

MANUSCRIPT MAYHEM

DATES and DETAILS of
NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS

A Paper for My Friends II

from

Bruce Van Blair

MANUSCRIPT MAYHEM

DATES and DETAILS of NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS

A Paper for My Friends II
from Bruce Van Blair

It will seem, at least it does to me, a very questionable use of time and energy to address a topic as “dry” as this one – time lines, dates, and authorship of New Testament writings. It is a huge topic in the scholarly world of seminaries, professors, and technical articles in commentaries and Bible dictionaries. But what of the ordinary Christian, the normal church member, the saints who just want to live the New Life in Christ? We pretty much leave such topics to the professionals, who have time to pore over such questions and delve into the history and languages of former times. Their conclusions drift down to us, sometimes shedding light, and sometimes sounding immensely complex and complicated.

But in my opinion, that is one of the problems of present-day Christian Life. We have left it up to the professionals, instead of thanking them and using their efforts, but continuing to “work out our own salvation” (Philippians 2:12) – and opinions – in humility, yet conscientiously.

So what is the issue which is compelling enough to cause me to write this paper to you? It is very clear to me that the core of the Christian Life is prayer – that is, a constant and continuing relationship with the Risen Christ. We are in constant dialogue with our Lord – inviting the guidance, support, affection, mercy, and inspiration of the Holy Spirit throughout each day and in every decision, choice, and direction we ever make or take. This is not something we do with any precision or perfection. But it is our intention and our aim, and we try to bring our lives into this pattern and alignment more and more the longer we walk the Path or WAY. We do not do it to earn our salvation. We do it in response to the incredible grace and love that we have already received – and in faith assume (believe) we will go on receiving.

If communication is not possible between us humans and God, then all religion is foolishness and false. All the cathedrals and liturgies and sermons and Bible study and ministers and denominations and budgets and programs are all a charade – a lie – unless somehow they are bringing individuals closer to God.

Ultimately, everything authentic about the Christian Faith and Life comes from prayer. The Bible was written by and about people of prayer. That is to say, communication with God came first, and then there was something to write about and put in a book. Therefore the Spirit

outranks Scripture, though the two go hand in hand for most of us. Abraham and Joseph and Moses all lived and encountered God *before* there was any Bible. Jesus and Paul and Peter and all the amazing characters we encounter in the New Testament lived *before there was any New Testament*. Spirit outranks Scripture.

The numinous, omnipotent, eternal Creator of all that is or ever will be ... wants to talk with you. That is the audacious but essential claim of the Christian Gospel. It is revealed in everything we see or know about Jesus’ life, from the time of His baptism and forty days in the wilderness, onward. Prayer is the power and guiding force of the Christian Life. Apart from it we go quickly back to running our own lives in our own ways. But if we do what is necessary to seek and allow and obey the dialogue between us and God – between us and the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – then it changes and redirects our lives. And not just once, but continually.

There is nothing – nothing – in this world more important than authentic prayer. But it takes most of us years to truly see and mean it – to stop letting everything else take precedence, interfere, or crowd it out. Prayer is the most essential ingredient of the Christian Life and of the life of the church, yet it takes little thought or awareness to realize that it is also the most neglected topic in the efforts and programs of most churches in our time.

You will forgive a digression within a digression? After all these years, I “hear” people’s questions in my mind when I am trying to say anything important. To know that Spirit outranks Scripture is both helpful and important. To know that prayer – dialogue with God – is at the center of our Path or WAY is essential. But someone will be saying to themselves, “But what of the Eucharist? What of salvation? If Jesus is our Savior, is that not more important than prayer *or* Scripture? Is that not the heart of it all?!”

Yes it is. It is the prerequisite for all “Life in Christ Jesus.” But in what way? When I receive communion, it realigns my life – it reminds me of the foundation on which my New Life rests, and without which my Life with Christ would be impossible. But communion (as ritual) does not guide my life personally unless it leads into true and current communion – which is prayer. That is to say, partaking of the Eucharist reminds me of what Jesus has done for us, and for me. And it reminds me that

He is willing to do it still – to do it continually – to go on saving, and forgiving, and surrounding me with mercy and grace. “The body and the blood” fill me continually with New Life beyond anything I can ever acquire or obtain on my own, or from any other source. And it also reveals the depth and the extent of the love of God for us. It is what Jesus primarily came to reveal to us. The phrases and concepts are familiar, but the reality is not always so easy to claim and hold on to, despite all that Jesus did and went through to reveal God’s love for us, and to reconcile us to God. We never seem to “get it” once and for all. There are endless new dimensions and applications, and we have continual need for renewal and reminder.

But back to the point: What is the connection between communion and prayer? (Of course, in “real life,” communion leads us into prayer, just as studying the Bible leads us into prayer, unless we are unwilling to go there. Nevertheless, prayer is still the purpose, the goal, the hoped-for outcome of both. That is, both the Eucharist and the Bible lead us into prayer.) What is the good of the Eucharist if it does not cause us to turn our wills and our lives over to God? If God (or the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, who reconciles us to God and reveals God to us) cannot guide our lives and influence our choices on a daily basis – in real life, where things really happen and where our minds, hearts, souls, and hands are really being shaped and used – then religion has turned back into a shell game, a pretense, a superstition.

The core problem of all prayer is trust. The core foundation of all relationship is trust. The true meaning of the old word “faith” is TRUST. If we want to return to the core meaning of our heritage, “The Christian Trust” would be a much better phrase for us than “The Christian Faith.” (Language keeps changing, and many of the old words have been changed into pablum, or worse – to the confusion of many things. Love, forgiveness, humility, meekness, sin – for instance – no longer carry the definitions, principles, or power they once represented.)

In any case, when we go to our prayers, the biggest issue is always “Do we really trust God?” If the Holy Spirit does communicate, will we cooperate? If we get guidance, will we obey? Do we really and truly believe that God is more intelligent, more caring, more powerful, more trustworthy than we are? If not, prayer will never happen; it will be a “going through the motions” – a ritual – but no real dialogue between us and the Holy Spirit. The prerequisite of all genuine prayer is to say (and mean): “My life is in Your hands. Whatever You tell me, if I can comprehend it, I will obey. Anything You want of me is Yours. I trust You more than my own mind or heart.”

If we do not go to prayer in such trust, we hear little or nothing. Emergencies, disasters, and significant fear often drop us into genuine prayer and closeness to God because, at such times, the barriers go down and we get humble and teachable and willing. Prayer is not a relationship between equals. And we can never go to our prayers without dealing with the primary consideration: Which one of us is God?

Now it comes clear: How can we ever come to trust God *that much* – enough to turn our lives over to the care and guidance and mercy of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ? The Cross and Resurrection is the only way we can come to such trust. Jesus is the great Reconciler. (II Corinthians 5:18) Jesus finally reveals that God loves us more than we love ourselves – and even loves our loved ones more than we ourselves love them. Our lives are safer in God’s hands than anywhere else on earth – safer there than anyplace else we could ever put them. Trust is the foundation of all true relationship – and also of all true obedience. The purpose of even the Death and Resurrection of Jesus is to build this trust (in Him, and in the Father who sent Him) as the foundation of our lives. But the relationship is made active in prayer. And it cannot become active in any other way. So we cannot truly pray unless we have come to trust Jesus as our Savior – the true and authentic Messiah. His Death and Resurrection is always the foundation of our New Life. Nevertheless, this does not dead-end in some lifeless creed. It leads us into constant, humble, obedient prayer, where our dialogue with the Holy Spirit continually shapes and guides our lives. (Even Good Friday and Easter would get nowhere without Pentecost.)

Likewise, while the Spirit outranks Scripture, that in no way implies that Scripture is not of huge importance and assistance and support for those of us who are serious about walking the Christian WAY. We want to communicate with God, and one of the ways God communicates with us is through other people. (We won’t get into a “defense” of the church – the Christian community – but we could.) There are three obvious ways in which the Spirit uses other people to help us:

- 1.) THE ECCLESIA – the church, the faith family, the disciple band.
- 2.) FRIENDS (and sometimes “angels” – people who drop into our lives for a while and bless us, and then are gone).
- 3.) THE RECORDS – writings left by other faithful people whom we do not know personally, but whose writings (from them or about them) inspire and often guide us. Chief among “the records” is the Bible. It is the primary overt source for the roots of our faith. We know nothing of Jesus, or the formation of the early church, or the struggles of the first people who wanted to follow Jesus – except from the Bible. Nor do we know much of the history and background out of which Jesus came, and without which much that He did and said would be unintelligible – apart from the Bible.

I happen to be very grateful for other information too. The story does not stop with the Bible, despite what some people seem to imply. If we never read beyond the Bible, the story of the church stops around 100 A.D. Yet huge insights – and huge blunders and mistakes which still affect us all – have developed long after the biblical record was cemented in canon scripture. I need to know about Constantine, and ecumenical councils. I am appreciative to learn of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Kepler, John Cotton, and countless others clear down to my own day. In fact, we never know or comprehend enough. The

point is, the records are immensely important to us. Therefore we take them seriously—we take them to heart. *“It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day, to study some portion of the Scriptures each day, seeking in grace and praise to discover God’s will for our own lives on a daily basis.”*

As we all know, there are lots of foolish and ignorant theories surrounding the Bible—things made up by those trying to be helpful by forcing us to “believe it better.” Yet they only confuse the issue and make it much harder for honest seekers to hear what the Bible is saying. (If it gets inhuman and magical, people either stop reading it altogether or can no longer think straight when they do read it.) But essentially the Bible is the record—the best record, and the most carefully searched-out and argued-over record—of those who have tried to be faithful to God in the past.

And now we are back to my reason for writing this paper. While the “conservative wing” of the church has been working to make the Bible more and more authoritative (beyond challenge or question), the “liberal wing” of the church (the so-called mainline churches, denominations, writings, and their seminaries) has been working to make it less and less authoritative, believable, and trustworthy. This is never the stated intention of liberal scholars, of course, but they put more and more distance between the events and the records about those events. And whether intentional or not, the result is that many Christians today do not consider the Bible a worthy resource for their journey.

To their credit, liberal scholars call into question everything they can. That is wonderful—that is their task. We should welcome their objective and honest appraisal. They challenge the records from every perspective they can think of. (Did Paul really write what bears his name? If Matthew was one of the twelve disciples—an eyewitness to Jesus’ life and ministry—why did he copy Mark (who was only a kid at the time), and why does he sound so wooden and distant from his subject?) So we are grateful for the scholars and their efforts. They bring us overwhelming evidence that we cannot take everything in the Bible at face value. We do not know with certainty who wrote some of the books in the New Testament. We do not know for sure when some of the books were written, or from where. People have opinions, and some of them are carefully weighed. You should have some too! We should not kill each other or excommunicate each other over our opinions, no matter how carefully weighed. Humility is also part of the Christian WAY.

