

The Life of the Apostle Paul

A Comprehensive Chronological Timeline

c. AD 5 – c. AD 67

Preface and Methodology

This timeline traces the life of the Apostle Paul from his birth in Tarsus to his death in Rome, gathering in one place every event Scripture records about him and every passage in the New Testament that bears on his life. The primary source throughout is the canonical text itself; the chronology is built outward from a small number of fixed historical anchors, and secondary works are used only to date events and identify persons and places — never to settle doctrine.

We have more biographical material for Paul than for anyone else in the New Testament. Luke devotes the second half of Acts to him (Saul/Paul appears from Acts 7:58 to the final verse, Acts 28:31), and Paul’s own letters are unusually autobiographical — Galatians 1–2, 2 Corinthians 11–12, and Philippians 3 in particular read almost as memoir. Where Acts and the letters describe the same events, we let them interpret one another; where they are silent, we say so plainly rather than filling the gap with speculation.

A note on method: dates carry a tilde (~) or “c.” to mark them as estimates. Two or three events are genuinely fixed by external evidence; everything else is reckoned from those points and should be read as approximate, usually accurate to within a year or two. Where careful students reach different conclusions — the identity of the Galatians 2 visit, the provenance of the Prison Letters, whether Paul was released and imprisoned a second time — those questions are flagged in the text and treated at length in a closing section, not quietly decided.

A note on sources: popular-level websites have been set aside in favor of the standard chronological and archaeological literature (Finegan, Bruce, Hemer) and the primary ancient witnesses (the inscriptions, Josephus, Suetonius). These secular and archaeological sources are cited only for dating and identification; they are not treated as authorities over the text.

Key External Anchors

Pauline chronology rests on a handful of datable pegs outside the New Testament. Each is cited again in the timeline at the point it applies.

Anchor	Date it fixes	What it anchors	Source
Delphi (Gallio) Inscription	Gallio proconsul of Achaia, AD 51–52	Paul’s 18 months in Corinth (Acts 18:11–12)	Delphi Inscription, c. AD 52
Aretas IV’s death	AD 40 (ethnarch in Damascus from c. AD 37)	The Damascus escape and first Jerusalem visit must precede AD 40	Nabataean coins/inscriptions; Josephus, <i>Ant.</i> 18.109–119
Death of Herod Agrippa I	AD 44	Acts 12; brackets the Antioch period and famine visit	Josephus, <i>Ant.</i> 19.343–352
Claudius’s expulsion of Jews from Rome	c. AD 49	Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth (Acts 18:2)	Suetonius, <i>Claudius</i> 25.4; Orosius 7.6.15

Anchor	Date it fixes	What it anchors	Source
Festus succeeds Felix	c. AD 59 (AD 60 also argued)	End of the Caesarean imprisonment; the voyage to Rome	Judaean coinage, Nero yr. 5; F.F. Bruce; cf. Gray-Fow, <i>JETS</i> 59 (2016)
Nero's persecution / reign	AD 64; reign ends AD 68	Outer limit for Paul's martyrdom	Tacitus, <i>Annals</i> 15.44

Periods of Paul's Life (Key)

Background – Birth, upbringing, and life as a Pharisee and persecutor (to c. AD 34)

Conversion – The Damascus road and its immediate aftermath (c. AD 34–37)

Early Years – Arabia, Damascus, the first Jerusalem visit, and the silent years in Syria and Cilicia (c. AD 34–43)

Antioch – Ministry at Antioch and the famine-relief visit (c. AD 43–47)

First Journey – Cyprus and Galatia with Barnabas (c. AD 47–48)

Jerusalem Council – The circumcision question settled (c. AD 49)

Second Journey – Macedonia, Achaia, and the founding of the Corinthian and Thessalonian churches (c. AD 49–52)

Third Journey – Ephesus, the Corinthian correspondence, and Romans (c. AD 52–57)

