

# “Getting to Know Paul”

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:10-11; 18-25

9/17/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Moving from the larger picture of Paul’s life into this letter to the people in Corinth, it’s helpful to have a sense of how all this came about. When did Paul write this? Why did he write the letter? And finally, we’ll try to summarize the powerful influence Paul had on the history of the Christian Church and in our continuing understanding of our faith.

I’ll mention this almost in passing, but to most people, there isn’t a lot of interest in the fact that most Biblical scholars feel we are missing some of Paul’s writings. Some feel that Paul wrote a first letter of which only a few fragments are included in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. Most all of them feel that 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians is really two letters with the order reversed. But the reason students of the Bible have put so many years into trying to figure out how and when these books were written is that it simply helps us understand why he was saying what he did.

You already know from Acts and Paul’s own writings that he was born into a Jewish family that had achieved Roman citizenship, living in the cosmopolitan Greek-Speaking<sup>1</sup> Roman colony of Tarsus (a regional capitol located in Southern Turkey). He was best known as Gamaliel’s star pupil Saul, the Pharisee and teacher.<sup>2</sup>

There are some discrepancies between Paul’s accounts of his travels and Luke’s descriptions in Acts, yet Biblical scholars focusing on Paul and Luke have put together an approximation of Paul’s life, relying more on Paul’s first-hand accounts.<sup>3</sup> Luke’s concern in writing Acts was to outline how Christianity spread – not to provide a detailed point-by-point itinerary of all of Paul’s travels.<sup>4</sup> This chart

<sup>1</sup> Greco-Roman or Hellenistic culture

<sup>2</sup> Describing himself as a circumcised “Hebrew born and bred” from the Israelite tribe of Benjamin (Phil. 3:5-6)

<sup>3</sup> See the helpful chart in Harris, page 261

<sup>4</sup> This is because the author of Acts compiled the travel narratives from various sources but appears to have worked with inadequate documentation in recording Paul’s career. The author of Acts seems to be unaware of Paul’s voluminous

of the probable events and sequences in Paul’s life is helpful in approximating what happened and when.<sup>5</sup> But I’ll mention that although this sequence of events may sound simple because I’m briefly explaining it, I had to look at the work of five scholars of Paul and his life and try to abstract (from their summaries) what makes the most sense to me. So this is only our best attempt to approximate what happened and it isn’t as easy as it might sound.

<b>32-34 CE</b>	Paul has vision or encounter with the risen Jesus
	Paul goes to Arabia
	Paul returns to Damascus without visiting Jerusalem (Gal. 1:16-17)
<b>35 or 36</b>	(After 3 years) Paul visits Jerusalem, meets Cephas (Peter) and James (Gal. 1:18-19)
<b>49</b>	He travels through Southeast Turkey as a missionary to Gentiles
	(14 years later) Paul visits Jerusalem a 2 <sup>nd</sup> time with Titus and Barnabas, - Discussing Gentiles given equal access to the faith
	Paul goes to Antioch, opposes Peter on issues of eating with Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-14)
<b>49-51</b>	Paul goes on 2 <sup>nd</sup> Missionary trip, starts new congregations, in Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth. He stays in <b>Corinth</b> , 18 months and writes to Thessalonians in 50 (Acts 18:11-12)
<b>52-55</b>	Goes to and stays in Ephesus and <b>writes 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians</b>
	Paul hears his opponents have taken over the Corinthian church

correspondence, arguments defending his apostleship and his detailed theological teaching.

<sup>5</sup> Essentially from Harris, page 264

	Paul returns to Corinth but is humiliated and returns to Ephesus and <b>writes a severe reprimand</b> (2 <sup>nd</sup> Cor. 10-13)
	Titus carries the letter to Corinth, but returns with good news of their return to loyalty
	Paul <b>writes a 3<sup>rd</sup> happy letter</b> (2 <sup>nd</sup> Cor. 1-9)
<b>56-57</b>	Paul makes a third and last visit to Corinth and writes Galatians
<b>61</b>	Paul writes Romans and makes plans to visit Rome on his way to Spain
	Paul goes to Jerusalem but is arrested, imprisoned at Caesarea
<b>60-62</b>	Paul is transported to Rome, remains under house arrest
<b>62-64</b>	Paul is executed in Rome under Nero

You remember that Paul demonstrated his loyalty to Pharisaic Judaism by persecuting those who believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah.<sup>6</sup> But sometime between the year 32-34, he has a vision or encounter with the risen Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

