

Pauline Chronology: Life and Letters

*Father, thank You for this splendid, glorious early spring day. Thank You for the way You have made things. Lord, we are cognizant of the fact that the fall has marred so much of what You have made that was good, especially human life and relationships, thinking, and acting. And so we are surrounded by discouraging reports and disheartening facts even in our own lives. Lord, we are surrounded by pain, grief, death, suffering, and mourning, and yet we see that there is something very good at the heart of what You have made. And so we ask You, Lord, that these times of reflecting on Your Word would be times of renewal in our minds and our hearts, of apprehending that which You are doing in our lives: changing us according to Your purposes and making us aware of the great deeds that You have done in our lives. Lord, we know that we are not freed from suffering but yet we praise You that You have promised Your unceasing presence in the midst of it. And so we pray that You would mature us, even now, through Your Word. We pray this for Your sake and to Your Glory. Amen.*

I want to summarize a little of the lesson from the last lecture. The issue between indicative and imperative in Galatians is this: on the one hand, Paul says that we have been crucified with Christ as a statement of fact. That would be an indicative. But he also says we need to watch out and put to death that which is sinful. That is an indication of a process, something that needs to grow in our lives. That would be the imperative. Galatians 5:13 and 16 refer to this process of growth. Galatians 5:24 refers to the accomplished fact of God's work in our lives, the indicative. So Galatians 5:13 and 16 are imperative references to growth, and Galatians 5:24 is an indication of the indicative—the state that we are in. As you look at all of Paul's teaching you will find this pattern of we are already this, and we are becoming this. There is a certain tension held here between the statements of the fact of Christ's completed work in our lives on the one hand, and the work that God is doing now on the other. Remember Philippians 1:6: He who has begun a good work in you [or, 'among you'] will carry it on to completion." You see that there is something that has begun, something that is in the process of coming.

As we begin this lecture, I have a question I would like you to be thinking about. How do you approach new issues and problems as a Christian? Particularly as we look at First and Second Thessalonians, but also later on in Philemon. You will see that Paul has a wonderful way as the messenger of God to approach these new issues. Perhaps we can learn something about how we approach new issues in our lives with the Gospel, and also see what kind of problems were facing the Church then, and are facing the Church now. Thus we will have two questions to ask: how were problems approached, and what kinds of problems arose then—are they applicable to our lives today?

Thus far we have spent much time looking at Acts, seeing how the early church moves forward and goes through its expansion. We have also spent some time on Galatians as a first approach of Paul to the particular problem of the Judaizers—the problem of falling back into a self-centered godliness or righteousness rather than finding justification and sanctification in Christ. I believe I said in a previous lecture that the letters Paul writes are addressing the specific issues that are unearthed as he brings the Gospel into Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and, in the end, to Rome. These letters address the problems and challenges that come up as new groups of people are presented with the Gospel of truth—the Gospel of returning to a reconciled relationship with God. Thus we find a multiplicity of effects, of factors, of problems, and they begin really with Paul's conversion.

Paul spent his childhood in Tarsus. We do not know exactly when he came to Jerusalem, but more scholarship seems to indicate that it was earlier rather than later. It was perhaps at age 12 or so that Saul moved from Tarsus, his place of birth, to Jerusalem. All we know of his time in Jerusalem is that he was educated under Gamaliel, a very highly-respected teacher of the law. He was of the school of the

Pharisees and the particular faction of the school of Hillel. He was a member of the Sanhedrin and a persecutor of the Christian church. That is what we know from Acts 26:10, one of the testimonies that Saul gives about his early life. We know a good bit about the conversion event, which is described three times in Acts. There are also references back to this great and significant event in the Pauline Epistles.