Arrest – Seized in Jerusalem; defenses before the council and the governors (c. AD 57)

Caesarea – Two years' imprisonment under Felix and Festus (c. AD 57–59)

Voyage – The appeal to Caesar, the storm, and the shipwreck (c. AD 59–60)

Rome – The first Roman imprisonment and the Prison Letters (c. AD 60–62)

Final Years – Release, further travel, the Pastoral Letters, second imprisonment, and martyrdom (c. AD 62–67)

The Complete Timeline

Date (est.)	Period	Event	New Testament Reference	External Anchor / Note
c. AD 5	Background	Born in Tarsus of Cilicia, a Roman citizen by birth, of the tribe of Benjamin	Acts 22:3; 22:28; 21:39; Phil 3:5; Rom 11:1	Birth year inferred: a "young man" at Stephen's death (Acts 7:58); "Paul the aged" by Philemon 9
boyhood	Background	Raised and educated in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel, trained in the strict Law; a Pharisee, son of Pharisees	Acts 22:3; 26:4–5; 23:6; Phil 3:5–6	Gamaliel the Elder, a leading Pharisaic teacher (cf. Acts 5:34)

Date (est.)	Period	Event	New Testament Reference	External Anchor / Note
—	Background	Learned the trade of tentmaking (leatherworking), which later supports his ministry	Acts 18:3; cf. 1 Cor 4:12; 1 Thess 2:9	
c. AD 33–34	Background	Present at the stoning of Stephen; the witnesses lay their garments at Saul’s feet; Saul approves of the killing	Acts 7:58; 8:1; 22:20	
c. AD 33–34	Background	Saul ravages the church, dragging off men and women to prison; “breathing threats and murder”	Acts 8:3; 9:1–2; 26:9–11; Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9; Phil 3:6; 1 Tim 1:13	His own letters repeatedly recall this
c. AD 34	Conversion	On the road to Damascus, the risen Christ appears; Saul is blinded and confronted: “why are you persecuting Me?”	Acts 9:1–9; retold 22:6–11; 26:12–18	Conversion year reckoned back from the Aretas anchor
c. AD 34	Conversion	Ananias sent to him in Damascus; Saul regains sight, is baptized, and is named a “chosen instrument” to the Gentiles	Acts 9:10–19; 22:12–16; cf. 9:15	
c. AD 34	Conversion	Immediately preaches in the Damascus synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God; Jews are astonished	Acts 9:19–22	
c. AD 34–37	Early Years	Goes away into Arabia, then returns to Damascus; does not first consult “flesh and blood”	Gal 1:16–17	The “three years” of Gal 1:18 span this period
c. AD 37	Early Years	Escapes Damascus by night, lowered through the wall in a basket, evading the ethnarch under King Aretas	Acts 9:23–25; 2 Cor 11:32–33	Must precede AD 40 (Aretas IV’s death); ethnarch active in Damascus from c. AD 37
c. AD 37	Early Years	First post-conversion visit to Jerusalem; Barnabas vouches for him; meets Peter (Cephas) and James the Lord’s brother	Acts 9:26–28; Gal 1:18–19	“After three years” (Gal 1:18)
c. AD 37	Early Years	Disputes with the Hellenists, who try to kill him; the brethren send him down to Tarsus by way of Caesarea	Acts 9:29–30	
c. AD 37–43	Early Years	The “silent years”: ministry in the regions of Syria and	Gal 1:21–24	

