

Going Places with Paul

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A life prepared

Paul was born and brought up a Jew. In view of traditional Jewish indifference to the evangelization of the Gentiles, his missionary travel in the non-Jewish world is remarkable. That his expeditions involved much sea travel is likewise remarkable, because the Jews had never been a seafaring people. Their world was Palestine, and if they looked westwards across the Mediterranean, they preferred not to think about the Gentile world beyond the horizon.

By nature, Paul was not one to challenge accepted Jewish attitudes. He grew up in a traditional Jewish home,¹ and he spent many years studying the Jewish law under the prominent Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem, the very heart of Jewish conservatism.²

But Paul's thinking had been broadened and his powers of reasoning developed by a Greek element in his secular education. A Roman influence also helped shape his life. He had inherited the valued privilege of Roman citizenship,³ and the Roman notion of empire provided the background to his program of world evangelism.

This rich heritage, whether Jewish or otherwise, was no cause for personal pride. Paul acknowledged this, and even renounced it as a basis for claiming God's salvation. His standing as a Christian was not based on personal heritage or achievement, but on what God had graciously done for him through Jesus Christ.⁴

With his conversion, however, it soon became evident that the God whom Paul previously misunderstood had, through all Paul's circumstances, been preparing his chosen messenger. For Paul was supremely fitted to penetrate the Gentile nations with the gospel to an extent never before imagined.⁵ Nevertheless, he still needed to make a response of obedience to the divine will.

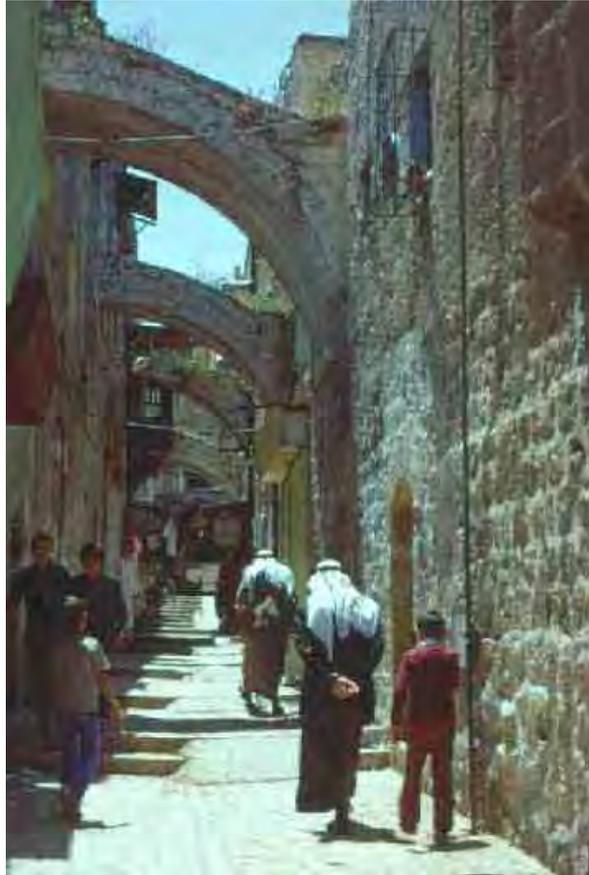
1. Phil 3:5-6

2. Acts 22:3

3. Acts 22:27-28

4. Phil 3:7-9

5. Acts 9:15. For map see page 38.



Jerusalem, where Paul studied Jewish law

From a convert to a leader

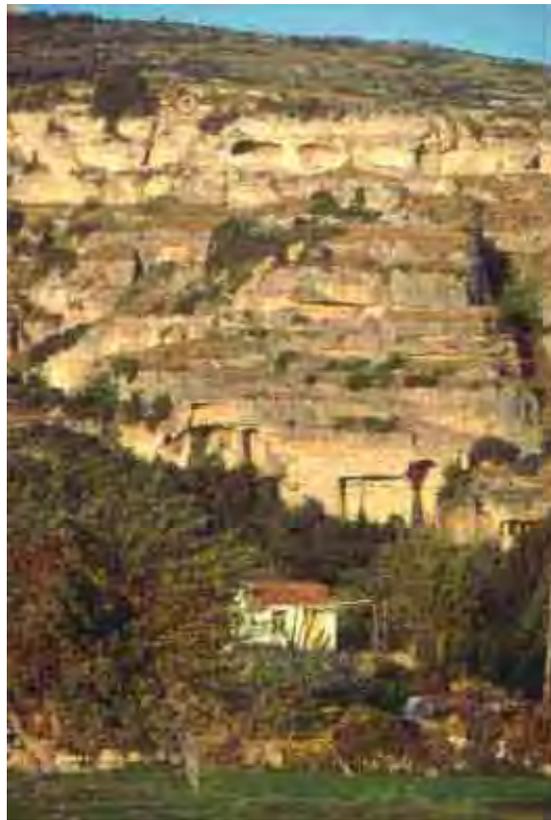
Natural ability, a godly upbringing, a good education and a thorough grounding in the law of Moses may all be valuable, but they are not in themselves enough to carry out God's service properly. Even a convert of the calibre of Paul was a novice in relation to the new life he now possessed in Christ. At the time of Paul's conversion, God made known the work for which he had chosen him,¹ but many years would pass before Paul would begin that work.

Though a convert of only a few days, Paul did not hesitate to proclaim his new-found faith in the face of bitter opposition.² To be a *leader* in God's service, however, was a different matter. Much preparation was necessary, but few details have come down to us of that period of Paul's life.

Our only knowledge of Paul's first three years as a Christian is that he spent some time in Arabia and Syria.³ After this he went to Jerusalem, then returned to Syria and went on to Cilicia, the region where he had been brought up.⁴ Nothing is recorded of the next eleven years of Paul's life, apart from a note concerning the last of those years, which he spent with Barnabas at Antioch in Syria.⁵ That year provided the background to a significant development in Paul's career.

The church at Antioch had been founded by Jewish Christians of Mediterranean origins who had been expelled from Jerusalem.⁶ On coming to Antioch, they took the revolutionary step of preaching the gospel specifically to the non-Jews. Many believed, and a lot more believed when Paul and Barnabas came and helped them. This must have been a great experience for Paul. After all those years of preparation, his mission to the Gentiles had begun – and with resounding success.

1. Acts 9:15
2. Acts 9:20-22
3. Gal 1:17-18. Damascus was in Syria.
4. Acts 9:26-30; Gal 1:18-21
5. Acts 11:26; Gal 2:1
6. Acts 11:19-26



Remains of Antioch's fortifications near Seleucia

The church with a vision

The generous spirit of the Jews who evangelized Antioch passed on to their Gentile converts. When they heard that Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were suffering economic hardship as a result of a famine, the Antioch Christians promptly organized a collection of goods and money that Paul and Barnabas took to Jerusalem on their behalf.¹ The conservatives in the Jerusalem church were not happy about what was happening at Antioch, but that did not stop the Antioch Christians from demonstrating the sort of generous fellowship that should always characterize God's people.

Antioch's concern extended beyond the Christian circle to people and nations who had not yet heard the Christian message. Though it had existed only a short time, the Antioch church matured rapidly. It maintained a healthy balance between building up the Christians and reaching out to non-Christians.² The believers had an appetite for instruction in the Scriptures, without which outreach can be very superficial. Yet they had also a concern for the unevangelized, without which a church can become complacently self-satisfied.

One factor that contributed towards this healthy outlook in the Antioch church was the local ministry of prophets and teachers. These men, being sensitive to God's directing, took the initiative in the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas for their divinely appointed task of taking the gospel to the Gentile regions beyond. From Antioch, Paul and Barnabas went to the nearby port of Seleucia, from where the vast Mediterranean stretched westward. They boarded a ship and set sail.³

The missionaries' first landfall was the island of Cyprus. There was a large Jewish population on Cyprus, and in fact Cypriot Jews were among those Christians from Jerusalem who first took the gospel to the non-Jews of Antioch.⁴ Now the Antioch church was in turn sending the gospel to Cyprus.

1. Acts 11:27-30
2. Acts 11:26
3. Acts 13:1-4
4. Acts 11:20



Harbour at Seleucia, from where Paul set sail

Messiah and Saviour

Paul's plan was to preach the gospel to the Jews first, because they were supposed to be God's evangelists to the nations. But if the Jews refused to believe, Paul did not hesitate to take the message to the Gentiles direct.¹ The contrast between Jewish rejection and Gentile acceptance of the gospel was well illustrated on Cyprus when a Jewish sorcerer fiercely opposed Paul, whereas the Roman proconsul believed.²

Having preached the gospel from one end of Cyprus to the other, the missionary party set sail again, this time heading for Asia Minor. They landed at Perga, and then pushed on north into the Pisidian region of Galatia, where they stopped at the city of Antioch³ (known as Pisidian Antioch, to distinguish it from Syrian Antioch).

In keeping with his policy of 'to the Jew first', Paul began his proclamation of the gospel by addressing the worshippers in the synagogue. His audience consisted of Jews and a large number of Gentiles who, because of their attraction to the Jewish religion, attended synagogue services regularly.⁴

These Gentiles, known as 'God-fearers' or 'worshippers of God', already had a knowledge of the God of Israel, and Paul built on that knowledge in presenting to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. Significantly, those who had already received some teaching about the character and activity of God were the ones who responded more readily to the gospel when it was presented to them.⁵

The Christ whom Paul preached in Antioch is the same one who is preached today – the centre of history, the fulfilment of all God's purposes for Israel, the very reason for which the nation existed. Through him, and him alone, people can have the forgiveness of sin that Israel's law aimed at but could never achieve.⁶

1. Acts 13:46-47
2. Acts 13:6-12
3. Acts 13:13-14
4. Acts 13:43
5. Acts 13:48
6. Acts 13:38-39



Roman stadium, Perga

A new bondage and a new freedom

Most of the towns Paul visited had a Jewish community that was large enough to justify the existence of a synagogue. Paul could usually be assured of an audience with whom he had some common ground in religious matters. However, as Jesus had experienced before him, Paul found that the synagogues often produced his most fanatical opponents.