Remember that I have tried to present here and elsewhere the important fact that Saul was not troubled in his soul at the time of his conversion. He was not insecure about what he was doing, sitting under a tree before Damascus thinking, "What am I doing here? I think I am not quite pure before God. Who knows whether I am acceptable before God?" I do not believe that is the state of mind that Saul is in as he goes toward Damascus. I think he is riding the crest of success, feeling that he is fighting and performing his best for God. At that very highest point of performance for God, Jesus appears to him and says, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" At that point Saul had to see that the sum total of his own abilities to follow God's purposes was not just a small deficit, but it amounted to him being an enemy of God. That shakes his entire foundation, his understanding of what it means to live a godly life. He was not just slightly improper, slightly insufficient, but he found himself to be directly opposed to what God intended. How is that possible if you study the Scriptures all your life and have been taught by the most respected teacher, Gamaliel? He had not only learned, but also practiced the Word, and he found himself to be the enemy of God. How is that possible? That is the shaking event that Saul has before the gates of Damascus. His eyes are blinded as an external indication of internal blindness. He has to be led as a blind person into Damascus and he does not know what is happening to him. He is not a person shaken inside before this event. He is a person shaken inside after this event. He has to reconsider everything. "Who is God? What are God's purposes? How does the Old Testament relate to all of this? I must have mistaken it all to come up so short, so wrong, and so opposed to the purposes of God."

This is Paul's conversion, dated at around A.D. 34, as described in Acts nine and other parallel passages. He moved from Damascus briefly to Jerusalem three years after his conversion, as mentioned in Galatians 1:18. Then there were the "dark years" of Saul's, or now Paul's, life. This was a time of living back in his home town, probably speaking in synagogues around there concerning the fact that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. He was probably looking through the Old Testament, perhaps again studying Psalm 110, Psalm 2, and Isaiah 53. Many passages that Gamaliel and his other teachers did not really capably describe to him suddenly made sense now that he realized that the crucified Jesus, the one who had been confessed by the early Christians as Lord, is the one who is worthy of receiving worship and is indeed enthroned by the will of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This was an enormous change and God needed to give Paul a few years of quiet and reflecting. Perhaps these are times also where Paul had further revelations from God, but really the key revelation was the encounter at the gates of Damascus and from there he had to rethink everything.

It is then in around A.D. 45 that Barnabas the bridge builder remembers that there is a capable interpreter of the Old Testament who believes in Messiah Jesus up in Tarsus. He calls Paul from Tarsus to minister with him in Pisidian Antioch, which has become the second base, after Jerusalem, of growth in the early church. This was perhaps the first multiethnic church where there were Greeks and Hebrews together. There were people from other nations, and so there was a lot of growth happening in Antioch that perhaps was not so noticed in Jerusalem. Paul ministers with Barnabas in Antioch for approximately one year. They instruct and teach, but Paul also learns from Barnabas. Barnabas has close contacts with the apostles in Jerusalem. He is a trusted person, and so Barnabas the bridge builder brings Paul into the circle of ministry of the early church. Paul visits Jerusalem in A.D. 47, probably referred to in Acts 11:27-ff and Galatians 2:1-10. Fourteen years after his conversion, he visits again in Jerusalem, bringing support for the famine. Paul and the leaders of the church in Jerusalem meet and greet one another. The

agreement is that the Gospel that Paul is preaching and the Gospel that has been entrusted into the care of the disciples in Jerusalem is one Gospel. This is enormously significant and important.

It is from Pisidian Antioch that Paul and Barnabas are sent out for their missionary journey (Acts 13 and 14). Paul is moving into what would be known as South Galatia, if you use the Roman nomenclature. The Galatian province included South and North Galatia and Paul and Barnabas minister in these southern regions. Their ministry is not just evangelism, but also church planting. I find it interesting that with evangelism in the church today there appears to be a stronger return to the concern to plant churches rather than to merely evangelize. I do not want to belittle the effort and the challenge to evangelize, but the importance of planting churches seems to be understood again in contemporary work. It is amazing that the first missionary journey was not merely evangelistic, but it also led to the planting of churches in these places. It is after the return from that first church planting journey that Paul writes his letter to the Galatians.