Date (est.)	Period	Event	New Testament Reference	External Anchor / Note
		Cilicia, unknown by face to the churches of Judea		
c. AD 42	Early Years	(Likely in this period) caught up to the third heaven and given a “thorn in the flesh”; reckoned “fourteen years” before 2 Corinthians	2 Cor 12:1–10	Dated by counting back from 2 Cor (c. AD 56)
c. AD 43–44	Antioch	Barnabas brings Saul from Tarsus to Antioch; they teach a full year; the disciples are first called “Christians” there	Acts 11:25–26	
c. AD 44	Antioch	Herod Agrippa I strikes the church (James the brother of John killed; Peter imprisoned), then dies at Caesarea	Acts 12:1–23	Josephus, <i>Ant.</i> 19.343–352: Agrippa dies AD 44
c. AD 46	Antioch	Famine-relief visit to Jerusalem with Barnabas, prompted by Agabus’s prophecy of famine “over all the world” under Claudius	Acts 11:27–30; 12:25	Claudian famine in Judea attested c. AD 46–48 (Josephus, <i>Ant.</i> 20.51–53)
c. AD 47–48	First Journey	Set apart by the Holy Spirit at Antioch; sent out with Barnabas and John Mark	Acts 13:1–3	
c. AD 47	First Journey	Cyprus: at Paphos, Saul (now called Paul) blinds the magician Bar-Jesus (Elymas); the proconsul Sergius Paulus believes	Acts 13:4–12	First use of the name “Paul” (Acts 13:9); a Sergii Pauli family is attested at Pisidian Antioch
c. AD 47	First Journey	John Mark departs from the team at Perga and returns to Jerusalem	Acts 13:13	The cause of the later Acts 15:38 rift
c. AD 47	First Journey	Pisidian Antioch: synagogue sermon; many Gentiles believe; opposition drives them out as they “turn to the Gentiles”	Acts 13:14–52	
c. AD 47–48	First Journey	Iconium: bold preaching, signs, and a divided city; a plot to stone them	Acts 14:1–7	
c. AD 48	First Journey	Lystra: a lame man healed; the crowd hails them as Hermes and Zeus; Paul is stoned and dragged out for dead	Acts 14:8–20	Recalled in 2 Cor 11:25 (“once I was stoned”); 2 Tim 3:11

Date (est.)	Period	Event	New Testament Reference	External Anchor / Note
c. AD 48	First Journey	Derbe; then the return through Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, appointing elders in each church; report back to Antioch	Acts 14:20–28	
c. AD 49	Jerusalem Council	The circumcision controversy; Paul and Barnabas go up to Jerusalem; the apostles and elders rule that Gentiles need not be circumcised; the letter is sent	Acts 15:1–35	Often identified with Gal 2:1–10 — see “Points Where Faithful Students Differ”
c. AD 49	Jerusalem Council	At Antioch, Paul opposes Peter “to his face” for withdrawing from table fellowship with Gentiles when men from James arrive	Gal 2:11–14	Exact timing debated
c. AD 49	Second Journey	Sharp disagreement with Barnabas over John Mark; they part; Paul takes Silas and is commended to grace	Acts 15:36–41	
c. AD 49	Second Journey	At Lystra, Timothy joins the team; Paul has him circumcised for the sake of the Jews; the churches are strengthened	Acts 16:1–5	
c. AD 49–50	Second Journey	Through Phrygia and Galatia; forbidden by the Spirit to enter Asia and Bithynia	Acts 16:6–8	
c. AD 50	Second Journey	At Troas, the night vision of the man of Macedonia; the first “we” passage begins (Luke joins)	Acts 16:9–10	
c. AD 50	Second Journey	Philippi: Lydia converted; a slave girl freed from a spirit; Paul and Silas beaten and jailed; the midnight earthquake and the jailer’s conversion; magistrates apologize on learning they are Romans	Acts 16:11–40	Recalled in 1 Thess 2:2 (“after we had suffered and been mistreated at Philippi”)
c. AD 50	Second Journey	Thessalonica: three Sabbaths in the synagogue; uproar; Jason hauled before the politarchs	Acts 17:1–9	
c. AD 50	Second Journey	Berea: the noble-minded Bereans examine the	Acts 17:10–15	