Synagogues were not an Old Testament institution. They came into being during the intertestamental period, the centuries immediately before the era of Christ. They were the product of practices that arose during the time of the Jews' captivity in Babylon. With the temple in Jerusalem destroyed and the Jews exiled in a foreign land, people no longer carried out sacrifices and other rituals related to the temple. The emphasis was now on the moral teachings of the law rather than the temple ceremonies. From these beginnings there developed a clearly defined class of people known as teachers of the law (or scribes, or rabbis), and a recognized centre for Jewish communal affairs known as the synagogue.

Certainly, much was commendable in the attitude of those who, immediately after the Babylonian exile, taught the law of Moses and explained its implications.¹ Also, much was commendable in the initiative of the Jews scattered in countries far from their homeland who built centres for worship and teaching. But those who came later did not follow the fine example of the originators, and a new bondage closed in on the Jewish people. The scribes asserted themselves and the people suffered.² Religious power, wrongly used, can be cruel.

The synagogue services were one channel through which the Jewish legalists maintained their power. Paul's two memorable services at Antioch were the means by which many Jews and many Gentiles found new freedom.³

1. Neh 8:1-2,8; 9:1-3

2. Matt 23:2-4

3. Acts 13:39-49



Interior of a synagogue

More than just strategy

The Jewish leaders in Antioch, envious and angry at the success of Paul's preaching, incited the influential people of the city to use their power to oppose Paul and Barnabas. When forced to leave, the missionaries went to Iconium, where again they preached in the synagogue and again a large number of people believed.¹

Paul and Barnabas stayed in Iconium 'a long time',² strengthening the believers and ensuring that the church was established on a firm footing. In time, however, the opposition of unbelieving Jews and their incitement of the Gentile leaders forced the missionaries to flee once more, whereupon they moved on to the towns of Lystra and Derbe.³

Although his movements were to some extent determined by the reception or rejection he received in the places he visited, Paul still worked to a basic plan. The Romans had built great roads to link the important towns of the Empire, and Paul usually kept to these roads. His plan was to establish churches in the main population centres, then move on to other unevangelized parts, leaving the newly founded churches to spread the gospel into the regions round about.⁴

Having a strategy is one thing; getting it to work is another. The nature of Christianity is such that no scheme, plan or method is in itself a guarantee of success. The more important elements are less tangible, non-measurable, far deeper and more basic.

There would be no particular virtue in Paul's establishing churches in selected towns unless the spiritual life of those churches was of a quality that made growth and expansion possible. And the quality of a church's overall spiritual life is inseparable from that of its members.

1. Acts 13:50; 14:1

2. Acts 14:3

3. Acts 14:5-6

4. Acts 13:49; cf. 19:10; 1 Thess 1:8



Street in today's Konya - biblical Antioch in Pisidia

One true and living God

Although Greek was the language of the Roman Empire, regional languages were also spoken, mainly in the home and the market place. Paul and Barnabas may have been fluent in Greek, but they had little understanding of the many local languages they met. In Lystra they found themselves in an embarrassing situation when they failed to understand what the locals were saying, but Paul, with characteristic alertness, quickly turned the situation to their own advantage.

Somewhere around the streets of Lystra, Paul had healed a cripple. This created much excitement among the onlookers, and soon word spread around the town that Paul and Barnabas were incarnations of two of the Greek gods. Even the priest at the temple of Zeus felt convinced, and prepared animals as sacrifices to these two visiting deities. Paul and Barnabas, not understanding the local language, discovered what was happening only at the last minute, and quickly intervened to stop the sacrifice.¹

Seizing the initiative, Paul explained to the excited mob that there was only one God, the one Paul preached, and he alone was worthy of worship. In the synagogues Paul had based his preaching on the revelation God gave to Israel in the Old Testament, for that was familiar ground for his hearers, but pagan idolaters such as these had no such knowledge of the Old Testament. Paul therefore based his preaching on the revelation God had given to people in general through nature.²

The gospel does not change, and God's demands of faith and repentance do not change. But the presentation of the gospel may vary from one audience to another.³ The story of Paul's preaching in Lystra ends abruptly with no record of its results, but we know from other references that he established a church there.⁴

1. Acts 14:8-14,18

2. Acts 14:15-17

3. 1 Cor 9:16,21,23

4. Acts 14:21-22; 16:2



Across the Roman province of Galatia

Courage and faith

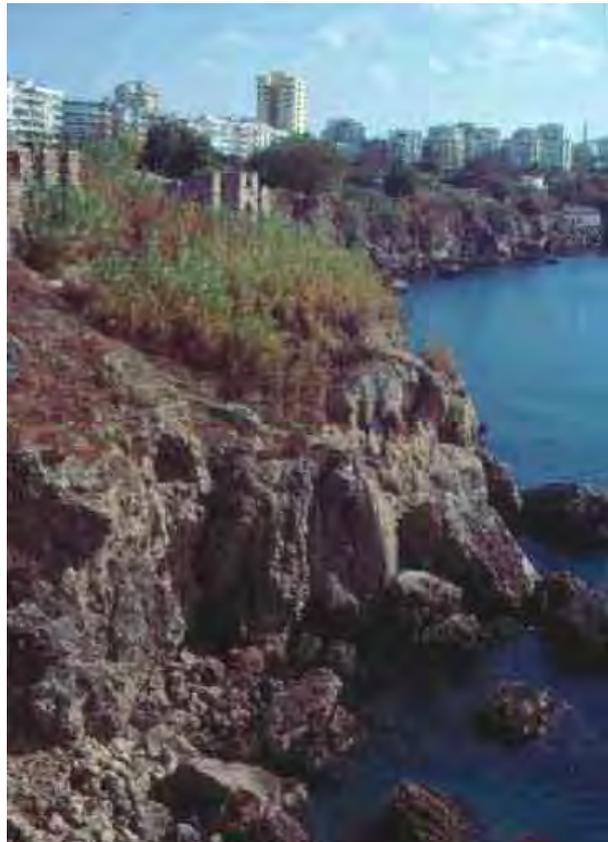
Jesus had told his disciples that just as he suffered persecution, so would those who followed him. In the world they could expect persecution, but, he added, 'I have overcome the world'.¹ In that assurance Christians throughout the ages have triumphed through violence and opposition. Courage in the face of hostility has been a distinctive mark of Christ's people.

In Antioch and Iconium, Paul and Barnabas had been threatened with violence and driven out by hostile enemies. In Lystra, Paul had been so fiercely stoned that it appeared he would lose his life.² But when the two men reached Derbe, from where they could have conveniently returned home overland, they decided to retrace their steps through the cities from which they had been driven out. They knew the importance of strengthening the believers and appointing elders in the newly founded churches. They are still remembered, two millennia later, as 'men who risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ'.³

Courageous though they were, the two men were not domineering. Enterprising Christian workers can easily think that something they began can be carried on successfully by no one else. Paul and Barnabas believed otherwise. They had founded the churches, but the spiritual life of the churches came from God. The two men had taught the believers to have faith in Christ, but they themselves also needed faith. The churches belonged to Christ, not to them. They therefore committed the believers to him in whom they believed.⁴

Returning to the coast, the missionaries preached in Perga and Attalia, towns they had missed on the outward journey. They then sailed for Syrian Antioch to report to the church that had sent them what God had done among the Gentiles.⁵

1. John 15:20; 16:33
2. Acts 14:19-20
3. Acts 14:21-26
4. Acts 14:23
5. Acts 14:24-28



Attalia, modern Antalya

Guarding the gospel

Paul had been back in Antioch some time when a group of men arrived from Jerusalem with teaching that Paul immediately saw struck at the roots of the gospel. These teachers were Jews who, conditioned by centuries of Jewish beliefs, could not accept the message Paul preached. They insisted that people must submit to the law of Moses to be saved.¹

With absolute confidence in the truth of his message, Paul boldly refuted the Jews. He also publicly rebuked those at Antioch who had been carried away by the new teaching.²

No sooner had he restored some stability in Antioch, than Paul heard that these Judaisers had spread their teaching throughout the churches of Galatia he had recently founded. Paul was furious, and immediately sent off a letter to the Galatian churches.

This was not a time for sweet words. In Paul's view the Judaisers perverted the gospel and were accursed.³ Those who believed them had deserted Christ and were fools.⁴ Neither then nor now must a person submit to the Jewish law, either to become a Christian or to live as a Christian. 'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.'⁵

Since the Judaistic teaching had spread to the most distant churches, Paul and others from Antioch decided to go and discuss the matter with the church from which the teaching came. Paul went to Jerusalem not to check whether the message he preached was right or wrong (he knew it was right), but to convince the Jerusalem church that salvation is by faith alone. The Jerusalem meeting not only supported Paul's stand, but even sent representatives to reassure the troubled churches.⁶

1. Acts 15:1,5
2. Gal 2:11-16
3. Gal 1:7-8
4. Gal 1:6; 3:1
5. Gal 5:1
6. Acts 15:1-35



Jewish tradition, Bar Mitzvah ceremony

Divine directions

Decision-making is, for most people, usually beset with difficulties and uncertainties. For Christians there is also the consideration of God's will. Inflexible rules of guidance can be as misleading as hunches, feelings and irrational impulses. Paul's movements at the outset of his second missionary journey show an exemplary balance between sensible planning and a willingness to alter well-laid plans if God so directs. Christians who have been 'transformed by the renewal of their minds' will know 'what is the will of God – what is good, acceptable and perfect'.¹

Paul thought it wise to revisit the churches of Galatia that had recently been troubled by the Judaisers, but on this occasion he decided to go overland rather than by sea. His travelling companion was a well-respected leader from the Jerusalem church named Silas, whose ministry in support of Paul would reassure those who had become confused.² The two were joined in Galatia by Timothy, a young man who had possibly been converted during Paul's previous missionary tour.³

It seems that Paul was heading across the province of Asia for Ephesus on the west coast. There were important towns along the way, but God directed Paul not to preach in them. Paul therefore headed north for the province of Bithynia, but he was not allowed to preach there either. So he turned west again and eventually came to the port of Troas.⁴

This change of plans meant that the provinces of Asia and Bithynia must remain unevangelized for the time being, as God had work for Paul to do in Greece first. He also had other people he could use in Asia and Bithynia.⁵ As a result Greece, Asia and Bithynia all heard the gospel. Planning is necessary in God's work, but obedience is what sees God's plans accomplished.