Nevertheless, whether Paul wrote Colossians or not—and whether it was written before or after First Thessalonians (for instance)—makes a difference in how a person understands the Christian story. Though it would be much easier to just say, “Accept it all, believe it, and move on”—or as Mark Twain quipped, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so”—part of our Path, and part of our worship, is to “worship the Lord our God with all of our minds.” One of our goals is that heart and hand and mind and soul all come together in adoration and allegiance—and leaving one out weakens them all.

I am a “liberal Christian” despite what many liberals would tell you of me. I appreciate sound scholarship. But while good scholarship must ask any and all the questions it can, that does not give it a right to claim firm and certain answers on flimsy evidence. And while a great many liberal scholars are very careful about not doing this, other less responsible scholars are far more often quoted (because they are more newsworthy). So the general picture which huge numbers of people are getting is that the Bible is not authoritative at all and, indeed, is hardly worth reading. And liberal Christians are not reading or studying the Bible *in droves!* Hence they cut themselves off from one of the major sources of the Christian Path and WAY. And the Holy Spirit, who longs to converse with them, is muted and shackled because they do not know the sources or the stories—they do not “speak the language.”

There are many incredible, humble, conscientious scholars in the liberal camp across the world. They study and write and speak to bring better understanding. If we read what they have actually written, we discover that often they have taken great pains to not mislead us. They give us reasons for not accepting their conclusions, as well as the reasons they have for coming to their conclusions. And many of them are not nearly as certain about things (like what Paul did or did not write, or when, or from where) as many people have come to assume. But few people read in-depth what the scholars have written. What they mostly get are summary statements and conclusions, without the benefit of what led up to the conclusions. And of course, articles in news magazines and programs on television are seldom without agendas of their own. In addition, there are the occasional “scholars” who would rather make headlines or get their names known than keep humble or stay conscientious.

Even so, it seems to me that the liberal wing of the church in our time has used more imagination in *challenging* Scripture’s authenticity than in *discovering* its authenticity. I hope for a day when liberal scholars work as hard to authenticate early dates as they do to put distance between the story and its telling. (Happily, there are already a few who do.) Not that we want some “paper pope” or inerrancy doctrine creeping back in, but are we so terrified of that aberration that we cannot keep some balance? For two generations, it has felt like the liberal camp has been afraid to believe anything. Such a statement is unfair to the many very dedicated and sincere scholars who have made huge contributions to our understanding of the ancient world and its texts. Nevertheless, presuppositions have huge influence, and quoting the quoted without rethinking assumptions is always a potential primrose path. If everybody is in agreement about the essential picture, either it is correct—and demonstrable—or we have built a “party line” that needs serious review.

In any case, from my perspective, we have strayed further and further from all reasonable understandings of what was actually happening—of the story as it was unfolding—in the New Testament records. We have substituted theories based on literary form, linguistic analysis, and theological prejudices as if they outrank

clearer and more primary evidence of events. But now it's my turn to stay humble. Maybe I have not given the doubts enough credence. Certainly I find my mind seeking alternate explanations that sometimes sound as "far out" as the scenarios typically given for doubting. (For instance, my reasons for thinking that Paul really did write Colossians.) But whether or not any liberal scholar intended to reduce the impact and importance of the Bible in the lives of Christian followers, that has been the result. I run into people all the time who, from what they have picked up from "scholarship," figure that there is a fifty- to sixty-year gap between Jesus' life and the records we read about Him. Or that many of the writings we do have are "corrupted," tampered with, written by others different from and later than what they claim. Clearly, in some instances this is true. But I am convinced that it is nowhere near as true as the liberal wing of the church has led most people to believe.

Admittedly, we do have hard evidence that in the second and third centuries, "the fights" over the truth produced spurious books and false claims to authority. For "the good of the cause," people were attributing to famous leaders of the past whatever they themselves believed or made up. But was this practice rampant in the middle of the *first* century? (The "my own hand" passages in the Bible (I Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18; II Thessalonians 3:17; Philemon 1:19) have many possible explanations, and no clear connection to false writings.)

For example: In his day, Paul was the maverick apostle, fighting to claim his credentials as an authentic apostle to the Gentiles. If he was fighting for the status of apostle all his life and there were plenty of folk challenging his credentials, why would we assume that he was known everywhere as "The Great Apostle," like we think of him today? There would have been much less reason to change his writings until after he was a known and accepted authority. It was much easier just to say he was a charlatan and a jerk – as many seem to have been saying. Some evidence suggests that upon his death, there was a period of "blackout" for thirty or forty years – that is, life went on and the church went on (into heresy and Gnosticism, in part).

We do not hear any more from Paul until Onesimus, as Bishop of Ephesus, called for a collection of Paul's letters, and had them copied and distributed as what we would call "the Pauline corpus" after the turn of the century. (This is not the accepted picture by all scholars, of course.) Prior to that, there must have been those who honored Paul in their memories and remembered him in their local churches, but there is no evidence that anyone had thought yet to "save" his legacy – his letters. And so we have, in all likelihood, only a few of the letters he actually wrote. Over fifteen or so years, at least four of them spent under house arrest (i.e., with time on his hands), Paul must have written far more than thirteen letters. Most scholars would agree. But today we have only thirteen letters, and yet six of them are now considered pseudonymous (written in Paul's name, but not by Paul himself) by the majority of liberal scholars. And if the current trend among liberal scholars continues, soon

it will be only six. Then perhaps Paul will eventually turn out to be a mere figment of our imaginations – as many of them think Jesus is ... at least Jesus as the Christ.

Well, that lowered the level! On the other hand, it is the underlying issue. When I attended seminary (Andover Newton Theological School) back in the late 1950s, the Gospel of Mark was said to have been written about 65 A.D., the Gospels of Matthew and Luke between 70-75 A.D., and the Gospel of John about 80 A.D. Though today nearly everyone agrees that the Book of Hebrews was not written by Paul, much of Christendom still thought so back then. First and Second Timothy and Titus were not from Paul, showing too much evidence of later church development. But were they written by friends who thought they were writing what Paul would have written had he been there – or by enemies trying to undo some of his teachings that they did not like? The rest of the ten letters were solid Pauline letters (at least in most camps). This was the picture in general back in the late 1950s.

Today in the liberal wing of the church, everything has moved from twenty to thirty years further away from their sources. There are endless books and articles about the writings being chopped up (even Philippians) and/or being pseudonymous (not written by the person claimed to be the author). Instead of just being careful and thoughtful, many scholars have become skeptical and agnostic. And so we have the strange phenomenon of vast "Christian Institutions" paying people to not believe – and to teach others to not believe as well. We are being taught to not believe that Jesus is really the Christ, or that He has been resurrected, or that He is alive and with us today as the Holy Spirit – in short, to not have any kind of personal relationship with Him, or with God as revealed by Jesus – to not have a Savior who in any way directly guides or inspires or directs our lives. And often this is "supported" by claims that the New Testament is not at all trustworthy. Faith is trust, and trust is the foundation of all true relationship. If we do not trust Jesus, we cannot have a meaningful relationship with Him – that is, no Christian Life is open to us. If people make an open choice, well and good; that is what choice is. But in many ways and places, the liberal church is now working against its purpose – it is working against the chance for people to choose Jesus. This is a subtle and satanic ploy. Many now claim that the records (the Bible) are so distant and corrupt that no intelligent person can trust them to tell us anything significant or accurate about Jesus – or much of anything else, for that matter.

Well, the records are not perfect – nothing in this life is. But they are more than sufficient for honest followers to know and trust Jesus for all the principles and invitations and proclamations and mercy and love that we need for the Christian WAY – and then some. At least that is my claim.

So I will give you "my picture" first (by way of a time line), and then we will talk about some of the details. And please, I presume that my picture is wrong in some ways and in some places. I hope you will keep thinking and studying for yourself, and that from time to time you

will read other pictures from other people, and compare and choose between them. While my picture is “wrong” to absolute truth, it is still better than anybody else’s picture that I know about. And of course, it is not “my” picture, but it stands on the work of many sincere and worthy scholars. And as a hint, do not simply write off what I suggest because it is different from what you have heard before. Look for “evidence” – New Testament comments that undo the picture I am giving. (Some will *seem* to, at first glance, but we will discuss them later.) And my picture is full of questions I cannot resolve yet. For instance, did Paul write Galatians before or after First Thessalonians? I suspect after, because Galatians is so great that Paul needed more time to become that clear.

But this is a pretty flimsy reason for making such a choice. The Galatian churches at Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (established on Paul’s first journey) certainly needed a letter sooner than the church at Thessalonica (established on Paul’s second journey).

As with the paper for you on Revelation, it will be helpful to both of us if you read this paper with your Bible open to the New Testament. I jump around a lot and only occasionally give citations, but there is enough of a road map here to lead you to books, chapters, or passages that will help you keep things clear. And I have included an Appendix entitled “The Life of Paul,” which is intended to remind us of some of the more dramatic mileposts of Paul’s journey.



MY PICTURE

For the moment, and for clarity, and so you can tell if you want to read further, here is my picture:

PAUL'S WRITINGS

Paul wrote from about 48 (or 50) A.D. to 62 (or 64) A.D. He wrote the following letters, in the following order:

- First and Second Thessalonians (49-50)
- Galatians (53-54)
- First and Second Corinthians (55-56)
- Colossians, Philemon, Laodiceans (which is lost) (56), written from Ephesus, not Rome
- Romans (56-57)
- Ephesians (58), written from Caesarea
- [Wonder about First and Second Timothy and Titus from Caesarea, or perhaps fragments reworked]
- Philipians (61), written from Rome

The Pastoral Epistles (First and Second Timothy, and Titus) are troublesome no matter what we do with them. Most liberal scholars today are quite certain Paul did not write them. And they strongly suspect that Paul did not write Second Thessalonians, Colossians, or Ephesians. I disagree, as you notice above. Most sources will tell you that Philemon and Colossians were written from prison in Rome. I think they were written from prison in Ephesus. And few think Paul wrote Ephesians, never mind from Caesarea or in 58 A.D., as I claim. A few have wondered if Ephesians is the lost letter to Laodicea. If so, most of them would say it was written from Rome. If so, I would claim it was from prison in Ephesus, about 56 A.D. But claiming that Ephesians is the lost letter to Laodicea is pretty far-fetched. (Its similarity to Colossians makes us wonder about a link.) But we will get back to details and considerations of these things later.



THE GOSPELS AND REVELATION

- Mark (51-52)
- Matthew (about 60-62)
- Luke/Acts (60-62)—a defense brief for the upcoming trial before Caesar
- John (90, give or take ten years), and presumably the three letters of John in same time period
- Revelation (90, give or take five years)

Dates of other New Testament writings do not greatly change anything. (That is, who cares? Well, I care, but have too little evidence to frame an opinion.) I assume the letters of Peter were not written by Peter, but by someone using his name. Same with Jude. (So I do accept that some writings in the New Testament are pseudonymous. Matthew for instance. The Pastorals probably, but in my mind they are a special case.) I have no guess about who wrote Hebrews.



