerusalem before returning to Antioch.
- ▶ 54 Undertakes third journey, retracing his route to Ephesus, where he remains for the next 3½ years (in prison?) While in Ephesus, writes *Galatians* and *1 Corinthians* (and possibly *Philippians* and *Philemon*).
- ▶ 57 Reports of conflict in Corinth lead him to set out for that city. On his way there, while in Macedonia, writes *2 Corinthians*. After arriving in Corinth, writes *Romans*. Returns to Asia Minor, gathering donations for church in Jerusalem.
- ▶ 58 While in Jerusalem, is arrested; taken to Caesarea, where he remains in prison for 2 years. Appeals to Caesar, is sent to Rome.
- ▶ 60 Transported by ship via Crete and Malta to Rome.
- ▶ 64 Executed during persecution of Nero.



The Letters of Paul

While thirteen books of the New Testament are known as the Pauline Epistles, only seven are generally accepted as having been penned by Paul himself. They are the oldest of the New Testament writings, predating the first Gospel (Mark) by as much as a decade.

Written to churches of a geographical region (e.g., Galatians), or a single local church (e.g., Thessalonians, Corinthians) or an individual (e.g., Philemon), they offer modern readers a glimpse of the Christian community within 25 years of the ministry of Jesus.

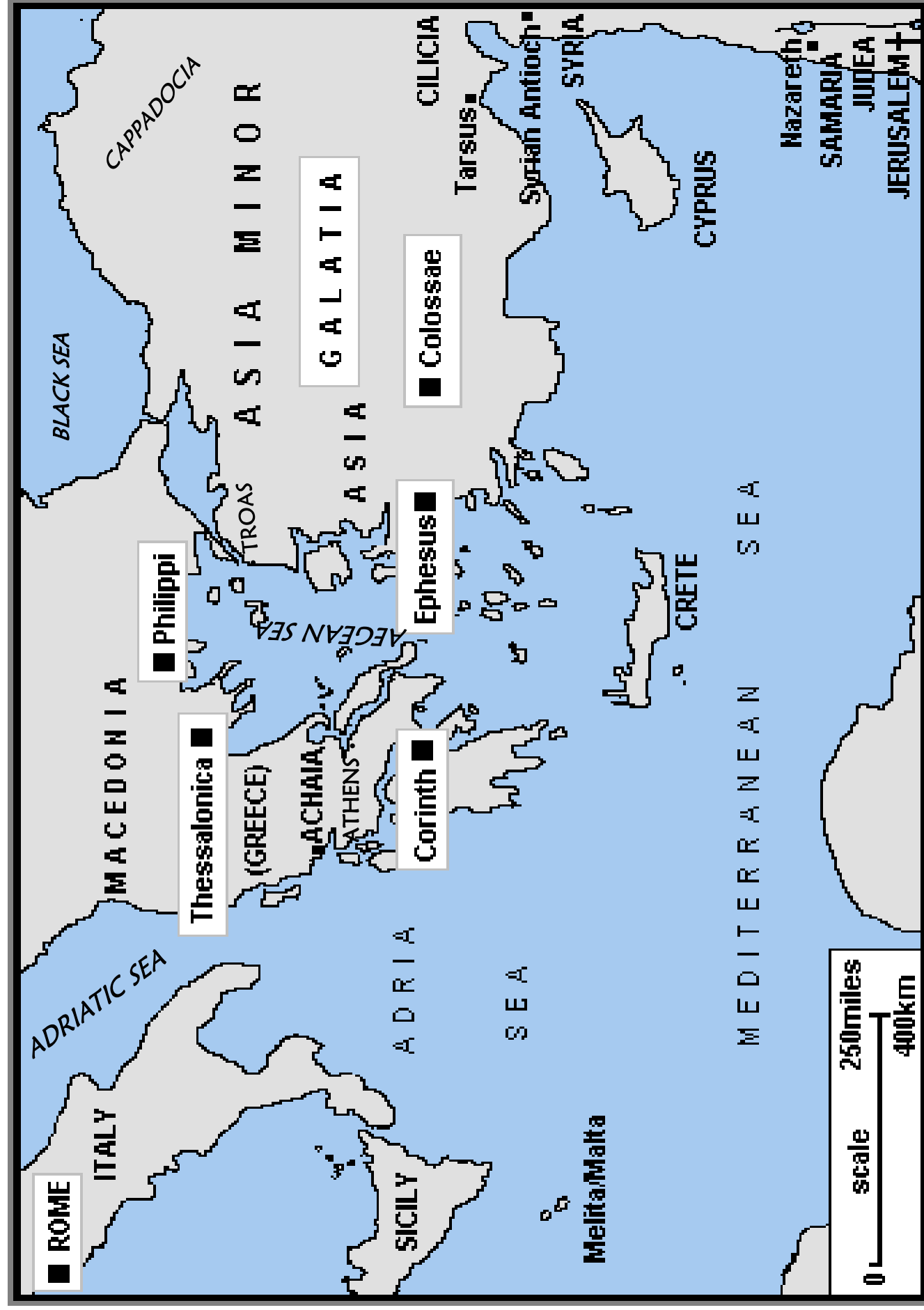
Letter	Date	Written from
1 Thessalonians	50 AD	Corinth
Galatians	54	Ephesus
1 Corinthians	56	Ephesus
Philippians	56	Ephesus <i>or 59 from Caesarea, or 61 from Rome</i>
2 Corinthians	57	Macedonia <i>Thessalonica or Philippi</i>
Philemon	58	Ephesus <i>or 61 from Rome</i>
Romans	58	Corinth

There is significant debate among scholars regarding the date and authorship of the six remaining letters. Most regard them as pseudonymous writings, i.e., having been written in Paul's name some time after the Apostle's death. While this form of writing may seem suspect to a modern reader, it was an acceptable approach at the time. It was seen as a means of perpetuating the teaching, authority and honor of the one named as author. These letters extrapolate the foundational principles of Paul's thought into newer developments and problems faced by the growing church.