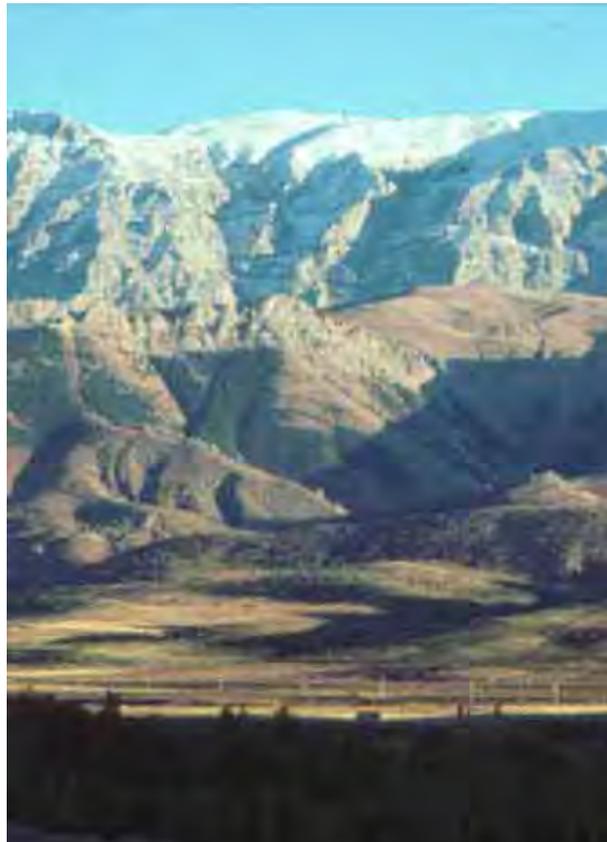
1. Rom 12:2

2. Acts 15:27,32,40

3. Acts 16:1-3

4. Acts 16:6-8

5. Cf. 1 Peter 1:1; Rev 1:11



Taurus Mountains

A true friend

It was probably at Troas that Luke, the author of the book of Acts, joined Paul and his companions. A comparison of the opening verses of Luke's Gospel with the opening verses of Acts will confirm that the latter book was written as a sequel to the former. The presence of the author among the missionary party is confirmed from his inclusion of himself in the story – 'we got ready to go into Macedonia . . . we made a direct voyage . . . we stayed in the city some days.'¹

Unlike the rest of the missionary party, Luke was a Gentile. He lived, it seems, in Europe, probably Philippi, in what today is northern Greece. Having travelled with Paul from Troas to Neapolis and then to Philippi, he remained in Philippi when Paul, Silas and Timothy moved on.² He rejoined Paul some years later when Paul passed through Philippi on his way to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey,³ and seems to have been with Paul for the next five years, to the end of Paul's first imprisonment in Rome.⁴

For a person who was close to Paul through those momentous years, Luke keeps a remarkably low profile. There is no hint of self-assertion in anything recorded by him or about him. The Bible writings show that he was discerning, dependable and thorough in things he did.

Most people would be content to leave such a good reputation behind, but there was another quality to Luke's life, one even more commendable and within the reach of all – love. He had that deep concern for people without which other accomplishments could have been worthless in God's sight.⁵ When, years later, the aged Paul sat in jail facing execution, Luke, 'the beloved physician', was the one person who chose to stay with him.⁶

1. Acts 16:10,11-12,16
2. 'They', not 'we' in Acts 17:1
3. 'Us' and 'we' recommence in Acts 20:5-6
4. Acts 28:30; Col 4:14
5. 1 Cor 13:3
6. 2 Tim 4:11



Archaeological work at ancient Troy, close to biblical Troas

Great things from small beginnings

Throughout its Empire the Roman government had changed the status of a number of towns to make them models of Roman life in what was largely a non-Roman world. The towns were called colonies, and their citizens (among whom was a large body of Roman officials, soldiers and business people) were given the right of self-government. They enjoyed, in effect, all the privileges of Roman citizenship.

Among these privileged towns was Philippi, a short distance inland from Neapolis, the port where Paul first landed in Europe.¹ He moved promptly to Philippi, where his evangelistic activity marked the beginning of a new era. The course of the world's history would be changed as Paul broke out of Asia and thrust into Europe. But there was no grand opening ceremony. His first recorded meeting was with a few God-fearers who met for prayer at the river bank, but out of that meeting one woman became a Christian.

This was an unspectacular start, but by no means a disappointing start. Paul knew, as Elijah did before him, that spectacular events are no measure of the work of God in people's hearts. A better measure is the transformed life that results when a person responds to the unseen power of the 'still small voice' of God as it brings conviction within the human heart.²

Paul's meeting at the river brought greater results than were at first obvious. Through that first convert a whole household was saved, and by the time Paul left Philippi (presumably some weeks later) a church was established there.³

The apostle seems to have had a special affection for the Philippian church, and the Philippians a special affection for him. To Paul, the Philippians were his 'joy and crown';⁴ to the Philippians, Paul was their example of what a Christian should be.⁵

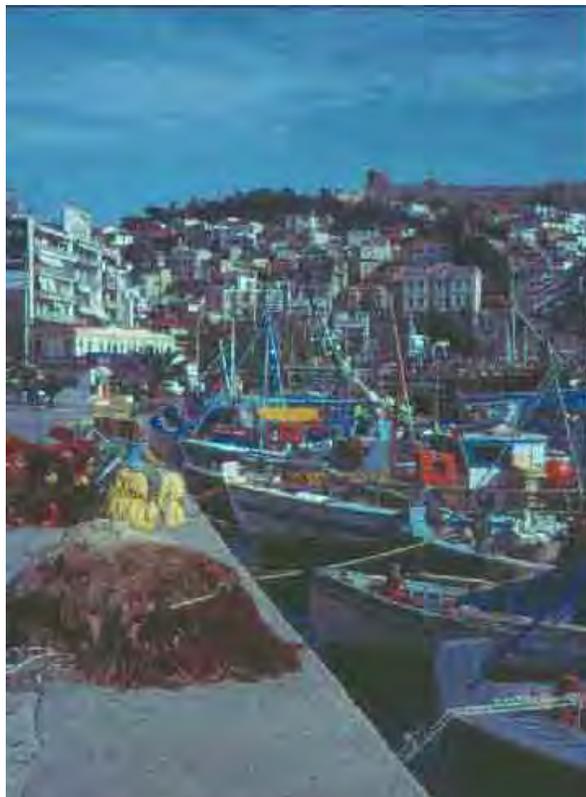
1. Acts 16:11-12

2. 1 Kings 19:11-12

3. Acts 16:13-15,40

4. Phil 4:1

5. Phil 4:9



Kavala, biblical Neapolis, where Paul first set foot in Europe

The price of freedom

The streets and market places of Philippi were bustling with all sorts of people – merchants, labourers, fortune-tellers, beggars, hawkers, craft workers and citizens in general. News of the visiting preachers soon spread, particularly when, day after day, a demon-possessed slave-girl followed them shouting that they were servants of the Most High God. This was not the kind of promotion Paul approved of, and in the end he exorcised the girl.¹

Then the trouble started. With the girl's return to normality, her owners had suddenly lost their source of income. They physically attacked Paul and Silas, and soon the townspeople joined them in a general free-for-all against the missionaries.

As if that was not enough, the two battered and bruised missionaries were then stripped and flogged by the local Roman authorities, and thrown into prison without so much as a questioning.² Such was the outcome of the visitors' kindness to a pathetic girl – and all because two or three heartless men had lost the source of their ill-gotten gains.

'When they saw that their hope of gain was gone . . .'³ A heavy cost may be paid when someone becomes a Christian. A cost may also be paid when a person lives the Christian life as Jesus intended it to be lived. Many who profess to be followers of Jesus cast doubts on their own profession when they hesitate to do what they know they should do, because they fear that their hope of gain may be lost.