OTHER KEY DATES

(ALL A.D. EXCEPT WHERE NOTED)

4 B.C.	Herod the Great dies
6	Archelaus, Herod's son and successor, is banished; Pontius Pilate becomes governor
4 B.C. - 39	In Galilee, another son rules—Herod Antipas
39 - 44	Grandson, Herod Agrippa, is king (Acts 12:1-4, 19-23)
14 - 37	Tiberius is Emperor
33 (April 3)	Jesus is crucified (more and more scholars come to this date from studying ancient calendars and how Passover dates were chosen)
41 - 54	Agrippa's boyhood friend, Claudius, is Emperor of Rome
49	Jews are expelled from Rome—the edict of Claudius (though it has been wondered if this was about 41, 49 is generally the accepted date) (Acts 18:2)
51 (summer) - 52 (summer)	Gallio is proconsul of Achaia, thus Paul is in Corinth at this time (Acts 18:12)
52 - 59	Felix is procurator of Judea
54 - 68	Nero is Emperor, coming to power in 54, following Claudius—Nero is a pretty decent ruler while Seneca has some influence over him; by 62 he has clearly “changed” for the worse; he kills his mother in 59 (and subsequently most everybody he has ever loved); he commits suicide in 68
59 (summer)	Festus succeeds Felix at Caesarea (not absolute, but highly likely)
62	Festus dies; James, the brother of Jesus, is martyred at Jerusalem
64	The great fire of Rome—Nero scapegoats the Christians, and many are killed; it is often said that Peter, and sometimes Paul as well, is killed in this persecution
66 - 70	Jewish revolt starts in 66, while Nero is still Emperor; ends with destruction of Jerusalem and the temple; vast numbers of Jews are killed throughout Palestine; afterward, there is no political entity of Judaism for almost two thousand years; end of temple worship, Sadducees, and the whole priestly class; rise of the synagogue movement—rabbis instead of priests (Pharisees are the viable survivors)
79	Vesuvius erupts—Pompeii is destroyed, and the bay of Naples is devastated

These dates, certain or highly likely, provide the framework of our dating of the rest of the New Testament events. As you see, this is very helpful. But it is also far from locking things down to the certainty often implied or claimed.

THE GOSPELS

TIMING

I think the first three (synoptic) Gospels were written far earlier than is commonly held today. The major reason given for dating them so late hangs on the assumption that nobody could have predicted the events of 66-70 A.D. (destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem, and indeed the whole land of Palestine) prior to the event. Hence Mark 13, Luke 21, and especially Matthew 24 prove that these accounts were written after 70 A.D. Well, it is conceivable that the Gospels were written later than I claim in my picture, but this is a very lame and ignorant reason for thinking so. Not only was Jesus capable and “advanced enough” to see such things coming, so were many others of His time. Some of the “authorities” were afraid that Jesus would help to bring this very holocaust down upon them, because they thought He was that kind of revolutionary. And all through history there have been people with special insight, and others with logic enough to see the “handwriting on the wall.” Even some scholars have *some* awareness of spiritual dimensions and gifts. I am astounded that they would allow others with no experience or imagination or prayer life to make such a ludicrous call and get away with it.

But once having established that these writings came after 70 A.D., then imaginative scenarios kick back in. Shortly after the cataclysmic event itself, the trauma of such extreme events would have been so huge that the writings would have been full of reaction, response, sorrow, and travail. Therefore they must have been written much later than 70 A.D. Like maybe by 80 A.D., some of the trauma would have worn off? That seems even more strange than the first error. Ten years is not enough time for such a trauma to wear off! Everything you had ever known had been destroyed—all Judaism as you had understood it was gone, not to mention hundreds of thousands of your countrymen killed and the remainder scattered. Ten years and you are no longer much troubled by it? Humans are crass and their memories are often short, but not that short. Trying to place the synoptic Gospels after 70 A.D. raises far more questions, and matches far fewer realities, than placing them before 70 A.D.

PAUL AND JESUS

It has usually been assumed that all the Gospels were written after Paul died, and that there was no connection between Paul and the Gospels. Paul was one thing, and the story of Jesus quite another. Eventually this assumption evolved into more and more questions, then theories, and then beliefs that Paul invented the Gospel of mercy and grace, and that Jesus was just an ethical teacher who did not Himself know the Gospel Message which was later associated with Him. In turn, Paul did not know much about the life or teachings of Jesus, but just sort of made it all up as he went.

Yet the fact is, Paul does allude to things Jesus taught more often than it seems at first. And as for whether or not Jesus knew the Gospel of grace and love over Law, that is evident everywhere in the stories we have of His life, His teachings, His parables, and His ministry. But of course, those stories were written later (after Paul), so perhaps that part was dubbed-in because of Paul’s influence ... That’s a bit of a circular argument, don’t you think? “Even though Paul knew the people who knew Jesus personally (Galatians 1:8), Paul knew little of Jesus’ life and ministry ... but Jesus’ life and ministry were essentially corrupted or invented by Paul.” However ludicrous, I have heard this argument many, many times. I can only conclude that it comes from prejudice determined to discredit.

Clearly the connection between Paul and Jesus is clearer and stronger than many want to believe. The connection between Paul and the Resurrected Jesus (the Holy Spirit—the Damascus Road conversion) shaped and guided the rest of Paul’s life. But the issue here is: Did Paul also know about the life and ministry of the earthly Jesus? Either Paul learned from those who knew Jesus, or those who knew Jesus allowed Paul to invent a whole new and different story about who Jesus was and what He was like. And they were still alive at the time, and often had association with Paul. I have little difficulty choosing which of these scenarios seems more likely.

PAUL AND MARK

My own “interest” moves on to what must have been the connection between Paul and those who wrote the stories of Jesus’ life and ministry. Mark, for instance, knew Paul. He went on the first lap of the first missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas (Mark’s uncle), though Mark ran for home when they got to Perga. We know that his mother lived in Jerusalem—years later, when Peter got out of prison right after James was beheaded, Peter went to the house of Mark’s mother, where the Christians were gathered and praying, in fear for Peter’s life. (Acts 12:12) The point is, Mark was probably a teenager at the time, but he was at the center of the earliest group of Christian believers. There must have been a certain amount of shame connected with his behavior on that first journey, and Paul would not allow him to come on the second journey. Yet we know there was some kind of reconciliation later. (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; II Timothy 4:11) Now, what if Paul is not the author of Second Timothy? It would still reflect what people thought Paul’s attitude toward Mark was by that time.

MARK’S GOSPEL

Some traditions think Mark wrote his Gospel with Peter’s help, from Rome. Was that just before Peter died, around 64 A.D.? That would seem to be the reasoning that usually dates Mark around 65 A.D. Matthew and Luke quote from him, so their Gospels came later. But these are merely guesses, and none are substantiated. This presumes that Peter died in the persecution that followed the great fire of Rome, when Nero blamed

the Christians for the fire. It's a good guess. The *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, normally considered a sane and careful source for solid liberal scholarship, states that both Peter and Paul were killed in this persecution around 64 A.D. (page 749) Yet this does not match any of the normal time lines given for Paul's death by any of the scholars I know of, from either the liberal or the conservative camp. Though a strange blunder, I suspect it may come closer to the truth than first meets the eye. (And I later suggest a two-part trial for Paul before the Roman Emperor, who would have been Nero. And this might mean that Paul did die around 64 A.D. (and Luke too), but that he never got out from under house arrest at Rome. That is, he was never acquitted or set free.)

My question is: How long do we imagine it was before the Christian communities became eager for more information about Jesus and His life? This is hardly a precision-science question. But the need would have something to do with how quickly someone would be moved to try and fill it. In this case, it was Mark (and what some people call "Q," which contains "collections" of sayings and stories). The point being, is it plausible to imagine that the early church went for *twenty or thirty years* before it tried to gather some accounts of Jesus' teachings—or to put forth His life, death, and ministry—for its own sheer love of Jesus, and also to share with other people who were becoming interested? From everything we know, the numbers becoming interested were rather impressive. By the end of Paul's third journey, there was hardly anywhere he could visit without finding a group of Christians there. The Christian Faith was spreading like wildfire. Yet most of us are content to imagine that the Gospel of Mark was written thirty or more years after the crucifixion, and the Gospels of Matthew and Luke forty-five or fifty years after the crucifixion? I have a difficult time imagining either gap! Mark, though young and maybe not paying enough attention, was "there." Not that he formally walked with Jesus or was involved in the Galilean ministry, but if he had been ten to thirteen years old when Jesus was alive—and was later clearly involved and able to write—would it really not occur to him to do so until he was forty or fifty years old? And then when he did write, and people saw that he had left so many things out, and the hunger for more information was huge—still nobody got around to a fuller presentation (Matthew and Luke) for another twenty or twenty-five years beyond that?! Am I the only one who finds this scenario ridiculous?

So when do I think Mark wrote his Gospel? Let's come at it the other way. Suppose Mark was twenty-one years old or so when he went with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey (about 46 A.D.). We have to suspect that there were some "self-image issues" for him in his desertion. The full repercussions came four years later, when Paul and Barnabas were about to go off on the second journey (50 A.D.), and the argument over whether or not to take Mark with them grew so hot that it split their friendship. Paul went off on his second journey

with Silas, and Barnabas went to Cyprus with Mark. Mark would now be about twenty-five years old. But the Christian movement was already alive with ferment in Antioch, Jerusalem, and wherever Christians were going. It had been seventeen years since Jesus' crucifixion, and those who knew about Him were sharing stories and were eager to hear more about Him—what He did, what He taught. So Mark decided to "write up" all the notes he had been collecting (in his head or on parchment), to try and be useful (and redeem himself in some way). Quickly his efforts were "rewarded" with gratitude. In a year or so, his Gospel (never more than a rough draft) was being circulated and copied, and his reputation was spreading. Mark was maybe about twenty-six or twenty-seven years old, and the year was 51 or 52 A.D. (thirteen years before the normal earliest estimates). Or perhaps Mark was much slower than that and waited until he was thirty years old, and the year was 55 A.D. (only ten years before the usual estimates). Still, Paul (at Ephesus on the third journey) would have been happy about this contribution. Is there hard evidence to make this implausible? What is it?

MATTHEW AND LUKE

So what about the Gospels of Matthew and Luke? Well, I assume they were written near the same time as each other, since they do not appear to "know" each other. I have no scenario from Matthew, but I do have one from Luke—or, more accurately, Luke/Acts. I think that Luke/Acts was written around 59-61 A.D. (fifteen to twenty-five years earlier than is usually claimed). I suspect that Theophilus (Acts 1:1) was a lawyer, perhaps even a court official, and that he was the attorney for the defense in the upcoming trial of Paul before the Emperor. Luke and Acts were written as the "trial brief" to explain the Christian movement to the Roman court. Both writings were "slanted" (not to suggest dishonesty, but we all speak to our audience) to be more palatable to Roman ears. Presumably Paul lost this case and was executed. The Book of Acts was never finished; it simply ends, without any comment about the outcome. We know that Luke was with Paul at the time. He had traveled with him from Philippi onward—that is, back to Jerusalem, then to Caesarea, and then to Rome. They may even have started the writing project in Caesarea. It is supposed that they could not have collaborated because Acts does not always agree with Paul's letters. But if they were indeed preparing a brief for the Roman court ... I recall conversations I have been in when my wife and I have tried to explain what happened ten years ago, or when some other couple has tried to explain to us what happened to them ten years ago. I think the precision conclusions which we often draw from comments that do not quite match (between Galatians and Acts, for instance) are far from conclusive evidence that there was a huge gap between Paul and Luke, or that Luke was not paying much attention to what was happening in Paul's life.