While the authorship of these letters remains a matter of speculation, it should be noted that their authenticity, canonicity and inspiration are not questioned. Whether written by Paul or someone writing in the name of Paul, the church accepts these as authoritative Scripture.

Letter	Date
2 Timothy	69 AD (or 90) <i>debate on date ranges greatly</i>
Colossians	80s
2 Thessalonians	90s <i>possibly a compilation of portions of several authentic Pauline writings</i>
Ephesians	90s
1 Timothy	95
Titus	98

THE WORLD OF PAUL



The Cities & Churches of Paul

Thessalonica

Thessalonica was located in Macedonia at the intersection of two major Roman roads. In 146 BC it became the capital of the Roman Province of Macedonia. Paul, Silas and Timothy came to Thessalonica from Philippi on Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 17). He preached in the city's synagogue, the chief synagogue of the region, for at least three weeks. When some of the residents turned against him, Paul fled to Berea, but certain Thessalonians followed him and eventually forced him to leave there also.

Galatia

A region of central Asia Minor, Galatia was settled by Gallic Celts in the Third Century BC, later becoming a Roman province, with its capital at Ancyra. Paul traveled through the region on his second and third journeys, establishing a number of Christian communities. Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia was probably written from Ephesus about the year 54; it addresses the confusion caused by the insistence of some of the "Juadaizers" that Gentile believers follow the Mosaic Law. In his letters to other churches, Paul makes note of the Galatians eagerness to contribute to the collection for the Church of Jerusalem.

Corinth

The city of Corinth was situated on the isthmus which joins the Peloponnesus to the mainland of Greece. Here ships between the Adriatic and Aegean Seas could be hauled out of the water and towed six miles across the isthmus, avoiding the dangerous trip around the peninsula. Due to its advantageous location, Corinth became a major center of commerce. It was also the site of the Isthmian Games. At the time of Paul, the large population was quite wealthy and diverse. There were already Christians in the city when Paul arrived there, including the married couple, Aquila and Prisca, who had fled from persecution in Rome.

Philippi

Founded by Philip II of Macedon, Philippi was located on the Via Ignatia, the major east-west road joining the Adriatic and Aegean Seas. It was the first city of Europe visited by Paul, accompanied by Silas, Timothy and Luke, who, according to Acts 16, were directed there as a result of a vision. It was in Philippi that Paul baptized Lydia, and the missionaries stayed in her home. As a result of the unrest caused by their preaching, Paul and Silas were arrested, flogged and imprisoned. While in jail, their behavior converted their jailer and his family.

Ephesus

Located in the Roman Province of Asia, Ephesus was a major seaport and marketing center with a population of about 250,000. Its temple of Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and made the city a center of pagan worship. Paul spent several years there, including some time in prison. Timothy served as one of the Christian community's early leaders. According to ancient tradition, the Apostle John brought Mary, the Mother of Jesus, to live nearby, and local tradition claims they both died there.

Questions for reflection and faith-sharing

- As we begin this study, what do you already know about St. Paul? What are your impressions of him as a person? What about him inspires you? Disturbs you?
- In Galatians, Paul recounts his encounter with Christ and the impact it had on his life. How have you experienced Jesus, and how has this given direction to your life?
- Why is it important to know something about Paul's life before reading his letters? Why is it important to know something about the cities and communities to whom he wrote?
- Which of the issues facing the churches of Paul's time are still with us today?
- Why was the resurrection so important to Paul? In what way is it important to you? How does the doctrine of the resurrection shape your understanding of everyday life?
- Throughout his letters, Paul argues forcefully against the distinction between Jew and Gentile. What are some of the distinctions we make among people today? What would Paul say about these?
- As we read through Paul's letters, we can see that Paul not only impacted the communities he was part of, but these communities also formed Paul and shaped his understanding of the Gospel. In what ways does being part of a parish form you? How does your everyday experience of other people shape your understanding of the Gospel?
- Paul impacted the church not only through his writings, but also through his preaching, his example, the witness of his life, and through the martyrdom of his death. In what way does St. Paul most inspire you? How can you make this a part of your life?

Resources for Additional Study

Paul of Tarsus: A Visionary Life

Edward Stourton; Hidden Spring Books

An Introduction to the New Testament

Part III: The Pauline Letters

Raymond E. Brown; Doubleday

What Paul Meant

Gary Wills; Viking Press

The Mind of St. Paul

William Barclay; Harper & Row

Human Authors of the New Testament:

Vol. 2: Paul & John

William Dicharry; CM; Liturgical Press

Collegeville Bible Commentary:

New Testament, Vol. 6: Galatians and Romans

John J. Pilch; Liturgical Press

Collegeville Bible Commentary:

New Testament, Vol. 8: 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Philemon, 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians

Ivan Havener, OSB; Liturgical Press

The Great Courses Series:

The Apostle Paul

Luke Timothy Johnson; The Teaching Company

The Beginnings of the Church

Chapter Four: The First Christian Communities

Chapter Five: The Churches in the Letters of Paul

Frederick J. Cwiekowski; Paulist Press