

Paul's Letters Background

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Table of Contents

Paul's Letters.....	1
Paul's Early Ministry.....	1
Paul's Ministry in Ephesus.....	1
Paul's Second Visit to Corinth.....	1
The Disturbance and Paul's Arrest in Ephesus.....	2
Paul's Appeal to Caesar in Rome.....	3
Final Months in Ephesus.....	3
Paul in Macedonia.....	4
56: The Lost Year.....	5
The Contribution, Jerusalem, and Imprisonment.....	6
Final Years.....	6

Paul's Letters Background

Paul's Letters

The following describes the background surrounding the writing of Paul's letters.

Paul's Early Ministry

Paul began persecuting the church in Jerusalem within months after Pentecost. In 31, he traveled to Damascus, where Jesus met him on the road. After traveling to Arabia, where he apparently ran into trouble with the king, he returned to Damascus and then went to Jerusalem in 33. His stay there lasted 15 days, when forced to leave, he ended up settling in Tarsus.

Around 42, Barnabas brought him to Antioch, and they brought famine relief to Jerusalem in 43. In 45, Paul made a second visit to Jerusalem, where he met with James, Peter, and John. Shortly after that, Peter visited Antioch; his visit was marred by Judaizers who also came from Jerusalem.

Paul traveled to Crete and Galatia in 46-47 and returned to Antioch. Soon after, Judaizers went to Galatia and disrupted the churches, leading Paul to write *Galatians* in 47. His letter created a controversy that led to the council in Jerusalem in 48.

Paul quickly took the council's letter and Silas and set out for Galatia. Having reached Corinth, he wrote *1 Thessalonians* in 50 and *2 Thessalonians* in 51. He then visited Ephesus and returned to Antioch.

In 52, he set out for Galatia for a third visit and then settled in Ephesus.

Paul's Ministry in Ephesus

Luke portrayed Paul's ministry in Ephesus as effective and uneventful; this was half true. Paul's preaching had a great effect, and the Jews quickly became jealous and began to plot against him, following a familiar pattern in *Acts*.

Paul's Second Visit to Corinth

In the second or third quarter of 54, Paul visited Corinth. This visit had not turned out well, as a group of dissidents was forming in the church that despised Paul because of his lack of formal Greek-style training. This situation was made worse by Apollos because he fit their expectations of an eloquent and learned speaker, although Apollos had no part in it. A year later, as Paul wrote *1 Corinthians*, Apollos refused to visit the church.

Paul's Letters Background

The Disturbance and Paul's Arrest in Ephesus

In October of 54, Agrippina assassinated her husband, the emperor Claudius, and had her son, Nero, appointed emperor. She then sent instructions to Ephesus to have the proconsul assassinated as well. The two assassins then took on the role of proconsul for two to three months, until a proper replacement was sent by the Senate. The delay was caused by difficulties traveling during the winter.

In the fourth quarter of 54, shortly after the assassination of the proconsul, the Jews plotted to use a mob to do away with Paul. One of their number, a metalworker named Alexander, helped incite the silversmiths to create a disturbance. Perhaps the Jews chose this time because the Roman government was disrupted. The silversmiths, led by Demetrius, proclaimed that Paul's teachings threatened Artemis, whose temple was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. This event had strong parallels to the one in Thessalonica as described in *Acts 17:5ff*.

Aristarchus and at least one other of Paul's assistants were swept up and dragged into the theater, but Paul's friends prevented him from going in as well. With the mob gathered in the city theater and ready to riot, Alexander attempted to address them. However, his plan backfired when the mob realized that he was a Jew, and they simply chanted for some two hours.

Finally, the city official addressed the crowd, warning them that the Romans could bring severe consequences upon the city because of the disturbance. He told them that the courts were in session and that there were proconsuls, tactfully acknowledging the unusual governance arrangement.

Paul's opponents took advantage of the fake proconsuls and brought Paul before them. Some of Paul's assistants were also arrested, including Aristarchus and Epaphras. The false proconsuls condemned Paul to beast-fighting, even though Paul, as a Roman citizen, was exempt from the more cruel punishments. At this time, many of the Christians in Asia distanced themselves from Paul. The punishment was carried out, but the beast, possibly a lion, refused to attack Paul, as sometimes happened.

The proper proconsul arrived in the first quarter of 55, in time to prevent further attempts to execute Paul. He found Paul condemned to death and his associates also confined, so he conducted another trial, during which Paul appealed to Caesar. The proconsul then kept Paul imprisoned, possibly in the fort west of Ephesus later known as Saint Paul's Prison, along with his assistants, until he could transport Paul to Rome in late March.