WHAT DID PAUL WRITE?

Paul is the earliest of all New Testament writers. Do not miss this fact. Paul is our earliest witness. That does not mean he automatically outranks the Gospel writers, or others. But it does mean that he was closer to the source, and more likely to reflect the picture and beliefs of the earliest followers. Paul's account of his Damascus Road conversion is our earliest account of a resurrection appearance! That is hard to remember. First Corinthians 15:1-8 was written *long before* Matthew 28. We automatically connect First Corinthians 15 with Acts 9, 22, and 26. And well we should. Luke, who wrote Acts, is doubtless telling us what Paul told him. Nevertheless, Acts was written many years after the first letter to the Corinthians. (Though I will claim that it was not written nearly as many years afterward as is being taught today.)

Let me tell you what neither I nor anybody else knows. (My turn to "have some fun.") In short, let's go over it again.

PAUL AND LUKE

The longer he followed Jesus so faithfully, Paul's life took on more and more of the "patterns and characteristics" of his Savior. Like Jesus, Paul ran his ministry on the basis of friendships. Like Jesus, Paul's friends loved him and did amazing things for him. Like Jesus, as things grew threatening toward the end, more and more of the friends deserted or got busy elsewhere. Like Jesus, Paul died for his faith. Like Jesus, Paul went to Jerusalem one last time. Like with Jesus, Paul's friends feared for his life as he headed for Jerusalem.

Two Asians – Tychicus and Trophimus – went to Jerusalem with Paul and the offering. So did Luke. Therefore, Tychicus would be available to carry a letter (Ephesians) from Caesarea to the elders at Ephesus. Luke seemed to stay in Philippi (on the second missionary journey), but came back into the picture as Paul went back through Macedonia at the end of the third journey (toward Jerusalem). So Luke was with Paul from that point until Rome. (Four to six years is a long time for good friends to collaborate and come to understand each other.) And the two of them prepared a brief (Luke/Acts) for the upcoming trial. They did not just "sit around" with no agenda.

As Paul entered Rome, many welcomed him. But as the time approached for the trial, he found himself more and more alone. Much was hanging on this trial. Nero was Emperor. Persecution of Christians was not yet official. (That came later, in 64 A.D., when Nero blamed them for the great fire. Was it Paul who brought Nero's attention to the Christians, thus giving Nero the scapegoats he was looking for? Wild suppositions followed.)

The trial did not take place in one easy phase. Paul was not set free, but there was some kind of extension or appeal, and he was under house arrest until 64 A.D. Then he was executed as part of the pogrom against Christians. Possibly Peter was too (as tradition holds).

And Luke? The Book of Acts was never finished. We are never told what happened at the trial, though it was the clear intention of Acts to tell us "what happened." Was Luke executed also, for association with Paul? Or perhaps because those identified as Christians were being blamed for the fire?

Who was Theophilus (to whom or for whom both Luke and Acts were written)? As I mentioned earlier, I wonder if he was involved in the trial. Was he a court official assigned to the case? If so, then perhaps Luke/Acts *was* a brief being prepared to set before the Roman court—a way to tell, or try to tell, the court what Christianity was all about. That would imply that Luke and Paul had collaborated, at least to some degree. And that is exactly what I suspect happened. Acts does not always agree with Paul's letters, but many have noticed that Luke/Acts seems to present Christianity in a way that would put things in their "best light" from a Roman point of view. And now Mark's work from a few years earlier would be very useful, and Luke (if not Paul) was adding in all the stories and perspectives that he had heard from those commenting on what Mark had left out.

The real picture is that people were hungry for information about Jesus from the earliest days of the forming churches. Stories were told, and sayings were remembered. Many eyewitnesses were still living. Despite what some scholars would have us believe, we do not have a gap of some fifty years before this information was gathered. Paul was converted within a year or so of Jesus' death. He spent fifteen days with Peter (Galatians 1:18) three years after his conversion. What were they talking about? Not football scores. Jesus!

Paul's "home church" was Antioch. In Antioch he was "ordained" and sent out. He visited Antioch before and after every journey. And many of those who knew and loved Jesus were there. We have eyewitnesses and cross-references and intense interest – and at least one person (Mark) who started taking notes and writing it down. (Not to forget possible other "collections" of sayings and stories that scholars propose as "Q.") We cannot prove it, but in all likelihood Paul preached about Jesus when he was personally present in a place. His letters have a special agenda, and he assumed that those folk he was writing to knew about the events of Jesus' life and a good bit about His teachings. And why was Paul eager for Mark to come on the first journey – and so bitterly disappointed when Mark "ran home" from Perga early in that first journey? Was Mark already one of the best sources of information about Jesus? Of course ...

In any case, we do know that Paul and Luke were very close and were a good team. Wish we knew why Luke stayed in Philippi so early in the second journey. Was it his hometown? More to the point, when Luke rejoined Paul as Paul came through Philippi with the offering for Jerusalem (dodging not only the assassins who hated Paul, but the bandits who were after the offering), Luke apparently stayed with him on to Jerusalem, through the two years at Caesarea, on the shipwreck trip to Rome, and during the years of house arrest at Rome while awaiting Paul's trial (or trials) before the Emperor. It is assumed

that Luke wrote long after Paul's death, and that inconsistencies between Acts and Paul's letters are due to Luke's poor memory, or maybe he was just not paying enough attention. But Luke was a convert of Paul's, and he loved him. Luke was why Paul went to Macedonia in the first place, and when Luke rejoined Paul, the two spent four to six years together! While we cannot prove that they died together, they did both go silent at the same time – and neither one was particularly “silent” while alive.

If Luke and Paul did collaborate – that is, Luke writing, and Paul consulting – in preparing a brief (Luke/Acts) for the trial, would they not “present the case” for clarity and effect? How big is the argument that some inconsistencies between it and Paul's letters rule out Paul's presence? Logic is good, but not if it is a logic that assumes there are no inconsistencies, errors, or mistakes possible in the lives of New Testament people. That is illogical, since inconsistencies, errors, and mistakes are part of the lives of all the other humans we have ever known – including ourselves.

EPHESIANS

Paul was converted around 35 or 36 A.D. He wrote sometime in the years from 45 to 62 A.D. But what did he write, and when and from where? Precision is not yet possible, but that is still a pretty concise time frame. The question is, could he have been learning, growing, and changing his mind as he went? That is, could the same mind which produced Ephesians have written First Thessalonians? It is very threatening to some to imagine that “a Christian” could learn or grow. How can the Scriptures be trusted if people are learning all the time?!

As mentioned earlier, some scholars have suggested that Ephesians is the lost letter to Laodicea. Ancient texts of Ephesians do not mention Ephesus, and perhaps in later years our letter to the Ephesians came to be associated with Ephesus as the “center” of Asia Minor, and thus generally meant for all the churches in that region. The affinity between Colossians and Ephesians makes this a tempting possibility. Though far from certain, this is a theory that answers more questions than it raises. Plus it does not “discount” Ephesians, or turn early believers into liars. Since I am persuaded that the letter to Philemon was written from Ephesus (when Paul was imprisoned there), it would make all three letters (Colossians, Philemon, Laodiceans) earlier than usually posited (end of the third journey, 55 or 56 A.D.), written from Ephesus, and carried by Tychicus and Onesimus to the tri-city region (Laodicea, Colossae, Hieropolis).

If Ephesians is not the lost letter to the Laodiceans (and I suspect it is not), then I suspect it was written from Caesarea. After the Jerusalem riots, the narrow escape, and things had settled down, perhaps Paul was thinking about his last visit with the Ephesian elders (at Miletus) and some of their concerns. (Acts 20:17) Those concerns were relevant to other churches as well, and so he wrote “Ephesians” to the region, knowing that the elders at Ephesus would distribute the letter to the various churches there. So it is more an early Christian treatise, or essay, than a personal letter. Yet it is incredibly thoughtful, deep,

and helpful, reflecting the years of prayer and seasoning that Paul had spent in service to his Lord. (Ephesians was John Calvin's favorite New Testament writing, by the way. But supporting that remark would require (at least for many) a treatise to straighten out the many misconceptions about Calvin, and that we do not have time for here.)

COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

About one hundred miles east of Ephesus today is a little knoll showing only a few scattered rocks from an ancient town site – all that is left of Colossae. Off toward the north you can see Hieropolis (Pamukkale). About ten miles to the west is Laodicea. This little triangle of towns (like Redlands, Riverside, and San Bernardino) was the “inland empire” of Asia Minor in Paul's day. Colossae had been prosperous a few hundred years earlier, but most of the prosperity had by Paul's time moved to Laodicea. All three towns were devastated by an earthquake in A.D. 61 or 64 (Tacitus says 60-61; Eusebius 63-64). But while the other two towns were rebuilt, Colossae “wasn't worth it.” It was the smallest and least important place to which Paul ever wrote.

However, there was one thing that made it very important to Paul. The church in Colossae met in the house of Philemon. Philemon was a good friend of Paul's. And Philemon owned a slave, Onesimus, who had stolen some money and run away. Some say Onesimus ran to Rome. But Rome was nine hundred miles (and four or five months) away. That does not make it impossible, but opportunity and means and correspondence make me think that Ephesus was a far more likely destination. Maybe Onesimus already knew Paul from when Paul visited Philemon on the way through Colossae.

Now, many will say that Paul was never even in Colossae. The letter to the Colossians mentions Paul's concern for those who “have not seen my face.” (Colossians 2:1) I have been gone from Corona del Mar for about six months, and already there are people there who have never seen my face. Besides, the comment could easily apply to people beyond Colossae. It is hardly proof that Paul had never been there. More telling for some, Epaphras is named as the person from whom the Colossians have learned the Gospel. (Colossians 1:7) At first glance, this is compelling. But it does not match what I expect (or want), so I go looking for alternative explanations. Paul often tried to strengthen the hand of his fellow workers. Perhaps the Colossians were going to need to rely on Epaphras. If someone learned the Gospel from Chip, Laura, Terry, or any of the rest of you, does it mean they never heard it from me? And in Colossians 4:12, Paul reminds them that Epaphras is one of them. Is that remark necessary if Epaphras is their known and accepted leader? And in Philemon 1:23, Epaphras is named as a fellow prisoner. I assume Paul and Epaphras were together in Ephesus. (Tradition and most scholars say Rome.)