Date (est.)	Period	Event	New Testament Reference	External Anchor / Note
		Scriptures daily; Paul sent on to Athens		
c. AD 50	Second Journey	Athens: the Areopagus address on the “unknown god”; Dionysius and Damaris believe	Acts 17:16–34	
c. AD 50–52	Second Journey	Corinth: 18 months; Aquila and Priscilla; Crispus converted; the night vision; Paul brought before Gallio, who dismisses the case	Acts 18:1–17	Gallio anchor: proconsul AD 51–52 (Delphi Inscription). See the companion <i>Paul & the Corinthian Church</i> timeline for the detail
c. AD 50–51	Second Journey	From Corinth, with Silas and Timothy, Paul writes 1 Thessalonians and, shortly after, 2 Thessalonians — his earliest surviving letters	1 Thess 1:1; 3:6; 2 Thess 1:1; 3:17	
c. AD 51–52	Second Journey	Departs Corinth; a vow shorn at Cenchreae; brief stop at Ephesus (leaves Priscilla and Aquila); to Caesarea, Jerusalem, and home to Antioch	Acts 18:18–22	NASB takes the vow as Paul’s; the Greek is ambiguous
c. AD 52–53	Third Journey	Sets out again, strengthening the disciples through Galatia and Phrygia	Acts 18:23	
c. AD 52–55	Third Journey	Ephesus: disciples of John rebaptized; three months in the synagogue, then two years in the hall of Tyrannus; extraordinary miracles; the sons of Sceva; magic books burned; the riot of Demetrius and the silversmiths	Acts 19:1–41	Roughly three years total (Acts 20:31); affliction in Asia recalled in 2 Cor 1:8–10; cf. 1 Cor 15:32
c. AD 55	Third Journey	Writes 1 Corinthians from Ephesus (intending to stay “until Pentecost”); references a now-lost prior letter	1 Cor 16:8; 5:9	
c. AD 55	Third Journey	The painful (second) visit to Corinth and the severe letter, sent via Titus — both attested only in 2 Corinthians	2 Cor 2:1; 2:3–4; 13:1–2	Necessary inference from Paul’s own words (see companion timeline)
c. AD 56	Third Journey	Leaves Ephesus for Troas, then Macedonia; meets Titus with good news;	Acts 20:1; 2 Cor 2:12–13; 7:5–7	

Date (est.)	Period	Event	New Testament Reference	External Anchor / Note
		writes 2 Corinthians from Macedonia		
c. AD 57 (Winter)	Third Journey	Three months in Greece (Corinth); writes Romans, his theological masterwork; the Jerusalem collection is nearly complete	Acts 20:2–3; Rom 15:25–27; 16:1, 23	Erastus inscription (Corinth, 1929) names a city official of that name; identification probable, not certain
c. AD 57	Third Journey	A Jewish plot forces an overland return through Macedonia; sails from Philippi after Passover	Acts 20:3–6	
c. AD 57	Third Journey	Troas: the all-night sermon; Eutychus falls from the window and is raised	Acts 20:7–12	
c. AD 57	Third Journey	Miletus: the farewell address to the Ephesian elders — “I am innocent of the blood of all”	Acts 20:17–38	
c. AD 57	Third Journey	Tyre and Caesarea (Philip the evangelist and his daughters); the prophet Agabus binds Paul’s belt and foretells his arrest	Acts 21:1–14	
c. AD 57	Arrest	Jerusalem: received by James; undertakes a temple purification to answer rumors; seized by Asian Jews who think he has defiled the temple	Acts 21:15–36	
c. AD 57	Arrest	Rescued by the Roman tribune (Claudius Lysias); addresses the crowd from the stairs in Aramaic, recounting his conversion	Acts 21:37–22:21	
c. AD 57	Arrest	About to be scourged, Paul reveals his Roman citizenship and is spared	Acts 22:22–29	
c. AD 57	Arrest	Before the Sanhedrin: “I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees”; the council splits over the resurrection	Acts 22:30–23:10	
c. AD 57	Arrest	The Lord stands by him at night: “as you have testified at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also”	Acts 23:11	
c. AD 57	Arrest	A plot of more than forty men to ambush him; Paul’s	Acts 23:12–35	Acts 23:16 — Paul’s sister’s son in Jerusalem