After this revelation, Paul travels to Arabia (or the lands east of the Jordan River) and then returns to Damascus without going to Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> Then, three years pass and he visits Jerusalem and meets with Cephas (the Roman name for Peter) and James. Peter (the fisherman) is now the head of the Jerusalem church community of Jewish Christians along with James (one of Jesus' former close colleagues)<sup>9</sup> who is also a leader.<sup>10</sup>

Next, Paul goes on his first "missionary" journey to the Gentiles, traveling through Southeast Turkey but generally staying clear of Jewish Christian churches.<sup>11</sup>

A full fourteen years later, (*and we can't help but wonder what he did for those 14 years*), Paul

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13-14

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor. 15:9-10; Gal. 1:11-12, 16

<sup>8</sup> Gal. 1:16-17

<sup>9</sup> see Harris' convenient list of Biblical characters on page 96

<sup>10</sup> Gal. 1:18-19

<sup>11</sup> Gal. 1:22

makes a second visit to Jerusalem in the year 49 CE with Titus and Barnabas. This trip is to confer with Peter, John and James and other church representatives from Antioch. They meet to discuss admitting Gentiles as equal members of the Christian Church.<sup>12</sup> After this Jerusalem summit, Paul goes to Antioch where he opposes Peter over the issue of dining with Gentiles.<sup>13</sup> People who would like to feel that the Christian Church has always been in peaceful agreement on all things — just haven't ever read Acts, Corinthians or the rest of the New Testament.

Paul goes on his second missionary journey from Antioch through Greece. On this trip, he starts the first Christian congregations of Europe which include Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth but he stays in Corinth for a year and a half (49-51 CE). From Corinth, he writes a letter to the Thessalonians (50 CE).<sup>14</sup> He moves to and stays in Ephesus for three years and writes 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians in the year 54 or 55.<sup>15</sup>

Keeping in mind that Paul had lived in Corinth and worked in that congregation which he had started, he had now received reports of problems in his old church from the household of Chloe (1:11) and from Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17). There were two general reasons for writing this letter that we call "1 Corinthians."

First, while he was away from them, living in Ephesus, they had divided into factions, claiming to be followers of either Apollos, Cephas (Peter in Jerusalem), Paul or even Jesus. Apollos was supposed to be an eloquent speaker and well trained in the Old Testament Jewish scriptures. Acts and Romans describe him as an enthusiastic and accomplished teacher<sup>16</sup> and he was known to be a charismatic speaker and leader. So Apollos was there in Corinth and Peter was just as powerful and respected back in Jerusalem. You know how people who are followers like to rally around a particular person — and they certainly did in Corinth. Do you

<sup>12</sup> Gal. 2:1-10, Acts 15

<sup>13</sup> Gal. 2:11-14

<sup>14</sup> See Acts 18:11-12

<sup>15</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Acts 18:24-26 & Romans 12:11

see evidence of that in parts of your life in the organizations to which you belong?

So Paul was writing, trying to get them to stop quarrelling, picking sides, playing favorites and forming factions.

The second thing Paul was trying to do was answer questions they had raised about the Christian life and what they should believe regarding certain newly emerging issues. So Paul wrote this magnificent letter that we'll continue to study all this fall.

As was done by letter writers of that time, Paul dictated his letters to a scribe and occasionally added a signature or a few words by his own hand. These scribes were not "touch-typists" and they only paraphrased the gist of what was said.<sup>17</sup> And like his Corinthian letters, his other letters were composed under pressure of meeting an emergency in a particular church (except Romans went to a congregation he had not yet visited). In most every case, Paul was trying to be pastoral to people who were in a crisis in belief or behavior.

But here is another thing. These letters were written to be read aloud to the church as it was gathered. His writings to the Corinthians were letters and they contained conventional greetings, blessings and salutations typical of letters of his times. Mostly, they were essentially speeches containing arguments and rebuttals as well as teachings.

Paul, then, always chose someone who not only had the expression to read it as if *he* were reading it – he picked people who, after they read it, could interpret it and explain his words when there were questions or need for further elaboration. The individuals Paul chose to deliver his letters, then, had to have pastoral skills in order to be sensitive, fair and accommodating but display leadership as the members responded and reacted to what he or she had just read them in their gathering. Paul mentioned various friends with whom he traveled and who were occasionally involved in delivering his letters. Percilla and Aquilla, Titus – whomever

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<sup>17</sup> Rom. 16:21-22; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; Philemon 19:2; Thess. 3:17

Paul chose, we can be sure they were very competent people.