In any case, though I have read many commentaries on Colossians, they never mention Onesimus as a major

reason for the letter. There are other authorship concerns, to be sure: The style is said to be “different” from Paul’s style. Some of the vocabulary is said to be “unusual” for him. It must be a pseudonymous letter, they say, written by followers of Paul, not by Paul himself. The fact that Colossae no longer existed when this letter was probably written (by friends of Paul, after his death) only confirms it. It would have been a safe place to write a pseudonymous letter to, since nobody was there to dispute it. (That, I must admit, is more creative than anything I have suggested.)

Three letters were written and sent from Ephesus with Tychicus and Onesimus. One was to Philemon, begging him to free Onesimus and send him back to Paul. The second was written to Colossae, where Philemon was a prominent member of the community. The third is a lost letter, written to Laodicea. Nobody questions the authenticity of Philemon. So if Colossians was not written by Paul, the real letter to Colossae must have been lost as well. But if we *do* have Paul’s letter to the Colossians, we would expect that the issue about freeing Onesimus would be reflected in that letter. And as a matter of fact, it’s everywhere—if we are looking for it. There are comments about slavery. (Colossians 3:22; 4:1) There are comments about not conforming to the society around you (which would never agree to free a runaway slave), a major theme of the letter. Not seeing Colossians as a backup to the letter to Philemon regarding Onesimus misses the focus and import. Paul made other points as well, but it was his friendship with Onesimus that had inspired him to write to this little village in the first place.

As for Paul never being in Colossae and not knowing Philemon (or just knowing him casually, if they had met in Ephesus), none of that makes sense for the Philemon letter. The scholars who study the style and vocabulary of Colossians should also study a map! Ephesus was Paul’s clear destination when he came out of Antioch on his third journey. He traveled through Tarsus (his hometown) and through the Cilician Gates, and he visited the churches he had started on the first journey (Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian Antioch). There was only one major east-west road through that territory in Paul’s day. It went west out of Pisidian Antioch—straight through Colossae and Laodicea. It split just west of Laodicea, heading toward either Ephesus or Sardis. If Paul did not go through Colossae and Laodicea, he went weeks out of his way for no purpose.

And whatever Paul’s writing style and vocabulary, it could easily be explained by his concern for Onesimus, and his adamant hope and desire for Onesimus to be freed (and not punished). If it is the same Onesimus who later became Bishop of Ephesus, that also “matches” Ephesus as the place where Onesimus was converted and became a strong fellow worker with Paul. In short, the fascinating story reflected in the letters of Philemon and Colossians hangs together rather compellingly. And to posit that Paul did not write Colossians (perhaps because he had learned and grown a bit in his theology and eschatology) raises far more questions than it answers, and is much more complex and convoluted in theory and

explanation than if we take Paul, along with Timothy, as the author as stated. Where was Timothy at this time? If we had a little biographical time line for Timothy, it would clear up many things.

FROM EPHEBUS, OR ROME?

I claim that Philemon and Colossians were written from prison in Ephesus, not Rome. The assumption that these letters must be from Rome depends, in large measure, on Paul’s comments that Luke sends greetings. (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24) Luke must have been with Paul in order for him to make such a comment, and Luke was not with Paul in Ephesus—having remained in Philippi from the beginning of the second journey until the tail end of the third journey, when Paul came back through Philippi on his way to Jerusalem. All of this is based, logically, on the “we” passages in Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16; and others). Luke says “we” when he was personally present, and writes in the third person when he was not personally present.

But aside from this, it makes far more sense to me that Paul was writing Philemon and Colossians from Ephesus. It is possible but difficult for me to imagine Onesimus making it all the way to Rome in his flight from Colossae. It is hard to imagine Paul sending him all the way back from Rome. And it is harder to imagine Onesimus later becoming the Bishop of Ephesus if he did not know Paul and had not become part of the Christian community in Ephesus. So can I think of another scenario for Paul to make this comment about Luke sending greetings? It’s not hard to do at all. Had Luke written to Paul from Philippi? (“I just heard from Luke, and he sends his greetings.” My mother used to say that sort of thing all the time.) Had Luke come to visit Paul in Ephesus, having heard that Paul was in prison? A trip by Luke to Ephesus from Philippi that did not get recorded in Acts? Possible and plausible. We have to keep remembering that we are only getting a few highlights from all that was going on. Epaphras and Demas are also mentioned in the letter to Philemon. Epaphras was from Colossae, much closer to Ephesus. Did all three gather in Ephesus when they heard of Paul’s troubles and imprisonment there? Or do we go to the traditional assumptions that all of this must have been coming from Rome?

This is perhaps minor to some, but if Paul wrote from Rome, he was being dishonest. In the letter to Philemon, he says, “*At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be granted to you.*” (Philemon 1:22) Paul’s plan if he won his trial before the Emperor was to head west to Spain, not nine hundred miles and four or five months east to Colossae. Perhaps under the circumstances, most of us would forgive Paul for putting a little extra pressure on Philemon, since Onesimus’ life was at stake, so to speak. On the other hand, I consider Paul to have been pretty straight with his friends. And I suspect that if Onesimus were not treated as Paul hoped, Paul would indeed head from Ephesus to Colossae as soon as he was released.

That brings us to the inevitable but unanswerable question: Did Paul survive the first trial at Rome? As some of you know, this has long been a dispute, with most liberal scholars assuming that Paul was executed at the end of the first hearing before the Emperor (about 62 A.D.). And most conservative scholars assume Paul was acquitted at the first trial, went on about his ministry, got arrested a second time, and then was executed (presumably after a trip to Spain, and after writing the Pastoral Epistles) about 67 or 68 A.D. If that's the case, why is there so little evidence of his activities during this period? Was he not more likely to be noticed and noteworthy after being acquitted by the Roman Emperor?! And then what do we make of the Pastoral Epistles (First and Second Timothy, and Titus)? Are they from this extended period, as has so often been suggested?

THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

I have no intention of delving into First and Second Timothy and Titus in any depth. I guess that's because they are beyond my depth. I cannot imagine Paul writing them—because of their attitude toward women; the “mundane” attitude toward faith and life; the hierarchy of the church; the loss of focus on grace and faith (though despite the claims, this is questionable). I cannot imagine Paul *not* writing them—with so many personal comments; such good advice; clear warnings; so many corrections to foolish stances and opinions. These letters must be pseudonymous; on the other hand, Paul must have written them. If not, they must be reworkings of some things Paul *did* write.

In any case, revisit this passage from Second Timothy: *“Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will requite him for his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. At my first defense no one took my part; all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the message fully, that all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen. Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus remained at Corinth; Trophimus I left ill at Miletus. Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brethren. The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.”* (II Timothy 4:9-22)

When did Demas desert? Obviously not after Paul had died. Was he ever a supporter of Paul's at Rome?

(More evidence for imprisonment at Ephesus at the time of the letter to Philemon, when Demas was still a fellow worker and had not yet deserted.) When did Paul send Tychicus to Ephesus? And was it with the letter to the Ephesians? Earlier, Tychicus had carried the letters to Philemon and Colossae, and he had since accompanied Paul to Jerusalem, and very probably to Caesarea. Perhaps this letter to Timothy came from Caesarea. Or possibly from Rome, between the first hearing and the second hearing—when Paul was sentenced to death. (It's good to remember that nobody I know about is suggesting such a two-part trial, but it does allow for an early time in Rome when Paul was active and friends were around, and a second time, after the first hearing, when Paul found more and more “friends” deserting.)

I think Caesarea is more “timely” to the comments in the letter. Paul had just recently survived (barely) the riot in Jerusalem. He was safe in Caesarea for two years, so why—according to all the usual time lines regarding Paul—do we hear nothing from him during this time? I suggest we do hear from him, in the form of the letter to the elders of Ephesus.

In the above passage, Paul is also remembering his “flight” from Corinth, through Macedonia and Troas, and down the coast of Asia Minor—*island-hopping* and dodging assassins and robbers. He missed seeing dear friends at Ephesus (Prisca and Aquila and Onesiphorus). And he had left Erastus at Corinth, and Trophimus at Miletus. Plus he had left his cloak at Troas, and winter was coming on. Where was Timothy while Paul was in Caesarea? Was Paul just catching him up with what had happened?

Why all this “personal information” if this letter is not from Paul himself, but penned later by Paul's friends (as so many modern scholars insist)?

The assumption by some that Paul was famous and people were fooling around with his writings from the beginning is problematic. Certainly he was running into severe opposition from Jews and the Jerusalem church (the camp of James, the brother of Jesus). But as I mentioned earlier, there seemed to be considerable question about Paul's credentials during his lifetime (that is, he was not known as The Great Apostle), and there was an apparent period of “silence” for several decades after his death. So we hear little of Paul until Onesimus (perhaps), as Bishop of Ephesus, decided we needed Paul's wisdom and arranged the “collection” of his letters. Then finally we had the corpus of Paul's letters coming back into the life of the church shortly after the turn of the century. And *then* we had the many fights going on that caused the tampering with texts, insertions, etc., which scholars point to as evidence of textual corruption.

No need to sell this, but I like it, much better than efforts to explain that Paul did not write a letter so full of his personal comments and concerns: Perhaps Paul's pastoral letters (from Caesarea to Timothy and Titus) were “fragmented”—partly ruined by water or wear, or from being thrown in a corner somewhere for a while—and when discovered, perhaps some friends tried to “restore them” as best they could.

FINAL REMARKS

For the most part, for whatever reasons, the liberal schools of biblical studies have a “need” to put more and more distance between the events and the written records. They challenge the authenticity of the named/claimed authors whenever possible, and often on quite flimsy evidence. Whether admitted or not, the impact of this treatment of the biblical records serves to discount their authority and authenticity. It serves the skeptics and those who do not want a living relationship with the Risen Lord. It cannot dissuade those of us who do, but discounting the biblical records in every way possible makes it harder, not easier.

Now, I am not a literalist, nor have I any regard whatsoever for ignorant, inerrant foolishness. The biblical record should be challenged and questioned. And if the evidence is sufficient to support the claims, then we need to face such realities. My problem is that I grow increasingly convinced that many times, the evidence does not support the claims. That is to say, I believe we got started down the road of honest inquiry, but started honoring the doubts and stopped doubting the doubts. It seems to me that more and more weight has been put on a few assumptions, some of them far from pillars of certainty. Hence, this paper. It is my hope that my friends will compare what they read here with the introductory remarks they read in study Bibles and Bible dictionaries, and decide for themselves which makes the most sense. Is that a lot to ask—of Christian friends?



APPENDIX

THE LIFE OF PAUL

It has occurred to me that this paper assumes a more than ordinary familiarity with the events and circumstances that surround Paul's life and ministry. Since many of my friends have been in Bible Study groups for years, and some have gone on pilgrimage to Turkey or Greece/Italy with me, tracking the footsteps of Paul, this is a very logical assumption. However, information fuzzes on us sometimes, especially when we do not keep reflecting on it. And others perhaps never got into the subject as far as I might have supposed. So I thought I would add this brief (and sketchy) reminder of some of the drama that surrounded the life of The Great Apostle. And I use the word "drama" because that is the focus of these remarks.

