

The Story (27) – Paul's Final Days

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I. Introduction

A. Three weeks ago, we looked at Paul's conversion and his ministry through the end of his second missionary journey. This is the period from about A.D. 33 to 51/52, so roughly 18 years. Before being brought to Antioch by Barnabas around 45/46, Paul had spent 8-10 years in Tarsus of Cilicia, where he had been sent by the brothers in Jerusalem to keep from getting killed. Paul had no doubt been preaching in Tarsus and Cilicia, but we have no details about this period of his life.

B. You will recall, I hope, that on his second missionary journey Paul stayed in Corinth over a year and a half and wrote 1 & 2 Thessalonians. When he headed back to Antioch, he left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus and sailed on to Caesarea. He then went up and greeted the church in Jerusalem and returned to Antioch. This is now probably A.D. 51/52. It was not long before he headed out again on his third missionary journey, and that's where we'll pick up.

II. Third Missionary Journey

A. After Paul left Ephesus, Apollos arrived there knowing only the baptism of John. Priscilla and Aquila explained to him the way of God more accurately, and Apollos then went to Corinth with a letter of recommendation from the brothers in Ephesus (Acts 18:24-19:1). Apollos and others, probably including Peter, built on the foundation Paul had laid in Corinth.

B. In A.D. 52 Paul began his third missionary journey and probably arrived back in Ephesus in the summer or fall of that year. He had a very fruitful ministry in that city and was there over 2 ½ years (Acts 19:8, 10, 20:31).

1. While in Ephesus, Paul learned of certain problems in the Corinthian church and wrote them a letter (referred to in 1 Cor. 5:9) in which he forbid them from associating with immoral people. This letter has not been preserved (it is not "missing" – God did not intend for it to be preserved).

2. At some point during his Ephesian ministry, Paul received reports from "some from Chloe's household" (1:11) about the ugly factionalism in Corinth. It may have been at that time that he dispatched Timothy to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17). Three church delegates (16:17) arrived with a letter from the Corinthian church and provided their own verbal reports of the state of affairs. All this information established Paul's agenda as he wrote 1 Corinthians, probably in

A.D. 54/55. It is unclear whether Timothy arrived in Corinth before or after 1 Corinthians arrived there (1 Cor. 16:10).

3. We see from 1 Corinthians that the spiritually immature believers there had formed partisan groupings that claimed to follow this or that leader. In addition, the church was marred by abuses of the Lord's table, immorality, lawsuits, uncertainties about the place of marriage and the propriety of eating food sacrificed to idols, a warped view of charismatic gifts, and a spiritualized view of the resurrection. Segments of the church were disenchanted with Paul and resistant to his leadership.

4. When Paul sent 1 Corinthians, it was his intent to remain in Ephesus until Pentecost (late May) probably of 55 and then to visit Corinth *by way of* Macedonia (16:5-8), which would put him there sometime in the winter (1 Cor. 16:6). When he formulated those plans, he felt no urgency to get to Corinth. After all, he was in no hurry to leave Ephesus since the "great door for effective work" (1 Cor. 16:9) was still open there.

5. After sending 1 Corinthians, Paul decided it would be better to visit Corinth twice, once *on the way to* Macedonia and once *on the way back* (2 Cor. 1:15-16). He then learned, perhaps when Timothy returned (1 Cor. 4:17, 16:10-11; 2 Cor. 1:1), that conditions at the church had become critical, due in part to the arrival of Judaizing intruders from Palestine who presented themselves as leaders (2 Cor. 11:4, 13-15, 22). So Paul made an emergency visit to Corinth. Though it seems he spared the rod mentioned in 1 Cor. 4:21 (see 2 Cor. 10:1-11), the visit was painful for both the Corinthians and Paul (2 Cor. 2:1-3). For whatever reason, Paul found it necessary to leave the situation in Corinth unresolved and return to Ephesus.