Date (est.)	Period	Event	New Testament Reference	External Anchor / Note
		nephew warns the tribune; Paul moved to Caesarea by night under heavy guard		
c. AD 57–59	Caesarea	Tried before Felix; Tertullus prosecutes; Felix defers, hoping for a bribe, and leaves Paul bound for two years	Acts 24:1–27	Felix procurator to c. AD 59
c. AD 59	Caesarea	Festus succeeds Felix; pressed to be tried in Jerusalem, Paul appeals to Caesar: “I appeal to Caesar”	Acts 25:1–12	Festus anchor: arrival c. AD 59 (AD 60 also argued)
c. AD 59	Caesarea	Before King Agrippa II and Bernice; Paul recounts his conversion; “in a short time you would persuade me to become a Christian”; Agrippa: he could have been freed had he not appealed	Acts 25:13–26:32	
c. AD 59–60	Voyage	The sea voyage under the centurion Julius; the storm off Crete; shipwreck at Malta; the viper; Publius’s father and others healed	Acts 27:1–28:10	A “we” passage; the fourth shipwreck of his life (cf. 2 Cor 11:25, written earlier)
c. AD 60	Rome	Arrival in Rome; brethren meet him at the Forum of Appius; permitted to live by himself under guard	Acts 28:11–16	
c. AD 60–62	Rome	Two whole years under house arrest, receiving all who come, “preaching the kingdom of God... with all openness, unhindered” — the closing words of Acts	Acts 28:17–31	
c. AD 60–62	Rome	Writes the Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon (traditionally from this Roman imprisonment)	Eph 3:1; 6:20; Phil 1:13; Col 4:3, 18; Phlm 1, 9	Provenance debated (Rome / Ephesus / Caesarea) — see closing section
c. AD 62	Final Years	Released (inferred): Acts ends without a verdict, and the travels named in the Pastoral Letters fit nowhere in Acts	cf. Phil 1:25; 2:24; Phlm 22	An inference, not a recorded event
c. AD 62–66	Final Years	Further travel: possibly westward toward Spain as planned; leaves Titus in Crete; leaves Timothy at	Rom 15:24, 28; 1 Tim 1:3; Titus 1:5; 3:12	“Limits of the west” — 1 Clement 5 (c. AD 95)

Date (est.)	Period	Event	New Testament Reference	External Anchor / Note
		Ephesus; winters at Nicopolis; writes 1 Timothy and Titus		
c. AD 66–67	Final Years	Re-arrested; a second, harsher Roman imprisonment; writes 2 Timothy — “I have finished the course”; only Luke is with him; the cloak and scrolls left at Troas; Trophimus left sick at Miletus	2 Tim 1:8, 16–17; 4:6–8, 11, 13, 20	
c. AD 64–68	Final Years	Martyred at Rome under Nero (by tradition, beheaded as a Roman citizen). Scripture records Paul’s expectation of death but not the act itself	2 Tim 4:6–8 (his own anticipation)	1 Clement 5–6; later Tertullian, <i>Scorpiace</i> 15; Eusebius, <i>Hist. eccl.</i> 2.25
c. AD 64	Final Years	A later apostle commends “our beloved brother Paul,” ranking his letters with “the rest of the Scriptures”	2 Pet 3:15–16	The one explicit reference to Paul by another New Testament writer

Narrative Summary

From Tarsus to Damascus (c. AD 5–37)

Paul was born Saul, a Jew of the dispersion, in Tarsus of Cilicia — “no insignificant city” (Acts 21:39) — and held Roman citizenship from birth (Acts 22:28), a fact that would prove decisive again and again. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, “a Hebrew of Hebrews,” raised in Jerusalem and trained under Gamaliel in the strictest sect of the Pharisees (Acts 22:3; 26:5; Phil 3:5). By trade he made tents (Acts 18:3), a skill that later let him preach without being a burden to anyone.