You see that where the Gospel is presented, there are problems. If you feel called to the ministry in any shape or form and you hope that you will have a life of ease, lovely solitude, and pleasant conversation over a cup of tea, you are thinking in the wrong direction. The Gospel is the Gospel of truth, of light, of revelation and unveiling, of bringing to life that which is hidden, and there will be all kinds of problems inside of and around you. Luther was quite right to say that the church is a hospital. There are all kinds of things that come out right there. It is a concentrated place where all of these things come to the fore that may lay dormant before you have become a Christian—before you are engaged in and exposed to the teaching of the Word. Therefore, the book of Galatians is not a surprise. The writing of that letter shows that Paul is quite ready and aware that he has to deal with all kinds of misconceptions and attempts, by various forms of human teaching, to take away the power, clarity, simplicity, and efficiency of the Gospel. One of those teachings is that you must do your part to add to God's work, which was propagated by the Judaizers. They were teaching the Galatians to pursue the law in a self-centered way rather than to pursue godliness in a God-centered way that leads to fulfilling the law.

Following the writing of Galatians, this issue of the Judaizers begins to mature and mushroom to the point that a first council has to be called. In Acts 15:1 the issue of the council is clearly announced: there are some who believe in Messiah Jesus who say, "If you are not circumcised, you will not get to heaven." Thus that issue comes to the fore and a first council is called. This is the third major visit of Paul to Jerusalem. The council agrees that we are saved by grace through faith, not by works so that no man may boast (I am quoting Paul). After this Paul is sent on the second missionary journey. There is a disagreement with Barnabas over John Mark, and so Paul takes Silas with him. (I do not want to deal with that separation at this point, but sometimes paths need to part, even in a friendly manner.) Timothy joins them at a certain point—and Luke as well.

A.D. 50-52, recorded in Acts 15-18, marks this major journey that goes now far beyond Asia Minor. The itinerary nearly reads like a modern flight itinerary, except that this journey was a little more arduous: Jerusalem, Caesarea, Pisidian Antioch, Tarsus, Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch—these are all the places Paul had already visited, but now he is moving into Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. Paul moves into Europe via Greece. He speaks in Athens, resides in Corinth, and returns to Antioch via Ephesus, Caesarea, and Jerusalem. It is while he is residing in Corinth that Paul writes 1 Thessalonians, and then a little while later 2 Thessalonians. He resides in Corinth for about 18 months during A.D. 50-52. A very strong chronological indicator is that Paul has to stand before Gallio (Acts 18:12-16). We also note that he takes Priscilla and Aquila along to Ephesus on his second missionary journey. You remember, perhaps, that Priscilla and Aquila had been expelled from Rome. This was probably the result of a persecution of Jews and Christians that had started to arise in Rome a few years prior to this. Then

immediately following the return from the second missionary journey, Acts gives us the account of the third journey through Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia, which was in A.D. 52-57. This third missionary journey was quite lengthy, ending in the Acts account in chapter 21. Again, there is a stay in Corinth for a certain amount of time, but the base of the third missionary journey is Ephesus. The base for the first missionary journey is Pisidian Antioch, and the base for the second journey, for a longer stay, is Corinth. The longer stay of the third missionary journey is in Ephesus from A.D. 52 to 55. For over two years Paul remains in Ephesus, the capital of Asia Minor. This is the place to reach into the hinterland of Asia Minor. There we find Paul teaching in the synagogue and then also in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. From Ephesus Paul writes the first letter back to the Corinthians. We will look at this rather sad and challenging issue of Paul's relationship to the Corinthian church in the next lecture. The issue of what happens between Paul and the Corinthian church is very informative and highly relevant to us today.

