

What is a timeline of Paul's life?

The study of the life of the apostle Paul is both challenging and rewarding. He is called Saul, his Hebrew name, and Paul, his Roman name (Acts 13:9). We first meet him at the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7. Saul is “a young man” (Acts 7:58), and he “approved of putting Stephen to death” (Acts 8:1, NASB). Paul was probably about 33 years old at that time.

Saul became a persecutor of the believers, and “he made havoc of the church” (Acts 8:3, NKJV). On his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to capture more Christians, he himself was “captured” by Jesus Christ (Acts 9:3-9). After his conversion, Saul spent three years in Damascus and Arabia, receiving what might be called his “Bible college instruction” (Galatians 1:17-18). After this time he returned to Jerusalem to meet Peter and James, the brother of Jesus, who were understandably wary of him, but the apostles received him because of Barnabas’s testimony (Acts 9:26-28).

When he learned that the Jews were plotting to kill him, he escaped to his hometown, Tarsus, in Cilicia (Acts 9:29-30). Sometime after this, Barnabas went to Tarsus to get Paul and bring him back to help in his ministry at Antioch in Syria. This city became Paul’s home base; it was at the church there that believers were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). Later, the church at Antioch sent Barnabas and Paul with a financial gift to the needy saints in Jerusalem. This “famine visit” took place around AD 45 (Acts 11:19-30). This set the stage for the first missionary trip (Acts 13-14).

The work of Gentile foreign missions was inaugurated by the church at Antioch under the direction of the Holy Spirit in the sending forth of Barnabas and Paul (Acts 13:1-3). Accompanied by John Mark, the men sailed to the island of Cyprus. After preaching there,

they went to southern Galatia (modern-day Turkey) where John Mark defected and returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas continued to Antioch in Pisidia (in Galatia) where Paul delivered a typical sermon that he would preach in a synagogue to both Jews and Gentile proselytes (verses 16, 26, and 32). Forced to leave Antioch, they went to Iconium, preached and performed miracles there, and were driven out. At Lystra Paul healed a lame man and preached a sermon that did not sit well with the people. The people of Lystra stoned Paul and left him for dead, but God healed him. He and Barnabas went on to Derbe and then retraced their steps to Lystra, et al. Through it all, Paul displayed a genuine commitment to the cause of Christ and His gospel.

The first doctrinal controversy in the early church centered on the necessity of circumcision for personal salvation. To settle the issue, a council was convened in Jerusalem. After major addresses by Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James, the council decided that a Gentile convert did not have to be circumcised in order to be saved. Barnabas and Paul spoke of God's working among the Gentiles on their first trip (Acts 15:12). In letters to the Gentile churches, the council recorded their verdict: Gentile converts were not required to comply with the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:1-2; c. AD 50).

Paul's second missionary trip (Acts 15:36–18:22) was planned at the request of Barnabas (verse 36). When he and Paul argued over the advisability of taking John Mark once again, Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus, whereas Paul chose Silas and followed the land route into Syria and Cilicia. The record of Barnabas's ministry ends with this action. Happily, Paul was later reconciled to both Barnabas (1 Corinthians 9:6) and Mark (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 1:24; 2 Timothy 4:11). After Timothy joined the team at Lystra, they advanced through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia to the Aegean port of Troas.

In a vision Paul was directed to go into the European region of Macedonia. Luke then joined the team, and all four went to Philippi. Here Paul and Silas were beaten and put into prison, where they prayed, sang, and led the jailor to be saved (Acts 16:25-34). A small nucleus of believers was established, meeting in the house of Lydia, the first convert in Europe (verses 14-15, 40). The team traveled to Thessalonica where they ministered for about a month. Then Paul went to Berea where the brethren took him to Athens. There he preached both in the synagogue and on Mars' Hill before the pagan philosophers. This resulted in a few converts (Acts 17:16-34). Paul then moved on to Corinth where he labored for eighteen months (Acts 18:11). At first, he worked as a tentmaker with Aquila and Priscilla to support himself and to maintain a reproach-free testimony (see 1 Corinthians 9:1-18). Paul and his team returned to Antioch after a major ministry among Gentiles in spite of strong opposition.

The third journey (Acts 18:23-21:17) began as an edification ministry in Galatia and Phrygia. Paul then went to Ephesus, the key city of the province of Asia, where he labored for three years, longer than in any other city (Acts 19:8, 10; 20:31). Paul preached in the synagogue for three months and continued for two years in the school of Tyrannus. From this strategic spot, all the inhabitants of Asia heard the Word (Acts 19:10, 20). Paul then revisited the churches of Macedonia and Greece that were founded during the second tour.

He traveled back to Asia Minor and on to Israel. Both at Tyre and Caesarea, Paul was warned of the dangers of going to Jerusalem by believers speaking by the Holy Spirit (Acts 21:4, 10-12). He regarded these warnings not as a prohibition but as a divine forewarning so that he would be spiritually prepared for what would happen.

In Paul's final visit to Jerusalem, he met with James and the elders (Acts 21:17-26). He was seized in the temple (verses 27-40) and made a speech on the fortress stairs (Acts 22:1-21). Paul met with the Sanhedrin (verses 30-23:11); he was taken to Caesarea (Acts 23:12-35) where he was detained for two years (Acts 24:22-27). While incarcerated, he appeared before Felix (verses 1-27), Festus (Acts 25:1-12), and King Agrippa (Acts 25:13-26:32).

Upon an appeal to Caesar Nero (Acts 25:10-11), Paul was slated for a trip to Rome. The voyage to Rome was marked by delay and difficulty. Stopping at Crete, and against Paul's advice, the ship set sail and encountered a fierce storm. The ship wrecked near the island of Malta where Paul by God's grace survived a venomous snake bite. He then engaged in a ministry of healing on the island (Acts 28:7-10). Three months later they sailed again, and when they arrived in Rome, Paul underwent a special imprisonment (verse 16). After he called for the Jewish leaders at Rome, he explained his imprisonment and declared the gospel to them. He was released from this imprisonment, but after a second arrest, according to tradition, he was martyred in Rome, probably at the age of 67.

Here is a chronological list of major events in Paul's life (the dates are approximate):

Conversion on the road to Damascus, AD 34

Three years in Arabia, AD 34-37

First missionary trip, AD 46-48

Jerusalem Council, AD 49 or 50

Second missionary trip, AD 49–52

The epistle to the Galatians, AD 50

The epistles of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, AD 51 and 52

Third missionary trip, AD 53–57

The epistles of 1 and 2 Corinthians, AD 55 and 56

The epistle to the Romans, AD 57

Arrest in Jerusalem, AD 57

Imprisoned in Caesarea, AD 57–60

Appeal to Caesar and trip to Rome, AD 60–61

The epistle to the Ephesians, AD 61 or 62

The epistle to the Colossians, AD 61 or 62

The epistle to Philemon, AD 61 or 62

The epistle to the Philippians, AD 62 or 63

Release from the first Roman imprisonment, AD 63

Trip to Spain (?), AD 63 or 64 (see Romans 15:24, 28)

The epistle of 1 Timothy, AD 64

The epistle to Titus, AD 64

The epistle to the Hebrews (?), AD 65 or 66

Second Roman imprisonment, AD 66–67

The epistle of 2 Timothy, AD 67

Martyrdom, AD 67