He enters the narrative as a young man at the stoning of Stephen, guarding the cloaks and approving the death (Acts 7:58; 8:1). What follows is not passive consent but zeal: he ravaged the church, going house to house and dragging believers to prison (Acts 8:3), and set out for Damascus “breathing threats and murder” (Acts 9:1). Then the risen Christ met him on the road. Blinded, he was led into the city, and through Ananias he received both his sight and his commission as the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:1–19). The man who had tried to destroy the faith now proclaimed it in the same synagogues he had come to purge (Acts 9:20–22).

His own account in Galatians fills in what Acts compresses: he went into Arabia and returned to Damascus, and only “after three years” went up to Jerusalem (Gal 1:17–18). His departure from Damascus was a flight — lowered through the wall in a basket to escape the ethnarch under King Aretas (Acts 9:25; 2 Cor 11:32–33), an event that, because Aretas died in AD 40, gives us one of our firmest early anchors. At Jerusalem, Barnabas vouched for the suspicious convert, and Paul met Peter and James (Acts 9:26–28; Gal 1:18–19) before being sent home to Tarsus ahead of another plot.

The Silent Years and Antioch (c. AD 37–47)

For most of a decade Paul drops from Luke's narrative, laboring in "the regions of Syria and Cilicia" (Gal 1:21). It was Barnabas who drew him back into the wider work, fetching him from Tarsus to help with the surging Gentile church at Antioch, where for a full year they taught together and where believers were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:25–26). When Agabus foretold a famine, the Antioch church sent relief to Judea by the hands of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:27–30) — Paul's second recorded visit to Jerusalem. These years are bracketed by the death of Herod Agrippa I in AD 44 (Acts 12), one of the chronology's fixed points.

The First Journey and the Council (c. AD 47–49)

Set apart by the Spirit, Paul and Barnabas sailed first to Cyprus, where at Paphos the proconsul Sergius Paulus believed and where, tellingly, Luke shifts from "Saul" to "Paul" (Acts 13:9). From there they pressed into the highlands of Asia Minor — Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe — preaching first in the synagogues and, when rejected, turning openly to the Gentiles. At Lystra Paul was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19), the kind of suffering he would later list almost in passing (2 Cor 11:25). On the way home they appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23).

Success among the Gentiles forced the question that had been building: must they be circumcised? The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) answered no, and sent its decision in a letter. Paul's own report of a Jerusalem meeting "after fourteen years" (Gal 2:1–10) is widely identified with this council, though some careful readers tie it instead to the earlier famine visit — a question taken up below. Either way, the principle Paul had staked his life on was upheld: the gospel is received by faith, and Gentiles are not made to become Jews first.

The Second Journey: Macedonia and Achaia (c. AD 49–52)

A rift with Barnabas over John Mark sent Paul west with Silas instead (Acts 15:36–41); at Lystra young Timothy joined them. Barred by the Spirit from Asia and Bithynia and called by a vision to Macedonia (Acts 16:9–10), Paul carried the gospel into Europe: Philippi (a beating, a jail, an earthquake, a converted jailer), Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens, where he reasoned with philosophers on the Areopagus. Then came Corinth, where he stayed eighteen months and where his appearance before the proconsul Gallio gives us the single most precise date in his life (Acts 18:11–12). From Corinth he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the earliest of his letters to survive.