2 Corinthians is probably written from somewhere in Macedonia. It is a little harder to locate where 2 Corinthians was written. Paul stays for a short visit in Corinth from which he then writes Romans, anticipating a visit to Rome. Many interpreters have asked over the years, "What was Paul's true motive in writing Romans?" We will deal with that when we get to it in another lecture. Before Pentecost in A.D. 57, Paul returns to Jerusalem; it is his last visit there. We cannot be sure of how many visits he paid to Jerusalem, but we can be sure about this last visit. We find here the fulfillment of warnings that Paul has received. He is arrested and has to give a defense before the Sanhedrin. He experiences a guarded transfer to Caesarea, which is the seat of the Roman government and the governance of Judea. Caesarean imprisonment perhaps is a little exaggerated; he is under house arrest. He has to be kept there for his own safety, actually, from Jews who would perhaps seek to kill him. He waits there under Felix, the governor of Judea, around A.D. 55-60. Under Felix, nothing happens. If you study the life of Felix and his funny dealings with the Jews, you will understand that Felix did nothing to cause trouble anymore when Paul appeared on the scene. He had dealt with so much unrest he could not afford any more. He had caused enough trouble in his time and so the only way he deals with Paul is by not dealing with him. Thus it takes Festus taking over for Felix as governor to move this process forward more speedily. A meeting of Paul and Festus is called before King Agrippa II and Bernice.

Paul is then, on the council of Festus, sent to Rome as a prisoner on account of his appeal to Caesar. I am more and more convinced that Paul was not very concerned to save his own life. Some people say he appealed to Caesar to find his own justification. I think he simply sought further open doors of witness, and the appeal to Caesar was a wonderful way to do so. Some persecuted Christians that I have read about or heard directly from have that same pattern in their hearts; they are concerned for opportunity as a witness. They are willing to suffer enormous injustice to get the opportunity to meet before people who otherwise would never listen to them. Thus, under the guise of a legal investigation, Paul is able to present the truth of the Gospel to King Agrippa II, Bernice, Felix, and Festus. And now he is setting sail to do the same thing in Rome. Paul sails for Rome in the fall of A.D. 59. He may have composed Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, Philippians, and 2 Timothy during this Caesarean detention. The reason we are a little unclear about that is because these aforementioned "prison letters" mention that Paul is imprisoned or under confinement. Since he has been imprisoned and confined several times, sometimes it is hard to say which time that is. That is the reason why some of these prison epistles may have been written during this time in Caesarea or later when Paul is under house arrest in Rome awaiting imperial trial under Caesar. The sea journey, A.D. 59-60, is an amazing journey. The shipwreck probably occurs in Malta. Paul reaches Rome around 60 A.D., at which point I believe he wrote Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, and Philippians.

Paul is a pastor commissioned by the apostles who thinks of his churches as his own children. Those of you who have been involved in church planting may be able to empathize with that. I don't think I

have ever been as concerned as I was when I was involved in church planting in Germany. I was constantly thinking about this and that person, this and that issue. I was always thinking, “How will this next church meeting go? How will the service go? How is the growth happening? How are we reaching out?” It is all-consuming and you have to be careful, especially as a young father as I was at that point, not to neglect your family—which I did at times. Here is Paul thinking about these various churches. Whether he has been there or not is really immaterial. He has a heart of gold, being concerned for the welfare of these churches. As we read these apostolic letters, God's Word to these churches, we see Paul's pastoral concern for them and we learn how God is ministering to us in our church situations today.

There is perhaps a release of Paul in A.D. 63. He may have taken a further journey to the eastern Mediterranean, perhaps to Spain. Then we speculate that there was a re-trial in Rome and then Paul's execution, most likely under Nero, in A.D. 64. There is good early forensic evidence that both Peter and Paul were martyred together under Nero's persecution in A.D. 64. This was the first local major persecution; the other ones were minor. Here the Christians were made responsible for a major fire in Rome in order to shift the blame from those truly responsible. That is a very brief and quick chronological outline of the life of Paul. We are slowly piecing into this outline the various letters, concerns, and circumstances that Paul encounters so we can get an understanding of what happens when the Gospel reaches such people as the Thessalonians.