It is possible to study the life of Jesus for years and stay so interested in the "spiritual aspects" of His coming that most of the drama of the political and personal pressures all around Him are barely noticed. Then the import of Palm Sunday is missed, or we get starry-eyed schmaltz about giving up all our possessions (Luke 9 or 10), when Jesus is really trying to instruct His disciples about how to avoid being arrested by Herod's agents.

In the same manner, some people get lost in romantic fantasies over the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians and miss the realities of Paul's difficult but amazing adventures. Most people know that Paul had more than his share of trials. (II Corinthians 11:21-29) Indeed, over the years, when I have started to feel sorry for myself, I have often been "cured" by simply remembering Paul's efforts and his faithfulness. If you were a traveling companion of Paul's and saw him take his shirt off, his whole back must have been a mass of scar tissue. Knowing "in general" is not the same as clearer images of his "biography." And as you will see if you read on, putting it together is not easy or certain, which is probably the real reason for the fuzziness in most of our minds.

There are many excellent books about Saul of Tarsus. Two of my favorites are *PAUL, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, by F.F. Bruce, and *PAUL, The Man and the Myth*, by Calvin Roetzel. If you really want a clearer and broader comprehension, these are good places to begin. Or if you want a thoughtful but more imaginative approach, try Sholem Asch's historical novel, *The Apostle*.

But in this appendix, we have a quick review of some of the highlights. In short, we will skip over many things and mostly neglect what Paul really cared about most—Jesus and His Kingdom. Paul saw himself as an apostle to the Gentiles. That is, Paul was the carrier of an invitation from God, via Jesus, to join God's Kingdom—to become God's adopted children. (Gospel is sometimes seen as "good news," and sometimes as "the mystery" of God's true purpose.) So, in truth, it is an insult to know about Paul and his Message without becoming a converted, passionate, and deeply committed Christian. At least that would have been Paul's hope and purpose.

EARLY YEARS

Mostly through conjecture and adding up stray bits of information: "Paul" is Greek for "Saul," and in this case the name does not reflect any change or new identity. (Plenty of other things do.) Paul was born in Tarsus (you need a map to follow his life). At the time, it was a Roman city (like a satellite of Rome itself). It was also a famous center of Stoic philosophy. Paul was born a Roman citizen (his father or grandfather must have served with distinction in the Roman Army to have earned such status). Paul was born into a family of devout Pharisees, the most dynamic of Jewish reform groups at the time. We know he had a sister and a nephew (more on that later), but we know nothing of his family, and can only guess at their reaction to his conversion.

It is probable that Paul was sent to Jerusalem at an early age (perhaps twelve or thirteen) to study to become a rabbi. (Some say there were no rabbis until after 70 A.D., but there *were* great teachers, whatever you call them.) Paul studied under one of the great teachers, Gamaliel by name. We know little else, except by conjecture. Paul was devout, passionate, studious—devoted to the Law and to the heroes and traditions of Judaism. Since he was a contemporary of Jesus, we wonder if he was among the Pharisees who tried to discredit Jesus in debate. That might help explain Paul's early animosity toward Jesus and His followers. But there is no information about this. We do find Saul present and approving of persecution, watching the garments for those who stoned Stephen to death. (Acts 7:58)

DAMASCUS ROAD

Presumably the most familiar incident in Paul's story is his conversion on the Damascus Road. It is one of the great (and classic) conversion stories in the Bible. Indeed, it is fun and instructive to compare it with Moses at the burning bush and see how both reveal the component parts of a true conversion experience. All such experiences are tailored to the individual involved, but they still follow a pattern:

- A startling theophany—spiritual experience—confrontation with the divine.
- "Get me out of here!" (a deep sense of unworthiness, or shame, mixed with fear).
- Reassurance from God—"Do not be afraid!" (probably God's most frequent message to us).
- After we are calmed down, an assignment (there is no conversion without a *vocatio*).
- The assignment scares us, and we start making excuses, looking for a way out.
- We are reassured of God's help and support—"I will be with you" (the second most frequent message).
- Under protest but unable to escape, we "accept" the assignment.
- The "experience" ends, and we are given time to recover—for a little while—then to the task.

It is important to know the Scripture passages related to Paul's conversion. Acts 9, 22, and 26 are familiar to most. First Corinthians 15:1-10 and Second Corinthians 12:1-9 are also telling and instructive.

It is impossible to understand the life of the Apostle Paul if we forget his conversion experience. The texts do not remind us at every turn that Paul's confidence, determination, and focus are coming from his awareness that Jesus really lives, and that Jesus has chosen him personally to carry the Message. This awareness continually "explains" things that have no other explanation. Paul's conversion evolves into a life of constant prayer and eagerness to let the Holy Spirit of Jesus guide and direct his life. It is the single most important theme and reality of his life.

DAMASCUS TO ANTIOCH

A new convert is lovable, perhaps, but also in many ways a pain in the ass. Fresh enthusiasm is not yet matched with perspective or wisdom. The details of Paul's story are unclear, from what we can gather between Acts and comments in Paul's letters. Paul seems to spend some time in Damascus. One of my own prejudices is that he later goes to Mount Sinai, like Moses and Elijah and Jesus before him.

Some do not know that Jesus went to Mount Sinai. They think He went from His baptism in the Jordan River over to some sandstone cliffs (near Qumran) and sat and fasted. But they have no respect for "the tradition," or for the significance of "forty" (and Moses). Jesus went to the Holy Mountain like Moses and Elijah before him. That is why it took forty days, and why He fasted. You could not carry enough supplies on foot to make it there and back. There was precious little food or water in the Negev, and far less of either in the Sinai.

Anyway, *Paul* knows the tradition, and his spiritual awakening has shaken him to the roots, so eventually he heads for the Holy Mountain. Galatians 1:17 tells us that he goes to Arabia (presumably to think and pray). That is strange to our idea of geography. But in the same letter, while making a different connection, we discover Paul's notion of geography – Mount Sinai is in Arabia. (Galatians 4:25) And that is where he goes.

After three years in his own wilderness, Paul spends fifteen days with Peter in Jerusalem. (Galatians 1:18) Paul's old reputation as a hater and persecutor of Christians has to be worn down in some way. It is essential for Paul to have first-hand information from those who knew Jesus personally in the flesh. And it is important for them to know Paul as well, or at least it eventually will be. But Paul is still too much of a firebrand to stay in Jerusalem for very long. *"So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists; but they were seeking to kill him. And when the brethren knew it, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him off to Tarsus."* (Acts 9:28-30)

In short, Paul is about to get them all killed because he does not know when or how to keep his mouth shut. So they ship him home to Tarsus. I consider this critical to

the story. Paul needs to go think, pray, study the Scriptures, and get some deep seasoning before he can be really effective and useful to the Kingdom. After this, nobody will understand the connections between Jewish history and the coming of Jesus as deeply as Paul understands them. Nobody will be able to stand against him in debate, which means that many will hate him all the more. It will be ten years (or so) from his conversion to his first missionary journey, but by then he will have unusual credentials: He is a Roman citizen. He speaks Greek fluently, and understands the Hellenistic mind-set and philosophy. He is rabbinically trained under one of the greatest teachers of all time (Gamaliel). He is completely and totally aware of the resurrection of Jesus, and of the presence of His Holy Spirit. He believes that life as we know it is about to come to an end, so there is little to lose here. He is deeply ashamed (humble, and grateful for forgiveness and mercy) of some of his deeds in his former life. He is fearless. And so, Saul of Tarsus has the credentials to be the Holy Spirit's top choice to replace the missing twelfth apostle.

There is one other thing. The Holy Spirit always sends crucial and important friends into our lives when we are serious about the New Life. And we will really need them. The Holy Spirit sends many such people into Paul's life along the way. But at this point in Paul's story, there is Barnabas. Barnabas had met Paul in Jerusalem, and he liked and trusted him from the beginning.

Jerusalem is always the famous center, but, partly because of discomfort and persecution there, the Antioch church is growing quickly and attracting non-Jews much faster than Jerusalem. And that is causing more and more questions and problems. Must Christians also be Jews (kosher, circumcised, sworn to follow the Law)? As such questions grow in intensity, Barnabas remembers his new friend, who has extraordinary background and clarity on such things. So he goes to Tarsus to find Paul. The two of them come back to Antioch and spend a year there together. It will always be Paul's "home church." He will be "ordained" and sent out from Antioch. (The "laying on of hands" literally means "our support" – the work of our hands will go with you; you go for us, so we consider you an extension of ourselves.) Paul will go out from Antioch, and he will return to report there after each journey.

FIRST JOURNEY

Barnabas, Paul, and young John Mark head out from Antioch on what we call the "first missionary journey." Barnabas is the leader (Paul is still not trusted by many), and he will remain the prominent one until they run into trouble. Then Paul steps up and into it. But we must remember that Paul, because of his background and experience, is "more at home" with Gentile customs and culture than any of the other early Christians.

What are the highlights of this first journey? John Mark will leave at Perga and go home to Jerusalem. Is he homesick? He is probably a young teenager. Barnabas is his uncle. Is he frightened? Travel is difficult, and sometimes dangerous. In any case, this will cause problems later.

Paul and Barnabas head into the heartland of what we now know as Turkey (Phrygia, Galatia) – Pisidian Antioch,

Iconium, Lystra, Derbe. The plan—the strategy—is forming in Paul’s mind as they go: He is rabbinically trained; he can walk into any synagogue on the Sabbath and be asked to preach. You have to start somewhere, and there is a synagogue in nearly every town or city. Paul is more effective than anybody else because he has a strategy—he knows how to get things to happen. But it is a hard pattern. He preaches ... about guess what? “Jesus is the long-expected Messiah. He was murdered (as were many prophets), but He rose again, and is present for any who will believe in Him. He will forgive your past (as He has forgiven a murderer like me), and He will guide and direct your New Life from now on—if you want Him to. And this means life as we know it is about to come to an end here. If you hang on to the old life, it will soon turn to ashes in your hands.”

Paul is persuasive. He backs all that he says with Old Testament scriptures. Many wonder if he is telling them the truth, and some believe. Inevitably, resistance to the New Message also forms and grows. The more some believe, the more it threatens the Jewish community and its leaders. If some of the leaders also believe (as often happens), it is even more threatening. So we do not know if it takes weeks or months, but the opposition hardens and Paul is thrown out. Threatened and driven out of Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas do the same thing in Iconium. When leaders from Pisidian Antioch learn where Paul has gone and that he is doing the same thing there, they are even angrier. They want to stone Paul, but he learns of their plan and goes on to Lystra. Now alerted, the opposition tracks him to Lystra, and there they do stone him and leave him for dead. Not many people survive a stoning.