The Third Journey: Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome's Letter (c. AD 52–57)

The center of the third journey was Ephesus, where Paul spent roughly three years (Acts 20:31) — teaching daily in the hall of Tyrannus until "all who lived in Asia heard the word," confronting magic and idolatry, and finally riding out the silversmiths' riot. From Ephesus and then Macedonia he conducted the long, turbulent correspondence with Corinth (1 Corinthians, the painful visit, the severe letter, then 2 Corinthians). Wintering at last in Corinth, he wrote Romans, the fullest statement of his gospel, while gathering the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. The journey home was shadowed by Agabus's warning that chains awaited him (Acts 21:11), which Paul accepted with open eyes.

Arrest, Caesarea, and the Voyage (c. AD 57–60)

In Jerusalem a temple riot led to Paul's arrest; from there the narrative becomes a sequence of defenses — before the mob, the Sanhedrin, the governors Felix and Festus, and King Agrippa II. Twice his Roman citizenship shields him; once the Lord himself promises he will testify in Rome

(Acts 23:11). Held two years at Caesarea until Festus took office (c. AD 59), Paul appealed to Caesar and so set sail under guard — through the great storm and the shipwreck at Malta — reaching Rome at last (Acts 27–28).

Rome and the Final Years (c. AD 60–67)

Acts closes with Paul under house arrest in Rome, preaching “unhindered” (Acts 28:31), and there it leaves him — deliberately, it seems, since Luke’s purpose was the gospel’s advance “to the end of the earth,” not Paul’s biography. From this imprisonment came Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. The Pastoral Letters then describe journeys that fit nowhere in Acts — Crete, Nicopolis, a winter, a second arrest — which is the chief reason most have concluded that Paul was released around AD 62, traveled further (perhaps to Spain, as he had hoped, Rom 15:24), and was arrested again. From that final cell he wrote 2 Timothy, calmly certain that “the time of my departure has come” (2 Tim 4:6). Scripture does not narrate his death; the earliest external witnesses report that he was beheaded at Rome under Nero.

Points Where Faithful Students Differ

This timeline does not pretend that every date is certain. The following are the genuine open questions, set out so a reader can weigh them rather than simply receive a verdict.

The Galatians 2 visit. In Galatians 2:1–10 Paul describes going up to Jerusalem “after fourteen years” with Barnabas and Titus, laying his gospel before the leaders privately. Two identifications are defended. The first equates it with the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), since both concern circumcision and the standing of Gentiles. The second equates it with the earlier famine visit (Acts 11:30; 12:25), written before the Council — which has the advantage of explaining why Galatians never cites the Council’s decree, and why Paul says the leaders “added nothing” to him. The second view tends to make Galatians Paul’s earliest letter (c. AD 48). The text does not decide the matter for us, and honest students land on both sides.

The date of the conversion. Reckoning back three years (Gal 1:18) plus “fourteen” (Gal 2:1) from the fixed points yields a conversion somewhere in AD 33–36; the Aretas anchor (escape before AD 40) keeps it early. This timeline uses c. AD 34, but a year or two either way is defensible.

Where the Prison Letters were written. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are letters from prison, traditionally Paul’s Roman imprisonment (c. AD 60–62). Some argue for an (otherwise unrecorded) Ephesian imprisonment for one or more of them, or for Caesarea. The traditional Roman setting is followed here, but the question is real.

Release and a second imprisonment. Acts ends with Paul alive under house arrest and never records a trial outcome or his death. The travels mentioned in 1 Timothy and Titus cannot be fitted into the journeys of Acts. The straightforward reading of those letters, together with the early testimony of Clement of Rome, is that Paul was released, traveled again, and was arrested a second time, writing 2 Timothy shortly before his death. This is an inference — a strong one, but an inference — and it depends on taking the Pastoral Letters as Paul’s own, which they claim to be.

The date and manner of death. The New Testament records Paul’s expectation of imminent death (2 Tim 4:6–8) but not the event. The earliest external sources — 1 Clement (c. AD 95), then Tertullian and Eusebius — place his martyrdom at Rome under Nero, by beheading (the death of a Roman citizen). Proposed dates range from AD 64 to 68; AD 67 is a common estimate. None of this is Scripture, and it is offered here as historical testimony, clearly labeled.