During this time, Onesimus managed to run away from Philemon and take refuge with Paul. Under Paul's influence, Onesimus became a Christian, and Paul persuaded him to return to

Paul's Letters Background

Philemon. Paul wrote what seems to be a personal note to Philemon, but the note was likely read to the church in Philemon's house, adding to the pressure Philemon felt to take Onesimus back.

Paul also wrote *Ephesians* and *Colossians*, as he could not visit the churches himself, and fear and uncertainty gripped them all. Paul sent Onesimus back with Tychicus to Philemon in Colosse.

The exact relationship between *Ephesians* and *Colossians* is unclear. Perhaps Paul wrote *Ephesians* first and sent Tychicus to deliver it to Ephesus and then to the churches to the north and east. As Tychicus went about this task, Paul then wrote *Colossians* and *Philemon*. Tychicus returned to Paul, picked up the additional letters, and then headed southeast to Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.

Paul's Appeal to Caesar in Rome

Early in the second quarter of 55, the proconsul in Ephesus sent Paul to Rome to appeal to Caesar. At least Timothy accompanied Paul. Onesiphorus immediately followed after Paul, knowing that someone would have to meet Paul's needs while he was held as a prisoner in Rome. In addition, the church in Philippi sent Epaphroditus for the same reason.

Paul was held in the Praetorian Guard barracks, where he would be kept in chains. However, his positive attitude and refined behavior soon gained the respect of the Guard. Some Christians who were members of Caesar's household also had access to Paul and met his needs.

Epaphroditus arrived from Philippi in poor health and expressed the concern of the church. Paul quickly wrote *Philippians* from Rome.

Nero, or perhaps his mentors, heard Paul's appeal and acquitted him. Perhaps the circumstances around his arrest and the illegal punishment Paul had survived worked in Paul's favor. In addition, Nero, then 16 years old, abhorred the death penalty in his youth and was inclined to clemency. Paul was transported back to Ephesus, arriving sometime in the third quarter of 55.

Final Months in Ephesus

Shortly after Paul's return, he received news from Corinth telling him of various serious problems in the church there. The divisions had grown worse, and all sorts of sin and disorder went unchecked. Paul's beast-fighting sentence was common knowledge, and this no doubt encouraged those opposed to Paul.

Paul's Letters Background

In response, Paul wrote *1 Corinthians*. Once he was passed the greeting in the first nine verses, Paul's tone was cold, admonishing, and lacking affection. In chapter 5, he rebuked the church for tolerating an immoral man and ordered that he be expelled. In one of his last sentences, he said, "If someone does not love the Lord, let him be cursed!" Paul seemed to be exhausted and lacking the patience and concern that marked *1 & 2 Thessalonians*.

In the letter, Paul said that he wanted to remain in Ephesus until Pentecost, which occurred during the spring. However, he was still facing a great deal of opposition.

Paul sent the letter with Titus and waited for him to return with news of how the letter was received. However, for whatever reason, Paul did not remain in Ephesus. Instead, late in the third quarter or early in the fourth quarter of 55, he headed north to Troas and settled there to minister. Again for reasons that are not clear, Paul suddenly left Troas, leaving a cloak and some expensive books behind. He crossed over to Macedonia, where he found Titus.

Paul in Macedonia

Late in the fourth quarter of 55, Paul found Titus and heard about the situation in Corinth. Titus came with good news and bad news. Overall, the church was deeply grieved by what Paul wrote and moved to repentance. They had expelled the immoral brother, as Paul had commanded, but the brother had repented, and the church was uncertain how to respond.

In addition, the faction opposed to Paul had dug in; furthermore, highly trained Jewish Christians had come to Corinth as teachers, and a faction had hired them to teach against Paul. Paul had wanted the church to deal with these issues on their own, but these teachers forced Paul into an eventual showdown.

Paul was shaken by the news; he wanted to reply, but he needed to heal before he addressed the church in Corinth again. At the same time, he wanted to put Ephesus behind him and start his ministry again. As he prepared to send out his assistants, Demas deserted him and returned to Ephesus. Paul, intending to travel west to the coast of the Adriatic Sea, sent Titus on ahead of him, and he sent his other assistants to different places so that only Luke was left. He then wrote a highly personal and urgent letter to Timothy late in the fourth quarter of 55.

In *2 Timothy*, Paul opened up about how difficult the prior year had been, even as he encouraged Timothy to keep up the fight. At one point, Paul actually talked as if he had done as much as he could and that he wanted God to take him. However, Paul gathered himself, acknowledged how God had strengthened and protected him, and told Timothy to come to him quickly, bringing Mark with him. He also wanted Timothy to gather his belongings in Troas as well. In addition, Paul warned Timothy about Hymenaeus and his false teaching.