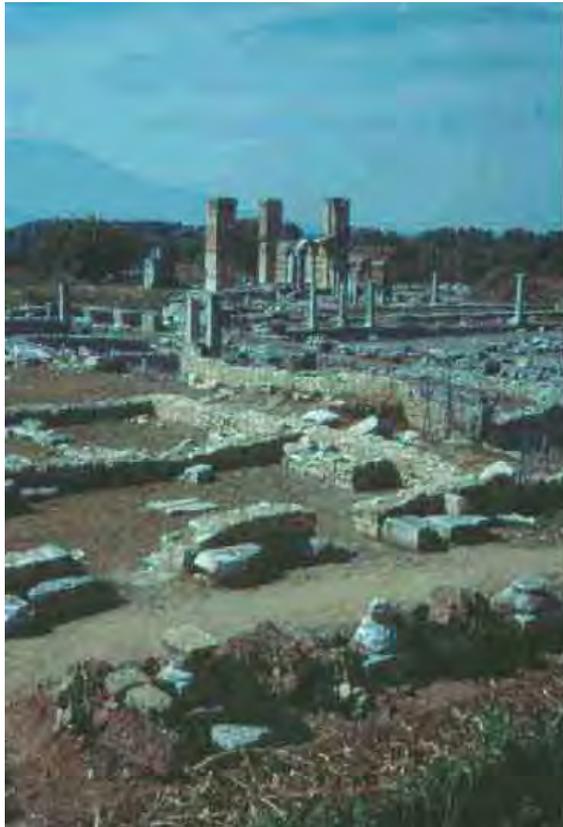
The account of Paul and Silas's night in prison is one of the Bible's best known stories. God's dramatic intervention showed that the two men were vindicated in his eyes; the next morning some shame-faced officials were forced to show publicly that the two men were vindicated also in the eyes of Roman law.⁴

1. Acts 16:16-18

2. Acts 16:19-24

3. Acts 16:19

4. Acts 16:25-40



Byzantine ruins at Philippi

The King has come

Thessalonica, in contrast to Philippi, had a large Jewish community and consequently a synagogue. For three consecutive Sabbaths, Paul preached in the synagogue, with the result that some Jews and many Greeks (God-fearers) believed. In keeping with his usual practice when addressing such audiences, Paul showed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and that his death and resurrection are essential to salvation.¹ The gospel, as always, is Christ-centred.

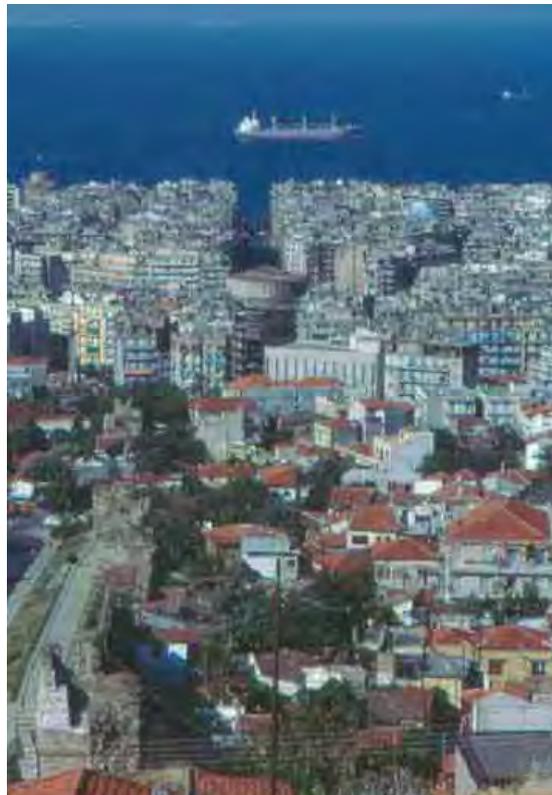
To proclaim Christ as Messiah and Saviour is to proclaim him as King. It is a fitting activity for anyone who prays the prayer, 'Thy kingdom come', for God's sovereign rule becomes a reality in people's lives as they submit to Christ in total allegiance. To preach such an uncompromising message may not always be popular, and when Paul did so he soon ran into trouble.

Jewish opposition to Paul's preaching in Thessalonica, however, was not based on the finer points of theology. It was based on some-thing far more assured of success, jealousy. Add to this a few hired trouble-makers and a deliberate distortion of what Paul had said, and soon the Jews created a riot.

The accusations brought against Paul and Silas were twofold. First, they caused trouble wherever they went – 'they have turned the world upside down' – and second, they were guilty of treason – 'they are acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.'² The charges were partly true, because Christianity *has* a revolutionary effect (not necessarily in a political sense), and Jesus *is* another king (though his kingdom is not of this world).³

Christ's opponents in Thessalonica thought they had won a victory over Christianity when Paul and his party were forced to leave.⁴ The subsequent history of the church in Thessalonica was to tell a different story.

1. Acts 17:1-4
2. Acts 17:5-7
3. John 18:36
4. Acts 17:9-10



Modern Thessalonica

Facing up to reality

Paul's sudden departure from Thessalonica must have been a blow to the young church. The person with whom the missionaries had been staying, Jason, was even required to pay some sort of bond, apparently as part of a guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave the city immediately.

Jason's bond may also have restricted Paul's re-entry to the city. Certainly, Paul's attempts to revisit the young church were not successful, a frustration he considered to be the work of Satan.¹

The Thessalonian church, however, so far from collapsing after Paul's departure, grew stronger. Strong personality that he was, Paul did not make the mistake of building a work around himself. The converts' faith was not to be tied to the style or personality of the person who began the work. It was to rest entirely in the power of God.²

Also, Paul did not give potential converts or new converts the impression that, if they believed the gospel, they were assured of a trouble-free life that everyone else would envy. On the contrary, he assured them that, if they lived the righteous life required of those who are 'in Christ', they would suffer persecution.³ The Christians of Thessalonica soon discovered for themselves the truth of Paul's words.⁴

Yet persecution was no hindrance to growth. Not only did the church in Thessalonica increase, but the Christians went out and spread the gospel throughout the surrounding countryside. Paul was so pleased with the Thessalonians' development that he might have wished to boast about it to other churches. But he had no need to; people elsewhere had already heard about it. The church from which Paul had been forced to make such a hasty departure had become an example to all the others.⁵

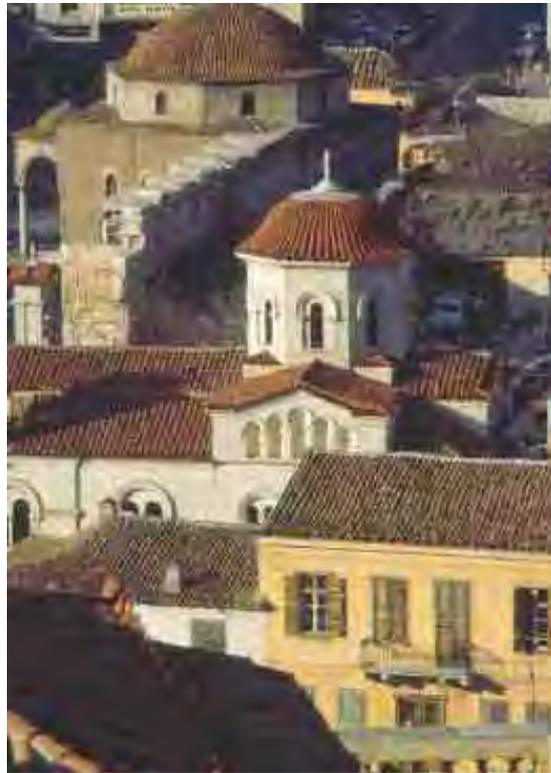
1. 1 Thess 2:18

2. 1 Cor 2:5; 1 Thess 2:13

3. 1 Thess 3:3-4; 2 Tim 3:12

4. 1 Thess 2:14

5. 1 Thess 1:7-8



Greek church

Light and darkness

From Thessalonica, Paul's party went on to Berea. Each stopping place took Paul one stage closer to the goal of the present trip, the large cities of Athens and Corinth in the south of Greece.

Unlike the Jews of Thessalonica, the Jews of Berea did not dismiss Paul's preaching the moment they heard it, but searched the Old Testament to check his claims concerning Jesus. Many of them were convinced and believed.¹ Prejudice is always a barrier to understanding the truth, but once the light of the Scriptures is allowed to shine in, Christ is made known. God shines into the heart 'to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'²

When Jews from Thessalonica came and stirred up opposition, Paul's life was in such danger that the Berean believers insisted he depart. Paul, rather than Silas or Timothy, was the target for the Jews' attacks, so when Paul left, the other two stayed behind to help the new church. Paul meanwhile was sailing for Athens, a group of Bereans going with him to ensure his safety.³

Alone in Athens, Paul contemplated the extent of the task before him. He had known from his student days that Athens was a centre of learning where philosophy, religion and politics were discussed freely, but he was not prepared for what he saw when he arrived there. It seemed that all the features of human philosophy and pagan religion that his soul loathed were there in Athens.⁴

Paul's first reaction may have been an urge to denounce this hateful idolatry as loudly and publicly as possible. But he restrained himself, and began his preaching, as always, among the Jews and God-fearers of the synagogue. Then he began to dispute with people in the market place, and soon the whole city was aware of his presence.⁵

1. Acts 17:10-12

2. 2 Cor 4:6

3. Acts 17:13-15

4. Acts 17:16

5. Acts 17:17



'Searching the Scriptures', Berea

A preacher among the philosophers

The Areopagus was an ancient council responsible for the proper conduct of public lecturing and debating in Athens. Being aware of Paul's preaching about Jesus and the resurrection, the Areopagites asked him to explain his beliefs.¹

Of the schools of philosophy represented in the Areopagus, the main ones were the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans believed that because nothing in the world is lasting or stable, people should live in calm and contentment, avoiding anything that produces pain, fear and anxiety. This was how the gods lived, and therefore they took no interest in human affairs. The Stoics, by contrast, practised strong self-discipline. Believing that everything is controlled by a universal Mind or Reason, they taught that all circumstances were pre-determined and should be accepted without fear or complaint.

Paul's address to the Athenians was a development of his short address to the Lystrans some time earlier.² In short, his message was that God was the Creator and Controller of the universe, and he could be known through his creation. In former ages he had been patient with the ignorance of sinful people, but now that Jesus had died and risen, things had changed. God demanded repentance, and people could no longer remain indifferent. To those who responded, God promised forgiveness; to those who refused, judgment.³ And God's guarantees are still in force.