6. At some point, one of Paul's opponents in Corinth defied him openly, attacking him in personal and deeply insulting ways (2 Cor. 2:5-8, 10; 7:12), and this apparently was tolerated by the church. This probably occurred soon after Paul left Corinth and was reported to him.

7. Paul presumably told the Corinthians early in the emergency visit about his new plans to visit them again on his way *to and from* Macedonia. But the emergency visit turned out to be such a distressing and unproductive clash, only to be followed by the personal verbal assault that was reported to him, that Paul decided it would be better to delay his next visit until *after* his trip to Macedonia (to revert to the original itinerary). (As Luke notes in Acts 19:21, Paul's longer range plan was to go to Jerusalem after Corinth and then ultimately to make it to Rome.)

8. After returning to Ephesus from the painful emergency visit and being informed of the personal attack, Paul sent Titus to the Corinthians with the "severe letter" referred to in 2 Cor. 2:3-4, 7:8-12, a letter Paul wrote out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears. Paul assured the Corinthians of his love for them but also laid down the standards he expected in the churches and sought to determine if they would meet those

standards (2:9). He also demanded the punishment of the person who had opposed him so maliciously (2:3-9, 7:8-12). This letter also was not preserved.

9. Titus presumably let it be known that he had planned to meet Paul in Troas or Macedonia with news of their response, which told the Corinthians that Paul had changed his plan to visit them on the way *to and from* Macedonia (or perhaps Paul noted his change of plans in the letter). This opened Paul to charges that he was fickle, untrustworthy, and indifferent to the feelings of the church, which leads him to explain the change of plans in 2 Cor. 1:12 - 2:2.

10. Titus also had the responsibility, depending on the Corinthians' response to the severe letter, to organize the collection for Jerusalem (8:6) to which the Corinthians initially had been willing to contribute. Their participation in this would not only bless the poor in Jerusalem but would signal their fellowship with Paul and the apostolic church.

11. Intending to visit Corinth by way of Macedonia (and ultimately on to Jerusalem), Paul sent Timothy and Erastus ahead of him to Macedonia (Acts 19:22). Not long after doing so, a riot erupted in Ephesus, having been instigated by a silversmith named Demetrius who made silver shrines of Artemis.

C. Paul promptly left for Troas where he hoped not only to preach the gospel but to meet Titus returning with news of the Corinthian reaction to his "severe letter" (2 Cor. 2:12). When Titus did not show, Paul headed for Macedonia (2:13), which is where the cities of Philippi and Thessalonica are located, apparently in keeping with a contingency plan he had with Titus.

1. In Macedonia, Paul encouraged the Christians (Acts 20:1-2) and organized the collection he was taking up from the Gentile churches for the poor Jewish Christians in Judea (2 Cor. 8:1-4, 9:2). The Macedonian churches were themselves facing "the most severe trial" and "extreme poverty" (2 Cor. 8:2), and yet they insisted on participating in the contribution and gave with extreme generosity (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

2. When Paul got to Macedonia, Titus had not shown up, so Paul still had no idea how his severe letter had been received in Corinth (2 Cor. 7:5-6). Titus soon arrived, and Paul's distress turned to joy because the church at large had responded positively to Paul's strong words (2 Cor. 7:6-13). The majority had repented of their rebellion against Paul's apostleship. There was a segment, however, that continued to resist his authority and gospel, and 2 Corinthians is shaped by the presence of both groups.

3. Paul probably started writing 2 Corinthians soon after receiving Titus's encouraging report, but it seems likely that he received more bad news about the church before completing it. There is a change of tone in chapters 10-13 that suggests Paul had news of a counter-offensive that had been launched against him by the Judaizing intruders. He does not state that he received new information between chapters 9 and 10, but that would have been obvious to the Corinthians by his specific references to the new charges against him. This is probably sometime in A.D. 56.

D. Paul worked his way down to Greece (Acts 20:2), where he stayed three months (Acts 20:3), no doubt in Corinth. It was here that he wrote Romans probably in A.D. 57.