Finding that he is still alive, Barnabas and perhaps some who have believed the Message carry Paul to Derbe. Derbe is not really a destination; it is a tiny, out-of-the-way village where the opposition is not likely to find Paul, and where he can recover. When Paul starts churches, they are of course “house-churches”—a handful of people who gather in somebody’s home to talk and pray and study together, and talk about what the New Life in Christ is really about, and how you can live it. A church is started in Derbe too, so Paul is not idle during his recovery.

Though we have often been told otherwise, there has always been a connection between Christianity and rich and prominent people. When the rich become Christians, their goods serve the Kingdom. Duh! Who has houses large enough for the house-churches to meet in? So, like Jesus, Paul has a long and growing list of rich friends. For Jesus: Levi (Matthew), Mary Magdalene, the sisters Mary and Martha, Joanna, “Susanna, and many others” (Luke 8:3), Zacchaeus, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus. For Paul: Lydia, Philemon, Priscilla and Aquila, Jason, Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Timothy, Tychicus, Trophimus, Jason, Crispus, Titius Justus. (There is evidence or logic that these are all people of means.) Barnabas and Mark are also probably “better off” than most. Of course, the New Testament knows that we can

never use money as a measure of wealth. So, unlike me, the New Testament does not “dwell” on such things.

If you look at a map, you will discover that Derbe is really not very far from the Cilician Gates—the pass over the mountains that leads back to Tarsus, Paul’s hometown. I think about that often. If I had started new churches everywhere I had been; and if I had been threatened, beaten, stoned, and left for dead; and if I had been just a hop, skip, and a jump away from home—I strongly suspect I would have called it a day and gone home. But not Paul. He dusts himself off, heals a bit, and goes right back to all the places he has just escaped from. He has small bands of friends in all these places, to be sure, but he also has enemies there who would love to see him and kill him. He is not stupid. He does not invite more trouble by announcing his presence. But he speaks and teaches and encourages the house-churches that have been started. Then it is back to Antioch, having visited all the sites on his journey ... twice.

This will be Paul’s strategy from now on, despite the known cost. Only, Paul will constantly be learning (thinking, praying, growing, trying to become more effective). Eventually Paul will learn to head for larger and larger towns. If you spend months in Derbe, some eternally precious individuals will be reached and blessed, but that’s it. If you spend the same time and energy in Corinth or Ephesus, that church will eventually spawn new churches all over the territory. (People are coming through those cities all the time, and if there is a turned-on group of Christians there, some of them will get infected, and they in turn will become carriers.)

And oh yes—Timothy is from Lystra. You get beaten and stoned and make some friends, and one will become like a son to you—and a great second-generation leader of the church. Such is life ... if you stay close to the Spirit.

SECOND JOURNEY

So back to Antioch, and telling everybody what happened. And a trip to Jerusalem. It is hard to track the Jerusalem visits, but it is important to know that Paul is eager to keep communicating with the Jerusalem Christians. There is growing animosity between Jewish Christians at Jerusalem and Gentile Christians outside Jerusalem. It is important to realize that when Jews in Jerusalem hear that “Christian Jews” are teaching people that they no longer have to obey Torah (or be circumcised, eat kosher food, worship on the Sabbath, or come to the temple to be right with God), well, that is blazing blasphemy. Therefore Jerusalem Christians are under a lot more scrutiny and a lot more fire than Christians elsewhere. Besides, it is already too hot for Christians in Jerusalem. James, the brother of Jesus (not one of the twelve disciples), has become the head of the Jerusalem church. He and his followers are Paul’s most severe critics, and Paul’s greatest opposition. But Paul goes to Jerusalem to talk, and from time to time it seems like they have “ironed out” most of their differences. The issue? Is everybody welcome in the Christian church? That is, even if

they do not convert to Judaism per se? (And behind it all: Is Jesus really the Messiah—the Savior? Does Jesus outrank Moses? Can and will Jesus save you even if you worship on Sunday (the day of resurrection) instead of on the Sabbath, as Torah insists (under penalty of death)?)

It may sound small to us, but what is at stake for them (and still is for us) is the overthrow of traditions and beliefs that have been held for over a thousand years. It is easy (at least for me) to scoff at James, who never helped his brother until after Jesus had been crucified, but then rides his reputation as a relative into prominence in the Jerusalem church—and ends up being Paul’s “worst enemy.” But James is no doubt doing the best he knows. And surely he is worried every day that “his people” will be imprisoned or killed if the Jewish culture all around them gets irate enough at what Paul is doing—splitting synagogues, and teaching people that they do not have to honor Moses or the Torah. (In case we think his concerns are not serious, James himself will be martyred rather brutally in A.D. 62.)

But one good trip deserves another, so Paul and Barnabas decide they should go on a second missionary journey to start new churches beyond where they had already been. Only, Barnabas wants to give his nephew Mark a second chance (and a chance to redeem himself). Paul is adamantly against it. (Desert me once, shame on you. Desert me twice, shame on me.) It is only mentioned in one verse. (Acts 15:39) We are given no details. But it splits the friendship between Paul and Barnabas. How incredibly sad. Behind the scenes, Mark’s desertion on the first journey must have wounded Paul in ways we can only imagine.

Anyway, we lose track of Barnabas and Mark for a while, as they sail off to Cyprus. Paul and Silas (Silvanus) team up and head out for the second missionary journey, this time by foot through Tarsus and over the mountains, to visit the churches founded on the first journey.

Now we come to a dramatic moment in Paul’s life that few seem to notice. It is incredibly important to me, because it reminds me of how serious Paul is about obedience to the Holy Spirit—that is, how much he is a man of prayer. In time, Paul and Silas get past Pisidian Antioch into new territory, which is the whole idea. Paul thinks it would be a good idea to go into Asia Minor (the region of Ephesus), but the Spirit has indicated otherwise. So Paul thinks it is time to go north. There are some enticing communities along the Black Sea (Bithynia), and I have long wondered if Paul maybe had an itch to visit Byzantium (Istanbul). But again, the Spirit says that is not the right direction. By now, Silas must be wondering what’s going on. Paul is the experienced veteran here—what’s he thinking?! Silas is going with Paul, and Paul has no idea what he’s doing!?

They walk from Antioch clear across Turkey, doing nothing. Well, it isn’t “nothing”—they have to eat and sleep, find work, and repair gear. It is over six hundred miles and four months, if they don’t dally. No new churches; just waiting for the Spirit to say “when.” They reach Troas and run out of land, and the second journey has not even really begun. But they also run into Luke at

Troas. And after talking with them, he pleads with them to come to Macedonia. In that conversation, they “hear” the Spirit confirming—“This is where I have wanted you to go.” I am presuming, of course. But the presumptions all match the story. Paul is not going to try to work apart from the Spirit’s guidance and support. (Oh! So *that’s* why he keeps accomplishing so much! Duh! Six hundred miles on foot is nothing, as long as you are staying faithful.)

The second missionary journey starts churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and mostly Corinth. Nothing happens at Athens because the people already know everything and are quite spiritual and sophisticated (the “well” who have no need of a physician). Paul spends over two years at Corinth (the first time), and finds it a very complicated and difficult place for Christianity. Paul’s leadership and authority are always being challenged. He thinks he has “lost the church” there a good deal of the time. The arguments and issues are endless. But Corinth ends up being a great center of Christianity, whose influence spreads far and wide. We will not get into all the stories, but the Corinthian letters read like a “laundry list” of the questions, issues, mistakes, and concerns that can face any group of Christians. That is, their struggles and problems are wonderful for those of us who want to learn and grow in our own faith.

Some highlights of the second journey (for later pondering and growth for those who care):

- Meeting Luke, and the jumping-off place at Troas.
- Meeting Lydia at Philippi.
- Being beaten and thrown into jail at Philippi (sigh), but Paul converts the jailer, and he and his family are baptized.
- New churches and similar responses at Thessalonica and Berea.
- The sermon at Athens (best sermon, worst results).
- The big one—Corinth.

It takes Acts four verses to close out the second journey and get us into the third journey. Paul stops by Ephesus on the way, but he does not even stay long enough to get into trouble. (A first for him.) He visits Jerusalem and Antioch, but all in a fleeting phrase. We are given none of the particulars, though Paul apparently spends “some time” at Antioch. (Acts 18:18-22)

THIRD JOURNEY

(THE LONGEST AND MOST COMPLICATED TO FOLLOW)

Paul comes out of Antioch (on foot again). We are not even told who his companions are, though if he is traveling alone, it is the first and only time (and far more dangerous). As mentioned in the main paper, Paul cannot “just walk”—he needs a road. (Tough enough to walk on water, but on land, you need a road.) Paul goes through Tarsus (does he still have family there?), then through the Cilician Gates, and on to visit the churches begun on the first journey. Beyond Pisidian Antioch, heading west, there is only one major east-west road in the area. Therefore, I believe that Paul must have gone through Colossae and Laodicea. Luke is not with him, so Acts does not tell us for certain (of meeting Philemon

and Onesimus, or founding churches in Colossae and Laodicea), but it is by far the most logical assumption from what information we have.

The destination is clearly Ephesus, and that will be the center of Paul's efforts on this third journey. However, there are "subplots" now. On the first journey, Paul had few concerns about previous churches (obvious, though many fail to notice). The longer we live, the "harder" it is to keep up with those we love and what we care about. However much it all blesses us, it also becomes impossible to keep up with it all. Paul is now known and loved (and hated) throughout Israel, Syria, Turkey, and Greece (to use our current designations). He has visited Ephesus briefly (while heading home from Corinth). He also knows that it is the major city of Asia Minor, and that if he can build a strong and faithful Christian community in Ephesus, it will eventually impact the entire area (which it surely does).

But Paul now has "friends"—many of them very loyal and deeply Christian—from all over the place, and especially from the churches he has founded. (Those who think of Paul as cold, severe, or judgmental are paying no attention to the real story. People who are cold, severe, and judgmental do not have hordes of loving, caring friends.) And Paul has concerns for every Christian community he has started, and for the mushrooming new communities that they are starting. There are arguments, disagreements, and fights within—and pressures and growing animosity without—and lots of imperfect people are doing imperfect things ... just like now. In the midst of it all, there are opinions, mixed motives, egos, and honest misunderstandings that threaten to draw the churches off course—away from dependence on the love and grace of Jesus Christ. To some degree, Paul is being drawn into these issues and concerns as well (throughout Israel, Syria, Turkey, and Greece).

Of course, Paul is revisiting the churches whenever he gets the chance. But his friends are also writing to him, tracking him down, coming to visit him, sometimes traveling with him—all of them talking to him about the churches and the people they themselves are involved with, and giving their own perspective on how things are going (and what they think of various people). From time to time, Paul is moved to write a letter back to one of the various churches, often sending the letter with whichever messenger is handy, or with the person who had brought news in the first place. But we have only the tiny "tip of the iceberg" from this scenario, and of this correspondence.