The Epicureans would have agreed with Paul that God needs nothing from mere humans, and the Stoics would have agreed that there is a supreme Being who gives life to all things and determines all things.⁴ But both groups, except for one man, Dionysius, rejected his teaching about the resurrection.⁵ While others in the council remained spiritually dead, Dionysius entered into new life through the risen Christ.

1. Acts 17:18-21

2. Acts 14:15-17. Later he developed the theme further in Romans 1:18-25.

3. Acts 17:22-31

4. Acts 17:24-26,28

5. Acts 17:32-34



The Acropolis, Athens

The weak who shamed the strong

Athens, with its interest in learning and philosophical debate, may have had an appearance of sophistication, but not so Corinth. Brash and gaudy, Corinth was a harsh world of commercial activity, where all the vices of city life were open to view. Corrupt merchants mingled with brazen prostitutes in a city where most people took advantage of whatever opportunity came their way, regardless of whether it was right or wrong.

When Paul began preaching in Corinth, he clashed, as usual, with the Jews. But God encouraged him to persevere, reassuring him with the words, 'I have many people in this city'.¹

The 'many people' God had chosen in Corinth proved to be representative of the community as a whole. There were not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble among them.² In fact, the church at Corinth soon numbered among its members converted thieves, prostitutes, drunkards, homosexuals and hooligans.³

Jesus had often met with a better reception among those considered disreputable than among those who were socially respectable. In Corinth Paul had a similar experience. He neither ignored those who were despised nor flattered those whose social status gave them influence. He had little in common with today's status-conscious critic who looks at the crude and the disreputable and murmurs, 'But we can't have people like that walking into our church.'

The Corinthian church, with its odd assortment of people, was the church to which Paul gave his memorable teaching on unity within the Christian fellowship. 'Just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.'⁴ It was also the church from which he wrote to another, 'Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.'⁵

1. Acts 18:6-11
2. 1 Cor 1:26
3. 1 Cor 6:9-11
4. 1 Cor 12:12
5. Rom 15:7



Remains of biblical Corinth (centre of picture)

Questions of Christian relationships

When people turn from sin to God and accept his forgiveness through Christ, they come from darkness to light, from death to life. They are, as it were, made new by the power and grace of God.¹ That does not mean, however, that former evils no longer bother them. They must grow towards spiritual maturity, and the deeply ingrained habits of years of ungodly living can hinder growth. It was so with many at Corinth.

Like Christians in all eras, the Corinthians had difficulty knowing where to draw the line concerning their involvement in the accepted practices of the society in which they lived. They erred from one extreme to the other.

Some, for example, tried to have no association at all with people who did not behave according to the Christian moral code. Paul pointed out that if they followed that thinking to its logical conclusion, they would have to take themselves out of the world altogether, which of course was impossible.² On the other hand some Christians made no distinction at all between themselves and non-Christians, even joining in idolatrous feasts, marrying idol worshippers, or hiring the services of prostitutes. Paul tolerated no compromise with such practices.³

Christianity is what it is because of Christ. The Christian life is lived in union with Christ, and that relationship determines all others. Paul's instructions to the Corinthian Christians demonstrate this. Out of the debate about idol feasts came the great statement about the communion of the Lord's Supper: it is 'a participation in the body and blood of Christ'.⁴ Out of the discussion about sexual relations came the powerful incentive to godly living: 'You were bought with a price, so glorify God in your body.'⁵

1. 2 Cor 5:17

2. 1 Cor 5:9-10

3. 1 Cor 6:15; 10:20-21; 2 Cor 6:14-15

4. 1 Cor 10:16

5. 1 Cor 6:20



Greek house

An army of evangelists

The eighteen months Paul spent in Corinth¹ was the longest time he had spent in any city during his missionary travels to that time. Corinth brought his present mission to a close, and in due course he sailed for home. He made a brief stop at Ephesus, expressing the desire to return soon, and then sailed on, landing finally at Caesarea. After spending a time with his home church in Antioch, he was, as anticipated, back in Ephesus. He stayed there three years.²

This being his first major evangelistic activity in Ephesus, Paul began his preaching in the Jewish synagogue. He maintained his base there for three months, but was eventually forced to leave. He took a large portion of the congregation with him and set up a new base in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. He taught and disputed there for two years, 'so that all who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.'³

If Paul was in Ephesus all this time, how, it may be asked, could his daily lecturing there result in the proclamation of the gospel throughout the province? The churches of Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea were probably founded at this time, but almost certainly Paul had not visited any of them.⁴ Probably the churches of Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia, recipients of letters sent some time later by John, were also founded at this time.⁵

The answer seems to be that the people Paul taught in Ephesus took the gospel to the surrounding towns. Epaphras, for example, took it to Colossae.⁶ The strategy of Paul mentioned earlier was working, because the Christians were well taught in the Scriptures and were enthusiastic about reaching others with the gospel. God was using people who were properly fitted and properly motivated.

1. Acts 18:11
2. Acts 18:18-23; 19:1; 20:31
3. Acts 19:8-10
4. Col 2:1; 4:13
5. Rev 2:8,12,18; 3:1,7
6. Col 1:6-7



Seljuk, today's custodian of ancient Ephesus

Action and reaction

Extraordinary things were happening in Ephesus. God was working miracles on a scale not matched elsewhere in the recorded history of Paul's work. Some of the events were terrifying, with the result that an uneasy fear fell upon the city's residents.

Many who became believers began to confess secret practices they had not yet given up. Those who engaged in occult practices not only admitted their wrongdoing, but also brought books that had fostered their wrongdoing and burnt them in a public bonfire. God's Word was piercing into people's hearts, causing people to see truths they had not seen previously. In a stronghold of satanic power, the God-given Word was overcoming the enemy.¹

Predictably, Satan fought back. Ephesus was considered to be the home of the goddess Artemis (Diana) and most people kept small shrines of the goddess in their homes. Now people were getting rid of their shrines. The silversmiths who made the shrines were going out of business and they decided to take action.

Although their chief concern was their own financial security, the silversmiths' tactic to gain public support was to appeal to the hometown loyalty of the local people. What if Artemis were deposed from her magnificence, and her temple brought into disrepute?

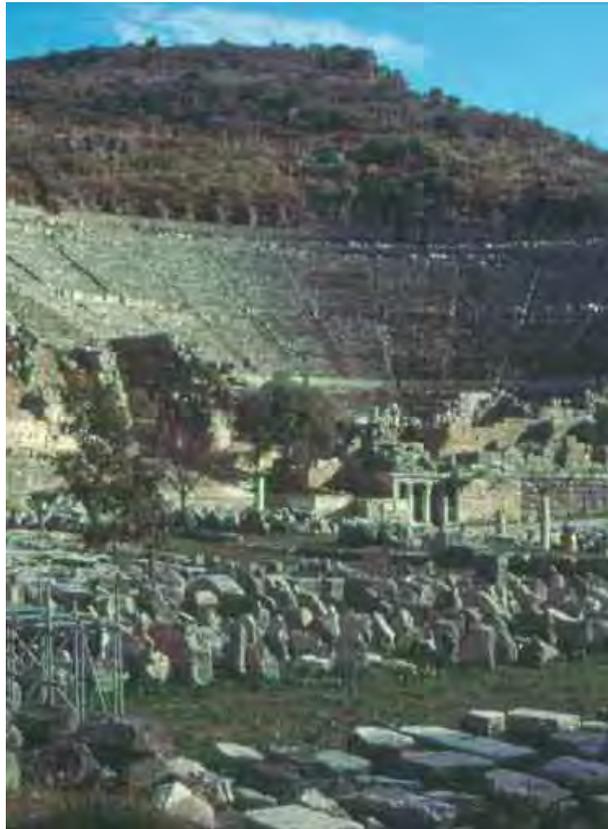
The silversmiths' tactic was successful. A riot broke out, and the Christians were saved from violence only by the timely intervention of the city rulers.² As in the cases of previous civil disturbances in Philippi and Corinth, the writer of Acts makes it clear that the Christians were not to blame. Quite the opposite; they were declared innocent by the Roman authorities.³ Christianity, far from being a threat to the ruling authorities, encouraged its followers to submit to them and pray for them.⁴

1. Acts 19:11-20; Heb 4:12

2. Acts 19:23-41

3. Acts 16:37-39; 18:12-16; 19:31,37

4. Rom 13:1; 1 Tim 2:1-2



The theatre at Ephesus where Paul was attacked

Blessed are the peacemakers

Paul's lengthy correspondence with the church at Corinth began during his three years in Ephesus. Problems had arisen in the Corinthian church that Paul had to deal with, and he even made a quick, but unsuccessful, visit to try to sort matters out.¹

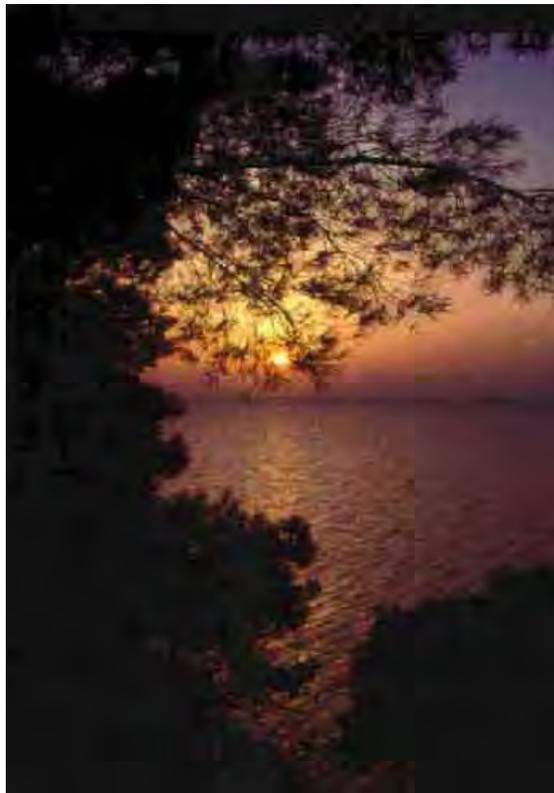
Once his current work in Ephesus was finished, Paul decided to visit Corinth again,² but this time he went the long way round – north to Troas, then across the sea to Macedonia and south to Corinth. After three months in Corinth he returned to Troas by the same route. There he made final arrangements with representatives from various churches who were to sail with him to Palestine.³

For some time Paul had been collecting money from the Gentile churches to take to the poor Christians in Jerusalem. Paul hoped that this offering would help the narrow-minded Jerusalem Christians feel a greater sense of unity with their fellow Christians from among the Gentile nations. The representatives of the Gentile churches, by travelling with Paul to Jerusalem, would demonstrate their genuine sense of fellowship with the Jerusalem church.