Every New Testament Reference to Paul

Because the New Testament is itself the primary witness, the references are gathered here in one place. Saul/Paul is named or speaks across Acts and in all thirteen letters that bear his name, and is named once by another writer.

In the Acts of the Apostles

Luke names him “Saul” from Acts 7:58 through 13:9, and “Paul” thereafter. The major blocks: Stephen’s death and the persecution (7:58; 8:1, 3); the conversion and its aftermath (9:1–30); Antioch and the famine visit (11:25–30; 12:25); the first journey (13:1–14:28); the Jerusalem Council and the split with Barnabas (15:1–41); the second journey (16:1–18:22); the third journey (18:23–21:16); the arrest and defenses in Jerusalem (21:17–23:35); the trials at Caesarea before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa (24:1–26:32); and the voyage, shipwreck, and Roman imprisonment (27:1–28:31).

In Paul’s own letters (autobiographical passages)

Romans — 1:1; 11:1 (a Benjamite); 15:17–28 (from Jerusalem to Illyricum; the plan for Spain); 16:1–23 (companions and the Corinth setting). 1 Corinthians — 1:14–17 (whom he baptized); 9:1 (he has seen the Lord); 15:8–10 (last and least, the former persecutor); 15:32 (the beasts at Ephesus); 16:5–9. 2 Corinthians — 1:8–10 (the deadly peril in Asia); 11:23–33 (the catalogue of sufferings and the Damascus escape); 12:1–10 (the third heaven and the thorn). Galatians — 1:11–2:14 (the fullest memoir: conversion, Arabia, the Jerusalem visits, the rebuke of Peter). Ephesians — 3:1–13; 6:19–22 (“an ambassador in chains”). Philippians — 1:12–26 (his imprisonment furthers the gospel); 3:4–14 (his Pharisaic pedigree counted as loss). Colossians — 1:24–29; 4:7–18 (“Remember my imprisonment”). 1 Thessalonians — 1:1; 2:1–2 (mistreated at Philippi); 2:17–3:10. 2 Thessalonians — 1:1; 3:17 (his own hand as a mark of authenticity). 1 Timothy — 1:3 (Timothy left at Ephesus); 1:12–16 (the foremost of sinners, shown mercy). 2 Timothy — 1:11–12; 3:10–11 (persecutions at Antioch, Iconium, Lystra); 4:6–22 (the final charge; the cloak at Troas; Trophimus at Miletus; companions; the first defense). Titus — 1:5 (left in Crete); 3:12 (Nicopolis). Philemon — 1; 9 (“Paul the aged... a prisoner”); 22 (he hopes to be released and to visit).

Reference to Paul by another New Testament writer

2 Peter 3:15–16 — Peter calls him “our beloved brother Paul,” notes that his letters contain “some things hard to understand,” and sets them alongside “the rest of the Scriptures,” an early witness to the recognized authority of Paul’s writings.

Primary Source: The Holy Bible (Acts 7–28; Romans; 1 & 2 Corinthians; Galatians; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; 1 & 2 Thessalonians; 1 & 2 Timothy; Titus; Philemon; 2 Peter 3)

External Anchors: Delphi (Gallio) Inscription (c. AD 52); Aretas IV (Nabataean coins/inscriptions; d. AD 40); Josephus, Antiquities 18–20 (Agrippa I, the famine, Felix and Festus); Suetonius, Life of Claudius 25.4 (with Orosius 7.6.15); Tacitus, Annals 15.44; Erastus Inscription (Corinth, 1929); 1 Clement 5–6; Tertullian, Scorpiace 15; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.25

Chronological literature: Jack Finegan, Handbook of Biblical Chronology (rev. ed., 1998); F.F. Bruce, Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free (1977); Colin J. Hemer, The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History (1989)