E. Accompanied by Timothy and some others, Paul headed back through Macedonia because the Jews had made a plot against him as he was about to sail to Syria (Acts 20:3-4). Timothy and the others went ahead to Troas, where Paul (and Luke) joined them, sailing there from Philippi (Acts 20:5-6). They left Troas immediately after the Lord's Day, being in a hurry to get to Jerusalem (Acts 20:11, 16). Those who sailed from Troas picked Paul up at Assos (he had gone there on foot) and then continued on to Jerusalem (Acts 20:13-14).

F. The ship stopped at Miletus where Paul sent for the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17). Paul prophesied that savage wolves would come in among the Ephesian Christians and would not spare the flock. He said, "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20:29-30). Paul also said that the elders would not see him again (Acts 20:25, 38).

III. Jerusalem to Rome

A. With a few more stops, Paul made it to Jerusalem, probably in A.D. 57.

1. He brought to Jerusalem the funds he had collected from the Gentile churches for the poor Jewish Christians. This collection not only was an act of benevolence; it was a theological statement that the Jewish and Gentile churches were one. That's why Paul indicates in Rom. 15:31 that he was concerned about how the gift would be received. He was concerned that some may resist the unity that acceptance of the gift would symbolize.

2. About a week after his arrival, he triggered a riot in the temple because some Jews thought that he had defiled the temple by bringing a Gentile named Trophimus into the restricted area, the area that was for Jews only. A mob dragged Paul from the temple and began beating him with the intent to kill him. Paul was arrested, and after a plot to kill him was uncovered, transferred to prison in Caesarea.

B. Paul was kept in prison in Caesarea for two years on bogus charges. When Governor Felix's successor, Festus, wanting to do a favor for the Jews, asked Paul if he wanted to be tried in Jerusalem, Paul smelled a conspiracy to have him killed on the way. He therefore appealed to Caesar, which led to his being sent to Rome, where he spent another two years under house arrest.

1. While Paul was imprisoned in Rome, the Philippians sent Epaphroditus to Paul with a gift (Phil. 4:18) and with instructions to care for Paul's needs (Phil. 2:25). It was also during this time that Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus, encountered Paul and was converted.

2. It was during his confinement in Rome that Paul wrote Ephesians, which was probably a circular letter to churches in Asia Minor that, because of some contact with Ephesus (e.g., the initial point from which it circulated), came at an early date to be associated exclusively with that city. It is also the time he wrote Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. That is why these four letters are known collectively as the "Prison Epistles."

C. Acts ends with Paul in prison, but in keeping with his expectation expressed in Phil. 1:25-26 and 2:23-24, it seems he was released from prison around A.D. 62. There is a strong church tradition regarding this release. It is reflected in 1 Clement (late 1st century), the Muratorian Canon (around A.D. 180), and in Eusebius (early 4th century).

D. At some point, perhaps before his release, Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus. Upon his release, Paul may have gone west to Spain, as he intended to do when he wrote Romans (Rom. 15:23-28) and as church tradition hints that he did. If so, he probably stayed in Spain only a short time and then made a missionary journey to Crete with Titus and left him there to appoint elders for the various churches (Tit. 1:5). He thereafter wrote to Titus, probably around 63/64.

E. Whether before or after going to Crete, Paul went to Macedonia, and Timothy left Ephesus to meet him while he was on his way there.

1. This may be the tearful visit that is mentioned in 2 Tim. 1:4. If this was the first time for Timothy to see Paul, his spiritual father, since his release from prison, it would have been very emotional, and parting would have been even more so.

2. Paul tells Timothy to stay in Ephesus to combat the false teaching that was threatening the church (1 Tim. 1:3). From what Timothy told him, the situation was dire. Sometime after that meeting, Paul wrote 1 Timothy, probably around A.D. 63/64.

F. It seems Paul was arrested again as part of Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians that began when Nero blamed them for the fire that destroyed much of Rome in A.D. 64. It was during this imprisonment that he wrote 2 Timothy. Not long thereafter, around A.D. 65, he was, according to church tradition, beheaded.