Apart from the unifying effect of such an offering, there were other reasons why the Gentile churches might help Jerusalem. Since they shared in spiritual blessings that had been prepared for them by way of the Jews, they should now share their material blessings with the Jews.⁴ But at the same time Paul knew that many in the Jerusalem church had never whole-heartedly agreed with his preaching of salvation by faith alone (that is, salvation without law-keeping), and he hoped this proposed visit would help change that attitude.

So Paul and the others began their long journey to Palestine. The ship made brief stops along the Asian coast at Assos, Mitylene, Samos and Miletus.⁵

1. The 'painful visit' of 2 Cor 2:1, and 'second visit' of 2 Cor 13:2
2. The 'third visit' of 2 Cor 13:1
3. Acts 20:1-6
4. Rom 15:26-27; cf. Gal 6:6
5. Acts 20:13-16



West across the sea from Troas to Macedonia

Shepherding the flock

Miletus was chosen as a brief stopover point because it was close to Ephesus but easier to reach by ship. Paul wanted to see the elders of the Ephesian church again, but time was short, so he arranged for them to come to see him at Miletus.¹

The Ephesian church, as noted earlier,² contained a strange mixture of people. Paul was well aware that many who were now Christians had an inbred interest in things that were mysterious or mystical, and for this reason he had given them a good grounding in the Scriptures.³ He knew that their interest in new or unusual ideas left them open to certain dangers, and he foresaw that opportunists, from elsewhere as well as from among themselves, would want to exploit the church for their own advantage.⁴

A church needs strong spiritual leadership if it is to withstand the enemy's attacks. Leaders must be watchful concerning themselves and concerning those in their care, but there is something even more basic in determining whether their ministry is effective, and that is that only the Holy Spirit can really fit a person to be a spiritual leader.⁵ When people attempt to discharge spiritual responsibilities without the necessary spiritual gift, they will inevitably run into trouble and disappointment.

Paul had given the Ephesian elders an example to follow. Apart from his devoted care and teaching, in the church and in private homes, he had worked hard to support himself so that he would not be a burden to any. He never used his position to seek power or profit, but on the contrary made personal sacrifices for the sake of others. The promised reward for such service is an unfading crown of glory when the Chief Shepherd returns.⁶

1. Acts 20:16-17

2. See page 23

3. Acts 20:27,31

4. Acts 20:29-30

5. Acts 20:28

6. Acts 20:20,33-35; 1 Peter 5:1-4



Miletus, once a port, now some distance from the sea

Single-mindedness

Whenever Luke was sailing with Paul, the narrative is sprinkled with words that reflect Luke's interest in seafaring. He recorded in his diary anything of interest relating to the ship and its cargo, and noted details of places, times, weather and directions.

Setting off from Miletus, Paul and his party sailed south towards the island of Cos and then to the island of Rhodes, from where they rounded the south-west corner of Asia Minor and came to the mainland town of Patara. There they changed ships for the long leg home. Passing Cyprus on the left, they came eventually to Tyre, on the Phoenician coast just north of Palestine.¹

While the ship spent the next week in port unloading its cargo, Paul and his party enjoyed fellowship with the Christians in the city, encouraging them by word and example to continue in the faith regardless of the opposition they might encounter. After a prayerful farewell, Paul's party boarded the ship and sailed south, coming first to Ptolemais and the next day to Caesarea, where the sea voyage finished.²

Paul had been warned of the hostile reception he could expect in Jerusalem, but he went on regardless. Nothing would turn him from his goal. He was determined to show the Jerusalem church that the churches of Asia Minor and Europe were united with it in Christ, and out of love and gratitude they sent this offering of money to help their brothers and sisters in a time of need.³

Tension mounted as Paul's moment of truth approached. Believers from Caesarea, sensing that momentous events lay ahead, accompanied Paul to Jerusalem. There was no doubt some initial relief when the leaders of the Jerusalem church welcomed them gladly,⁴ but everyone knew that was by no means the end of the story.

1. Acts 21:1-3
2. Acts 21:4-8
3. Acts 21:11-14
4. Acts 21:15-17



Bay of Paul, Rhodes

Fading hopes

Although the Jerusalem church leaders may have been sympathetic to Paul's activity, the majority of believers in Jerusalem were not. They were still zealous for the law of Moses, and were disturbed to hear that Paul was teaching converted Jews that they were no longer under that law.¹

In an effort to show that he was not anti-Moses, Paul agreed to join a purification ceremony in the temple. But the plan backfired, mainly because of the mischief-making of Paul's old enemies, the Jews of the province of Asia.

These enemies, on seeing Paul in the street with a Gentile from Ephesus, accused him (falsely) of taking a Gentile into the inner temple. That, to the Jews, was sacrilege, and a violent riot erupted. Only the timely arrival of troops from the local Roman garrison saved Paul from certain death.²

No coward, Paul asked permission of the Roman commander to address the mob that wanted to murder him. He tried to impress upon them that he was brought up a law-abiding Jew, but the dramatic intervention of the risen Lord Jesus Christ changed his life. He was to take the gospel to all people, and only when the Jews rejected it did God send him to the Gentiles.³

That was as far as Paul got in explaining his mission. Uproar broke out afresh, whereupon the Roman commander decided to take Paul into the barracks and deal with him himself.

Jesus had wept over Jerusalem: 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me!'⁴ Paul must have felt as Jesus had.

1. Acts 21:18-21

2. Acts 21:22-26

3. Acts 22:1-21

4. Matt 23:37



Market street in Jerusalem

From shattered dreams, fresh courage

The movement that in pre-Christian times produced the synagogue and the scribes also produced the Sanhedrin, or Jewish Council. The rulers of synagogues exercised much power in their communities, sometimes flogging or even excommunicating those they considered guilty of wrongdoing.¹ Out of these local councils developed the Sanhedrin, the supreme council based in Jerusalem.

Roman law gave the Sanhedrin considerable authority over Jews in matters relating to their religious laws. The Roman commander in Jerusalem, not knowing Paul's supposed crime but assuming it was related to Jewish law, therefore took Paul to the Sanhedrin to see if it could reach a decision.

The Sanhedrin, however, was by no means a united body. It consisted of scribes, elders, priests and influential citizens, all under the presidency of the high priest, but among these groups were different viewpoints on religion and politics. The main parties represented were the traditional opponents, Pharisees and Sadducees.

Observing the mixed composition of the council before which he stood, Paul declared himself a Pharisee by birth and training. He asserted, moreover, that even as a Christian he held certain beliefs in common with the Pharisees. Uproar broke out, the Sanhedrin was split, and the Roman commander had to rescue Paul once more, still without finding out the crimes of which he was accused.²

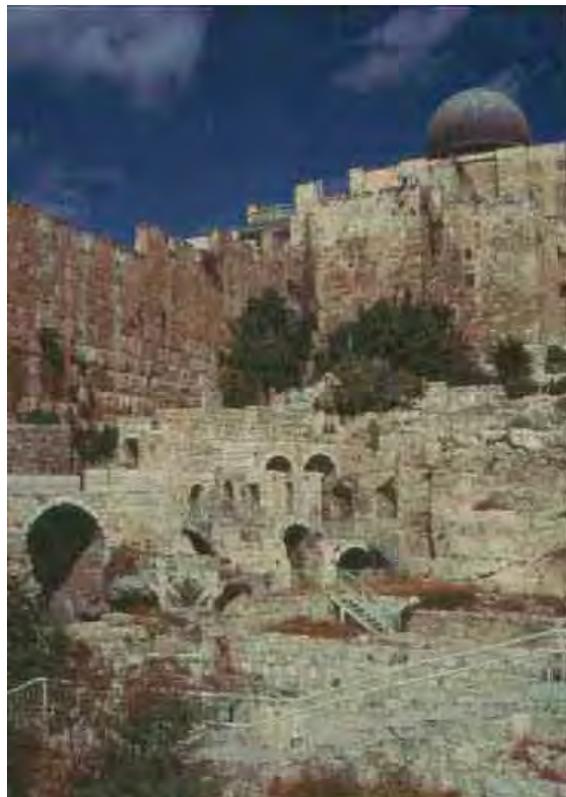
After further unsuccessful Jewish attacks on Paul, the Roman commander decided to send him to the provincial governor in Caesarea. So Paul left Jerusalem for the last time, with his dream for reconciliation between Jerusalem and the other churches utterly shattered.³ But another desire was to be fulfilled. Paul had always wanted to visit Rome, and now God encouraged him with the assurance that, through all these unwelcome circumstances, God would get him there.⁴

1. Matt 10:17; John 9:22; Acts 5:40

2. Acts 23:1-10

3. Acts 23:12-35

4. Acts 19:21; 23:11



Jerusalem city wall from the south

Righteousness on trial

Caesarea was a magnificent city. Built by Herod the Great and named in honour of the Emperor, it was a showpiece of architectural splendour that contained many monuments to Herod's building enterprise.¹ Its artificial harbour made it the chief port for Judea,² but its main claim to importance was its status as the provincial capital from which Judea and Samaria were governed.