After he had written his first letter, Paul then hears from his friends in Corinth that certain leaders had emerged in that church who outwardly oppose him. Apparently they were Jewish Christians from the central church in Jerusalem. Paul claims these opponents must have been teaching about "another Jesus and another gospel" — at least they had different interpretations about the Christian life and beliefs. *Remember, Paul had strong disagreements with the leaders of the Jerusalem church about accommodating Gentiles.* These leaders were so critical of Paul's teachings and personal integrity that they caused the church to seriously doubt his credentials as an apostle. Paul is so upset when he hears about this negativity, that he comes back into that region of Greece<sup>18</sup> and makes a brief but painfully humiliating visit in the church.<sup>19</sup>

His visit is a disaster. In dejection and failure, he returns to Ephesus where he writes a severe letter of reprimand (but the ancient manuscripts placed this piece as part of what we call the second letter to Corinth (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. chapters 10-13). In this second letter, with biting mockery, Paul refers to his opponents as "superlative apostles" because the issue is about his credentials as a true apostle of Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Titus carries this letter (of which we only have a part) to the church and then comes back to Paul in Macedonia, this time, with good news. He reports that the Corinthians are sorry for their behavior and now wish to support him. So Paul writes what is actually a third and very happy letter (that is placed in our modern Bibles in 2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. chapters 1-9).

Finally, Paul makes a third and last visit to Corinth and from there, he writes the very mature and general theological summary we call the book of "Galatians."<sup>21</sup> A few years later, he writes the book of "Romans"<sup>22</sup> and also makes plans to visit Rome on his way to Spain.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Acts 19:1,10,22

<sup>19</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Cor 2:1-5; 7:12

<sup>20</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 11:5

<sup>21</sup> 56 or 57 BCE

<sup>22</sup> 61 BCE

<sup>23</sup> Rom. 15:23-29

Paul finally goes to Jerusalem but he is arrested and imprisoned at Caesarea.<sup>24</sup> Under armed guard, Paul is transported to Rome where he stays under house arrest for two years (probably 60-62).<sup>25</sup> Paul is executed in Rome under Nero sometime in 62-64 CE.

In the grand scheme of all of Christianity, Paul's life dominates the second half of Acts and the history of the early church. He also dominates the later history of Christian thought as his letters take up about a third of the New Testament.<sup>26</sup> Scholars fully agree on his authorship of seven letters<sup>27</sup> and the rest of the epistles are considered to be attributed to him out of profound respect for all he taught and did.

Paul was the architect in designing, the interpreter in explaining and the chief promotional person responsible for taking Christianity from being a Jewish sect to making it a world-class religion for all peoples. It was Paul who outlined (in Romans and Galatians) a theology of redemption through faith that is central to Christianity's self-understanding. And later in history came the Roman church father Augustine (354-430) and then later Martin Luther, (in 1483-1546)<sup>28</sup> the German priest. These two leaders reaffirmed Paul's initial doctrines and beliefs about our relationship with God not being based on legalism but on faith in God's unconditional love through Christ.<sup>29</sup> When Martin Luther did it, it started the Protestant Reformation.

So as we spend our time together on this letter, it may be helpful to keep in mind that this is a church minister writing to people he knew well and cared about. At every point, it probably would be useful to ask yourself, if you were Paul, how would you advise these people who have asked you for help on a particular issue. Perhaps through reading and empathizing with Paul (as he faced these

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<sup>24</sup> under Antonius Felix, procurator of Judea, c.52-59 and Felix's successor, Porcius Festus.

<sup>25</sup> Acts 27-28

<sup>26</sup> Harris, p259.

<sup>27</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, Philippians and Philemon

<sup>28</sup> who ignited the Protestant Reformation

<sup>29</sup> Even Mark, a companion of Paul's, was influenced by Paul's ideas on how the gospel is for Gentile believers (when we look at his account of the last Supper and the crucifixion.)

questions and conflicts), you can try your hand at being a minister of a church.

Perhaps most important in all this talk about how great a person Paul was, is the question about ourselves. Because it is relatively easy to talk about other people, isn't it? But the effort we make in analyzing behavior would be best directed at what we can improve – and that would be our own circle of influence.

If Paul was a healer, an educator and one who gave support for that Church, how about you? How do you relate to this community here? How does your life affect what others feel, think and do?

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