When Paul writes a letter—let us say to Laodicea—where would people put it? There are no church buildings yet. The young Christian communities meet in people's homes—they are all house-churches. And do you imagine they have homes like you live in, with nice, dry, convenient places to store Paul's letters for later generations? Many do not yet know what Paul's reputation will become, and none of them think there will be any "future generations." Some are angered by what Paul writes, and look for a chance to throw the letter away. Others want to borrow the letter to read to other churches, or to people

who missed the meeting. People literate enough to make copies—and with writing materials available, and time enough—are few and far between. There are rain, dirt, critters, and clothes without pockets; not everybody remembers where they put things; not everybody keeps their promise to return what they borrow. It is a great wonder that we have copies of *any* of Paul's letters.

I have only hinted at the situation when Paul comes to Ephesus on the third journey. He will face a whole new challenge here, and now while trying to keep up with all that is already happening elsewhere. You can read about some of the more dramatic events (with some folk believing, and with growing opposition, as always): the seven sons of Sceva, burning books, miracles, the riot because of Demetrius the silversmith, a level-headed town clerk. (Acts 19)

What does not come clear in the Book of Acts (if anywhere, really) is that during Paul's time in Ephesus, he is much concerned for the church at Corinth. Major shipping lanes between Corinth and Ephesus make correspondence easier (for a change) than we would think at first. We have evidence of at least four letters (or fragments of letters) from Paul to Corinth, and we have hints of some letters we do not have. Doubtless there are letters from Corinth to Paul which he is answering, and sadly we have none of them. Apparently Paul makes a trip to Corinth in person to try and straighten out the conflicts, and it is a disaster. Finally, between messengers and letters, most of the disagreements are resolved—at least for a while.

At the end of Paul's stay in Ephesus (and running from the latest riot), Paul goes to Corinth for a three-month visit. At this point, a second major subplot comes to center stage. Paul has long planned to take a special offering from all the "Gentile churches" to the church at Jerusalem. The reasons are complex, but among them must be the hope of better relations between Jewish and Gentile churches and Christians. In any case, Paul has been talking and writing about this offering for months. Now it is time to gather it and take it to Jerusalem.

Of course, Paul has enemies and detractors. They are having a field day over the offering—telling everyone that Paul is a false apostle, that he is bilking them, that this offering will end up in his own pockets. Paul knows that if the offering does not reach Jerusalem—for *whatever* reason—everyone will assume from then on that he stole it. So Paul invites each church to send a representative or two to accompany him (and the offering) to Jerusalem. Paul wants eyewitnesses to the fact that the money reaches its proper destination. (Acts 20:4 names some of them.)

THREE THINGS:

1.) Paul has gathered a large sum of money, and there are thieves (brigands) who would love to get their hands on it. Between Paul's efforts to coordinate and gather the money, and the enemies who are claiming Paul's motives to be false, *everybody* has heard about the money.

2.) The anger toward Paul has increased as he has split more and more synagogues over the known world.

This anger is hardly a secret, since Paul has been stoned, beaten, imprisoned, and tracked from town to town by irate leaders (who feel toward Paul as Paul himself once felt toward Christians). While in Corinth at the tail end of his third journey, Paul learns that there is a plot against his life. Jewish assassins have decided to take him out. (Acts 20:3)

3.) Paul believes (Roetzel, pages 117ff) that this offering to Jerusalem is one of the necessary conditions that must be fulfilled in order for the Messiah to return. Therefore, taking this offering to Jerusalem, despite all the dangers, becomes a “must try” goal. The probability is that if the assassins don’t get him, the brigands will. And if by chance he does make it to Jerusalem, the Jews there will kill him.

And now we get one of the more dramatic and lesser-known episodes in Paul’s rather dramatic and episodic story. Having booked passage on a ship from Corinth to Syria, Paul realizes that assassins have done the same. So at the last minute, Paul does not get on the ship (and presumably some assassins have a pleasant trip to Syria).

Paul will now dodge and duck his way all the way to Jerusalem. He heads by land back up through Macedonia (and both assassins and brigands have to get reorganized). He picks up Luke at Philippi (and the Book of Acts shifts to “we” in the telling). To confuse the trail, Paul keeps splitting his party, sending some by land and some by sea. So some go ahead to Troas over land, while Paul sails to Troas with others (including Luke). At Troas, Eutychus goes to sleep during a sermon and gets his just reward. (Just kidding.)

Then Paul sends some of the party by ship to Assos, and this time he goes by foot. And then they “island-hop” to Miletus. (Who can predict or plan how to keep up with that?!) Paul knows that if he stops at Ephesus, “they will get him.” “They” assume he *will* go to Ephesus, and there is no way to get from the harbor to the city undetected. So Paul sends a message (by secret courier) to the elders at Ephesus, and he tells them to leave discreetly and meet him at Miletus (south of Ephesus). They have a very touching meeting, and Paul and his companions sail on – to Cos, Rhodes, and Patara, and then to another ship bound for Tyre. For many of us, this is all just a bunch of names, but behind it is an amazing plot. And of course, from my point of view, Paul is praying and taking guidance from the Holy Spirit all along the way ... much as Jesus did, in order to get Himself to Jerusalem without being assassinated or arrested on His last journey from Galilee.

JERUSALEM AND CAESAREA

Paul’s strange vows in Jerusalem (why is he following the Law after so much talk of grace?) and the unenthusiastic “reception” he gets from fellow Christians at Jerusalem (no mention of the offering, no gratitude) seem strange to me. But when Paul is recognized at the temple, we are jolted back to reality – and back to the true magnitude of the animosity that has built up against him.

If the Roman barracks had not been built on the edge of the temple square, Paul would not have survived the riot. It is the Roman Commander’s duty to keep order, so Paul is taken into custody to protect him. Then they discover that he is a Roman citizen (instead of the expected terrorist). Indefatigable, Paul still tries to preach his way out of the uproar. He cannot believe that Jews will not convert once they have realized what has really and truly happened – that the Messiah has come. It happened to him, and he converted. Can it not happen to them? (But they are only hearing a sermon; he encountered the Living Christ!) And yet, once quieted down, the crowd apparently listens with interest – until Paul mentions the word “Gentile.” That triggers the riot all over again.

Then a fascinating little episode (Acts 23:6): Paul’s nephew saves his life. Paul has a sister! But how did the nephew learn of the plot against Paul’s life unless he was a non-Christian Jew? What was it like between Paul and his relatives when he became a Christian? We can only guess, but at least at this point, their love for Paul causes the nephew to risk his own life to warn Paul. Forty Jewish men have sworn to neither eat nor drink until they have killed Paul. That’s a lot of conviction, and anger. “*If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.*” (Romans 12:18) I certainly do not mean to imply that Paul is being insincere when he writes this sentence. But it puts things into perspective to realize that Paul is also determined to be faithful, and therefore it is not at all possible for him to live peaceably with all. As with Jesus, we have to keep seeing the life along with the words, or we get very weird notions about what kind of love and peace and niceness they are really talking about.

And so Paul is escorted out of Jerusalem to Caesarea, the Roman headquarters for the entire region. Paul is taken by night, under the protection of seventy cavalry and two hundred foot soldiers. That is a HUGE escort.

Paul is under house arrest in Caesarea for two years. He is not treated like a criminal; he is not in prison. He is being guarded for his own protection. But he also cannot be released until or unless some official is willing to take responsibility for saying that there is no legitimate charge against him. Felix, the Procurator of Judea, is not willing to risk the wrath of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem by releasing him. Some think Felix is hoping for a bribe. Instead, he is recalled to Rome, very possibly in disgrace for being unable to resolve the conflict over Paul. When Festus assumes his post, it is obvious that he is determined to resolve things quickly, one way or another. Knowing that a trial in Jerusalem is a death sentence (from assassins), Paul appeals to the Emperor – his right as a Roman citizen.

We do get some fun conversations and two more recountings of Paul’s Damascus Road conversion, but we truly know very little of this two-year period. Nobody is sure whether Paul wrote any letters from Caesarea, and we learn very little of friends visiting or attending to Paul during this time. It is not possible to believe that Paul would be idle for two whole years, but we have almost no information.

SHIPWRECK

Acts 27 and 28 tell the fascinating story of the voyage to Rome. It is hard to hear about the huge storm without thinking about Jonah, though Paul is the epitome of the opposite of the character in that story. The story of the shipwreck stands quite well on its own. We might only add that the great fear of “the shallows of Syrtis” (Acts 27:17) was very real. Sandstorms from the Sahara had been blowing sand into the sea off the northern coast of Africa for centuries. Thus for miles out to sea, this northern shore had become a death trap—a kind of underwater quicksand area. Once a ship got into this sand (soft but deep), it would never get out. No other ship could dare come to the rescue, for it would suffer a similar fate. Trying to get into smaller boats or swim or wade ashore would only delay the inevitable. Sooner or later, you would be trapped and drowned by the sand, which was not firm enough to stand on but was thick enough to “hold you.” This was the terror “beyond the storm.” You might survive the waves, but if the wind drove you south into the shallows of Syrtis, you would surely die.

ROME

After surviving the shipwreck and then wintering on Malta (and a snake bite, and a conversion), there is apparently a lovely greeting from Christians on Puteoli (and seven days of visiting). Then a group comes out to greet Paul and accompany him to Rome.

Paul is still under house arrest, awaiting trial. He is not a criminal, or a prisoner as such. Then, as mentioned earlier, the Book of Acts does not end ... it stops. There is no word of the outcome of the trial. Our last information is that Paul had been two years in Rome, and that he talked with all who came to visit him. Even so, we do not know if Paul’s trial was about to take place, or if it had even been scheduled. We are only told that as this was being written, Paul had been in Rome for two years.

We can make up endings forever: Luke got sick and died. Luke got mad and quit. Luke ran out of ink, and never got back to his task. Luke got busy with all the dynamics surrounding the Christian house-churches in Rome, and never completed his book. There are endless possibilities, and we will never know for sure.

The most compelling to me, as you now know, is that sometime after this last entry (62-64 A.D.), the great fire of Rome took place, Nero blamed it on the Christians (scapegoated them), and both Luke and Paul (and very possibly Peter, along with many, many others) died in the aftermath. Had some or all of Paul’s trial occurred before the fire? Had Luke/Acts been written as a brief—an explanation (defense) of the Christian movement—in preparation for the trial? It does seem pretty clear that Paul had high hopes of establishing Christianity before the Emperor (and the Empire) as a worthy and nonseditious movement of great importance.

Since this was such a good and worthy purpose, why didn’t the Holy Spirit back it? How many times and in how many ways has this question arisen throughout history? Couldn’t the Holy Spirit have influenced Nero? (Not if there is free will—not from all we know of Nero by this time.) Why did Jesus appear to Peter and Mary and eventually Paul—but not to Tiberius Caesar, or Pilate, or Herod and the Sanhedrin? Why not do it right, and get it over with?!

On the other hand, what turned a Galilean fisherman and a young rabbi from Tarsus into such giants of faith and humility and devotion? We are given free will—and, some of the time at least, the opportunity to choose, and learn, and pray, and grow. Whether we become bitter or grateful is part of the drama, part of our pilgrimage, part of our own free will.

“Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come, come again.”