An earlier governor, Pilate, when he went from Caesarea to Jeru-salem to keep control during the Passover season, had been forced to make a decision concerning Jesus: what should he do with this person whom the Jews brought before him for judgment? Back in Caesarea the present governor, Felix, was faced with a similar situation: what should he do with Paul whom the Jews had accused before him?

Paul countered the Jews' accusations calmly and precisely. Felix was more impressed by Paul's straightforward statements of fact than by the flattery of the Jews' professional spokesman. As in the case of Pilate's judgment of Jesus, Felix knew that the accused man was not guilty; but, like Pilate, Felix refused to acquit the accused lest it upset the Jews.³

The failing shown by the two governors was one common to human beings in general – giving in to pressure, deferring to the powerful, pleasing the majority or fearing the influential rather than doing what they know to be right. In neither the case of Jesus nor the case of Paul would it have been a popular decision to release the man, but in both cases it would have been the right decision.

Any avoidance of trouble that the governors achieved was only temporary, and both men disappear from the biblical record as despicable, unprincipled figures. By contrast, the victims of their injustice were ultimately vindicated by the God for whose truth they stood.

1. Acts 23:35

2. Acts 18:22; 21:8

3. Luke 23:13-25; Acts 24:22-27



Caesarea, the Roman seat of government for Judea

Farewell to the East

For two years Paul remained in prison in Caesarea, even though his case had still not been judged. Felix's sole concern was to keep the Jews quiet till his term of government expired. The new governor could then deal with the matter as best he could.

The Jews, being as politically cunning as Felix, remained quiet for the time being. They knew that, with the arrival of a new governor, they had a better chance of winning a judgment against Paul. The new governor, Festus, had been in office only three days when the Jews renewed their charges, and within two weeks a fresh trial was held. However, it soon became evident to Paul that Festus, like his predecessor, was more concerned with gaining Jewish goodwill than with administering justice.¹

Paul saw clearly that, because the Roman authorities feared trouble from the Jews if they released him, he would receive no justice so long as he remained in Palestine. He therefore resorted to the final court of appeal open to all Roman citizens, that of the Emperor himself. At last his opportunity to reach Rome had arrived.²

Festus's problem now was that he had to send a man to Caesar without knowing the charges laid against him. He knew that the case was concerned with religious beliefs of some sort, but he had no idea how to deal with it. He was therefore pleased with the arrival in Caesarea of a person of eminence who knew the Jews and their religion well. This was Agrippa, the last descendant of Herod the Great to hold any administrative rank under the Romans.³

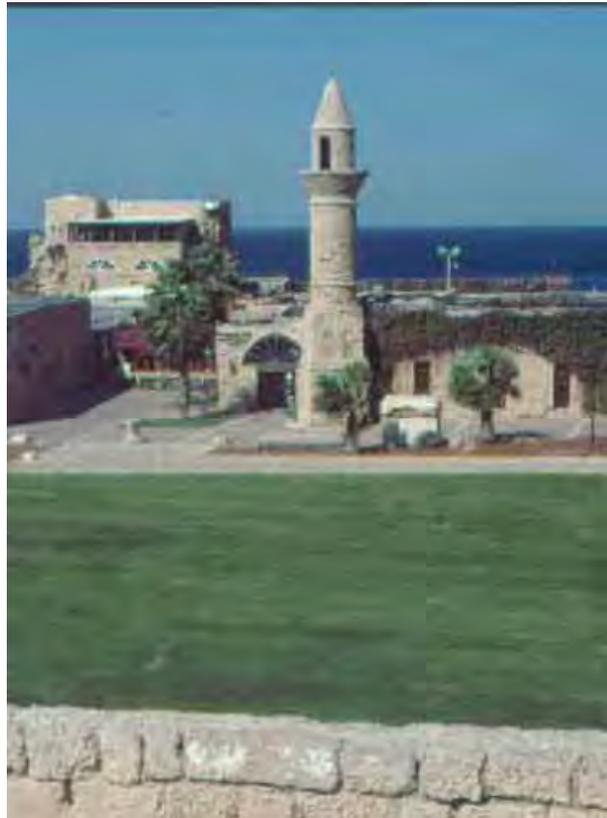
Agrippa gladly heard Paul's defence. Like the Jerusalem military commander, the Jewish Sanhedrin and the Roman governor, the expert on Jewish affairs found no guilt in Paul.⁴ But to Caesar Paul had appealed; to Caesar Paul must go.

1. Acts 25:1-9

2. Acts 25:10-12; cf. 19:21; 23:11

3. Acts 25:13-27

4. Acts 26:1-32



Part of medieval Caesarea reconstructed

‘I believe God’

Along with a number of other prisoners, Paul was placed under a Roman guard and put on a ship bound for Asia Minor. He was accompanied by Luke (and another Christian, Aristarchus),¹ and as a result the journey is recorded in some detail.

At the Asian port of Myra the party transferred to one of the large wheat ships that sailed the Mediterranean between Alexandria and Rome. By the time they reached Crete, the winter season was approaching and sailing would soon become dangerous. When they found a safe harbour, Paul advised them not to sail further, but the captain and the owner thought otherwise. Sailing on, they headed for a safer port where they could spend the winter.² They never reached it.

With little warning, a fierce storm blew up and the ship was blown off course. The crew soon knew that this was no ordinary storm. This was the dreaded northeaster, and for the next two weeks the ship was helplessly tossed and driven. Most on board gave up any hope of being saved, but not Paul. God revealed to him that, though the ship would be wrecked, all aboard would be saved. He believed God, and he demonstrated his faith by announcing publicly what God told him would happen.³

Paul was not one to hold his faith in secret. What he believed he announced, and in the long run he won people’s respect. In fact, when at last the ship was approaching land (as Paul had forecast), the person who appeared to be in command was the prisoner, Paul. When he saw some sailors selfishly arranging their escape, he demanded that they be stopped, and they were stopped. When he suggested that food be given to the desperately hungry people, food was given them.⁴ People took notice when a person who had faith declared it openly and acted upon it.



On the Mediterranean – the calm before the storm

1. Acts 27:1-2
2. Acts 27:5-12
3. Acts 27:13-26
4. Acts 27:27-38

Travellers with a story to tell

The place where the ship was wrecked was a small bay on the island of Malta. All on board escaped safely to land, then stayed on Malta for the winter months they should have spent in Crete. Paul was soon a well-known personality among the islanders and, in gratitude for his ministry of compassion and healing, they supplied his group with whatever provisions they needed for the final journey to Rome.¹

Another Alexandrian grain ship, one that had wintered at Malta, took the party on to Italy, landing them at Puteoli. There they found a group of Christians, with whom they stayed a week before moving on by road to Rome.²

Christians from Rome, hearing that Paul and his friends had arrived in Italy, came to meet them, and thereby exercised that characteristic Christian ministry of encouragement. 'On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.'³

In contrast to Malta, where the Christianity of Paul and his friends seems to have been something new to the local people, Italy already had its established groups of Christians. Neither Paul nor any of the other apostles had founded these churches (so far as we know from the records that have come down to us), so we might well ask how these churches originated.

Visitors from Rome, both Jews and Gentile proselytes, had been in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost almost thirty years earlier when Peter's preaching resulted in three thousand converts.⁴ One mark of true Christians is that they make known their Christianity wherever they go, and any converts among the Roman visitors to Jerusalem would surely have made known their faith upon their return to Rome. Also, all roads led to Rome, so to speak, and over the years Christian travellers or migrants to Rome no doubt furthered the growth of the church there.

1. Acts 28:1-10
2. Acts 28:11-14
3. Acts 28:15
4. Acts 2:10,41



Old harbour at Puteoli, modern Pozzuoli

A victor in chains

While awaiting trial in Rome, Paul was allowed a limited freedom. He rented a house where he could live by himself and receive visitors, but he was chained at all times to a Roman guard.¹

Paul's first concern was to explain his case to the local Jewish leaders. He was guilty of no crime and he had no accusation to make against the Jews. His appeal to Caesar was solely for the purpose of proving his innocence.²

Surprisingly, the Roman Jews showed no antagonism to Paul. They had received no advance reports concerning him personally, though they were aware that people in general were not favourable to Christianity. Paul tried, with only partial success, to convince them that Christianity was the true fulfilment of the Jewish religion. But if they would not accept this message and enter God's kingdom, the Gentiles surely would.³

And so it proved to be. Day after day, week after week for two years, Paul had a constant stream of visitors. People came and he taught them. Citizens of Rome, visitors to Rome, friends, strangers, refugees – Paul taught them all, openly and unhindered.⁴

A prisoner in chains is hardly the person to be celebrating victory. For Paul, however, this two-year period in Rome was a triumph. He had at last reached the heart of the Empire, and there he proclaimed the kingdom of God without interference or opposition.

Even in chains, God's apostle to the Gentiles was 'carrying Christ's name before the Gentiles, their kings and the people of Israel.'⁵ He may have recalled words he had written earlier: 'Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.'⁶

1. Acts 28:16,20,30
2. Acts 28:17-19
3. Acts 28:21-28
4. Acts 28:30-31
5. Acts 9:15
6. 2 Cor 2:14



Roman soldier

Letter-writing

Among the many people who visited Paul in Rome were Christians from various places where churches had been founded during, or as the outcome of, his missionary travels.