Paul's Letters Background

Timothy soon arrived, and Paul sat down to write *2 Corinthians*. He wanted to address two groups in the church. The first was the main part of the church who were struggling to live faithfully. They had been wounded by Paul's previous letter, and Paul wanted to pour himself out to them. The second was the dissidents, whom Paul intended to rebuke and even threaten. However, he wanted to approach them in a way that would cause the rest to sympathize with him against the dissidents.

To accomplish this, Paul wrote in three distinct sections. The first section is full of Paul's love and concern for the church. He praised them for obeying his command to expel the immoral brother, but he also encouraged them to receive the repentant man back and comfort him.

The second section dealt with the contribution on behalf of the church in Jerusalem that Paul was amassing in Greece, Macedonia, Asia, and Galatia. Paul encouraged the church to give diligently but cheerfully and not under compulsion.

The third section slammed the dissidents. Paul did this by pretending to accept the many criticisms made against him even as he made clear that he would not tolerate the fractious behavior any longer. Finally, he openly threatened the faction, warning them that he planned to visit the church again within the year.

56: The Lost Year

After Paul wrote *2 Corinthians* in early 56, we have little evidence about what he did for the rest of the year. *Acts* says only that Paul spent three months in Greece before he began to carry the contribution for the church to Jerusalem in early 57. We know that Paul headed west and preached in Illyricum, where he had recently sent Titus. Paul spent the last part of the three months in Greece, some of that in Corinth.

One of Paul's goals during this year was to be able to leave the churches in the east able to move forward without him. He likely wrote *1 Timothy* in the first quarter of 56; it appears to be an ordination letter. Paul was setting up Timothy as bishop over Ephesus, and by extension, all of Asia. The letter was meant to be read publicly, with Timothy present, and it discussed various issues that Paul wanted Timothy to address going forward. In the letter, Paul also reinforced that he had expelled Hymenaeus from the church after he refused to repent.

During the middle of 56, we may speculate that Paul and Titus traveled to Crete to visit churches that had sprung up there. Paul introduced Titus to the churches and then left. Shortly after that, Paul wrote an ordination letter for Titus. Perhaps the letter for Titus was shorter because Titus was older and more experienced than Timothy; *Galatians* 2:1–3 indicate that Titus had traveled with Paul to Jerusalem around 46. In the letter, Paul told Titus that he intended to spend the winter in Nicopolis, on the Adriatic coast of northwestern Greece. This fits with Luke's description of Paul spending three months in Greece.

Paul's Letters Background

The Contribution, Jerusalem, and Imprisonment

Paul spent at least the beginning of 57 in Corinth. He was pulling the contribution for Jerusalem together and preparing to travel as soon as it was safe. While he was doing this, he took time to write to the church in Rome.

Paul wrote *Romans* early in the first quarter of 57. He had promised to visit the church there and his plans had fallen through. In addition, the church in Rome was struggling. Early church tradition is vague, but Peter seems to have helped found the church in the 40s, working among the very large Jewish population in the city. Then, around 49, the emperor Claudius expelled “all” the Jews from Rome because of disturbances that seem to have had to do with Christians. In reality, mostly wealthy and prominent Jews were forced to leave, but among them were the Jewish leaders in the church, including Aquila and Priscilla. In early 55, after Claudius’ death, Jews had begun to return, Aquila and Priscilla among them. The Christian Jews found that the church was led by Gentiles.

This led to conflicts between the Jews and the Gentiles in the church, with the Jews claiming that the Gentiles were too lax and the Gentiles claiming that the Jews were legalistic. In addition, Paul’s legal issues posed a problem for the Gentile leaders, and some Jews opposed Paul’s message of faith apart from the observance of the Law of Moses. Paul wrote to defend his Gospel message and to address the breaches between the Jews and the Gentiles.

This was the last of Paul’s letters that were included in the New Testament.

Acts covers the next five years of Paul’s life in detail, from his journey to Jerusalem, the disturbance there and his subsequent arrest, his trials and detention in Caesarea, his journey to Rome, and his detention there.

Final Years

After this, we must rely on tradition. Clement of Rome said that Paul ministered as far west as Spain. In addition, Paul had a significant impact on the church in Rome, so he is frequently mentioned with Peter as a founder of the church. Sometime around 67, Paul and Peter were both handed over to the Roman authorities, and Paul was beheaded.