For example, Epaphras, the man who had been mainly responsible for the establishment of the church in Colossae, came seeking Paul's advice and help. Strange teaching about Jesus Christ had entered the Colossian church. To correct these wrong ideas, Paul sent back a letter to the church at Colossae, along with letters to the nearby churches of Laodicea and Ephesus, which were also affected by the false teaching.¹ Contained within these letters is some of the highest teaching about Jesus Christ to be found in the New Testament.

Another person from Colossae who met Paul in Rome was a slave who had run away from his master, Philemon, the man in whose house the Colossian church met. When this runaway slave became a Christian and decided to return to Colossae, Paul sent with him a letter addressed to Philemon, urging Philemon to welcome his now repentant slave as a brother in Christ.²

Paul was thankful to the Christians in these churches for praying for him. Therefore, in order to give them first-hand reports of how he was faring in his imprisonment, he sent Tychicus as his special representative.³

It may have been during this time that the Philippian church sent Epaphroditus with a gift of money and goods to help the imprisoned apostle.⁴ Paul was greatly refreshed by the news that Epaphroditus brought, and he sent back to the Philippians a letter well known for its warm and optimistic spirit. As Paul wrote, God spoke through him, and because of this, readers today find that his letters are still living and active.⁵

1. Col 1:7; 4:12,16

2. Philem 1-2,10-20

3. Eph 6:21-22; Col 4:3,7-9

4. Phil 4:18,22

5. Heb 4:12



The Forum, Rome

Matters of leadership

After his two years captivity, Paul was released. Either he was tried and found not guilty, or the charges of the Jerusalem Jews against him never reached Rome and consequently the case lapsed. Paul may have remained in and around Rome for a while, but the next recorded news we have of him is that he was sailing again in the cause of the gospel.

Churches had earlier been established in Crete, but they had a number of problems and needed help. With Timothy and Titus as his travel companions, Paul sailed expectantly to Crete, only to find that things were worse than he had imagined.

Without clearly recognized spiritual leaders, the Cretan churches lacked stability and direction. Self-appointed teachers, many of them greedy and dishonest, had unsettled the believers and created confusion throughout the churches.¹

When Paul decided to sail on, he left Titus behind in Crete. Titus was to help the churches further by appointing suitable people as elders, correcting the wrong teaching, and instructing the believers in vital matters of doctrine and practice.² Titus no doubt found that corrective ministry is no easy task when important issues have long been neglected.

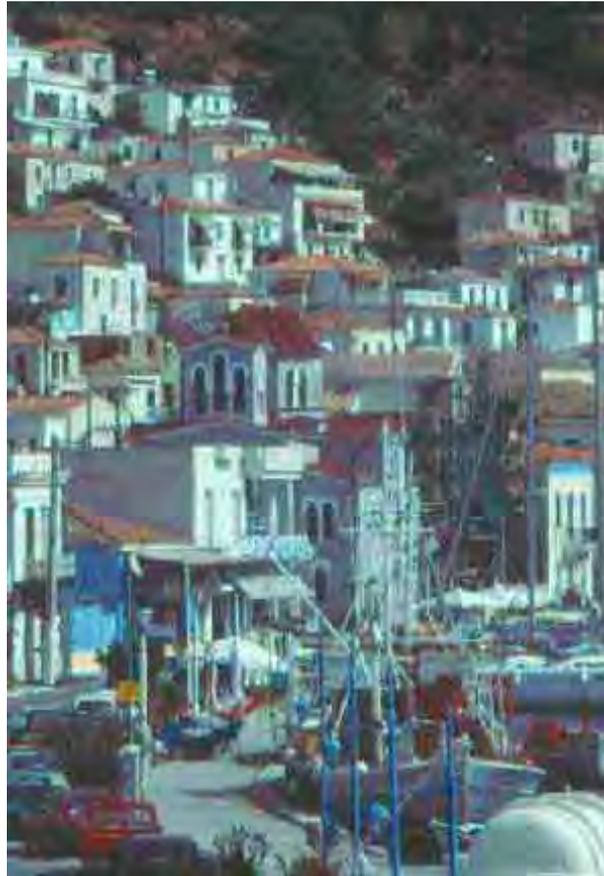
Meanwhile Paul and Timothy sailed on and in due course reached Ephesus. Paul had always been worried about the Ephesian church's vulnerability to false teachers. The last time he had spoken to the Ephesian elders, he made a special point of warning them to beware of the dangers that lay ahead.³ News he heard in Rome tended to confirm his fears, but he still must have been disappointed at what he saw when he arrived in Ephesus. The worthless teaching was more extensive and more damaging than he had imagined.⁴

1. Titus 1:5,10-14

2. Titus 2:1,15

3. Acts 20:29-30

4. 1 Tim 1:3-7; 4:1-5



Harbourside on a Mediterranean island

Without love, nothing

The constant need to counter false teaching can have a deadening effect on a church. It can become so concerned with refuting what is wrong that it neglects the positive teaching that is necessary for confident and fruitful Christian living. If it is not careful, it can become negative and barren, and this was the danger that lay ahead for the church in Ephesus.

Paul remained in Ephesus for some time to help the church back to normality. After dealing with those who had denied their faith and led others astray,¹ Paul proceeded to instruct the believers in those aspects of Christian belief and practice that they were neglecting. When the time came for him to move on (sailing to Macedonia), Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to continue to help the church.²

Upon arriving in Macedonia, Paul heard news of the churches in Crete and Ephesus that prompted him to send off a letter each to Titus and Timothy. Certain problems persisted, and he encouraged his two fellow workers to press on with the tasks that had been committed to them.

Although Paul, Timothy and the Ephesian elders did their best to correct what was wrong and teach what was right, the problem of wrong teaching in Ephesus was never fully overcome. Thirty years later the apostle John was still helping the Ephesians oppose false teaching.³

To their credit the Ephesian leaders stood firm for God's truth and opposed those who wanted to distort it.⁴ Unfortunately, in the process they lost that essential ingredient to all things Christian, love. The joy and warmth of their Christianity had gone, and the cold, hard, negative spirit that remained was not enough to keep the church alive. Faith, hope and love are all necessary, but the greatest of these is love.⁵

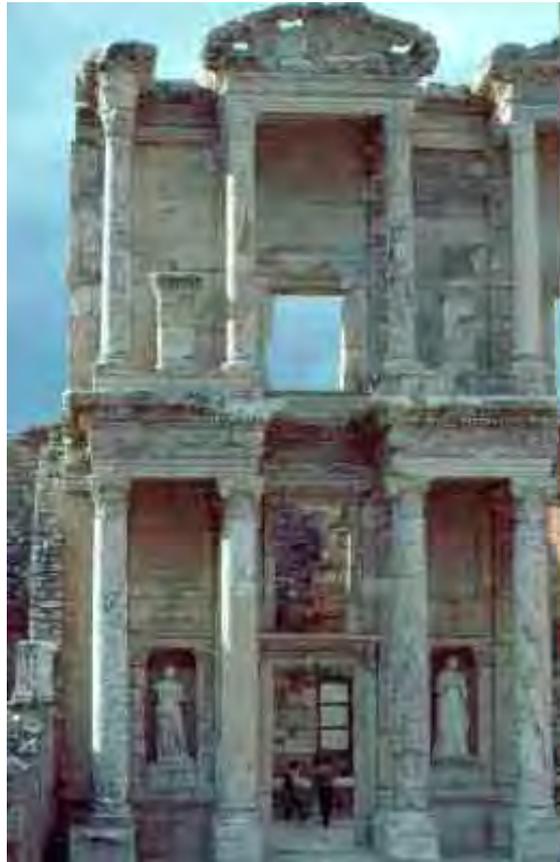
1. 1 Tim 1:19-20

2. 1 Tim 1:3; 4:6-7; 6:3-5

3. 1 John 2:18-22; 4:1; 2 John 7

4. Rev 2:2,6

5. Rev 2:4-5; see 1 Cor 13:13



Ephesus

Finishing the course

Paul's writings contain a number of short references to places he visited on his final missionary tour, but we cannot be certain of the extent of his travels or the route he followed. While in Macedonia, he probably fulfilled his wish to visit Philippi, and he visited also Corinth, Miletus and Troas.¹ The next we know of him is that he was back in Rome, a prisoner awaiting sentence.

Sensing that the end was near, Paul wrote another letter to Timothy, asking him to come to Rome as soon as possible, and to bring Mark with him.² The letter proved to be the last that Paul wrote.

It was now the first half of the AD 60s, and much had happened in Rome that might have caused a person of less fortitude than Paul to become depressed or cynical. The Roman authorities were turning against the Christians, with the result that, when initial charges were laid against Paul, friends that he expected to be witnesses for his defence deserted him.³ Some of the Roman Christians helped in various ways, but Luke alone was able to stay with him.⁴

Earlier, Paul had said to the Philippians that, because Christ meant everything to him, death could only be gain, for he would then be with Christ.⁵ That was a commendable expression of hope, but the test would come when death stared him in the face. That time had now arrived.

In his own words, Paul was on the point of being sacrificed. The time of his departure had come. He had fought the good fight, he had finished the course, he had kept the faith. 'Henceforth,' he could say, 'there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day – and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.'⁶

1. Phil 2:24; 2 Tim 4:13,20
2. 2 Tim 4:9,11,21
3. 2 Tim 1:15; 4:16-17
4. 2 Tim 4:11,21
5. Phil 1:21,23
6. 2 Tim 4:6-8



Inside the Colosseum (completed AD 82)

