



# Minutes With Messiah

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## *THE STICKING-POINT*

On the night of July 16-17, 1918, in Ekaterinburg, Russia, Tsar Nicholas II and his family were murdered. Those shot in the basement of the Ipatiev House included the Tsar and his wife Alexandra, as well as their son Aleksei, and daughters Olga, Tatiana, Marie, and Anastasia. Over the years, many people have believed, with absolutely no evidence, that at least one of the daughters survived. Some said Grand Duchess Olga Nikolaevna lived. Most commonly, though, the survivor was believed to have been Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna. Famously, one woman claimed to be Anastasia. That story led to a movie starring Yul Brynner and Ingrid Bergman (1956) and a Disney animated movie (1997). One thing that makes the theories of the survival of the youngest daughter most interesting is her name. Anastasia is the Greek word commonly translated resurrection.

The *anastasis* (resurrection) appears to have been one of Paul's main themes. He wrote extensively about it to the churches in Corinth and Thessalonica.

On more than one occasion it was the sticking point that caused his message to be rejected. In Athens, Paul was asked to tell the philosophers about his "new" ideas. His sermon carried the listeners from multiple gods to the God who is not made by man's skill who will judge the world by one man, which he proved by raising him from the dead. "And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked." (Acts 17:32) But it was not just gentiles who could not get beyond the resurrection. Years later in Jerusalem, he intentionally antagonized some Jews while defending himself against charges of defiling the Temple.

But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question. (Acts 23:6)

It was this belief in the resurrection, not the supposed defiling of the Temple, that caused the Jews to demand Paul be put into custody, and which eventually led to his transfer to Rome to appear before the emperor.

What was it that made this such a difficult point for people to accept? They could accept Jesus as a good

teacher, or a moral man. Some might even accept the concept of Jesus as atoning sacrifice, as long as he was still in the grave. But when the resurrection comes into the picture, people began objecting to the teaching.

Resurrection stories were not new, even then. For two millennia the Egyptians had based their whole theology on a resurrection story, that of Osiris. The Greeks had resurrection stories about Adonis and Eurydice. They used a resurrection story to explain the seasons. Even the Jewish scripture was full of resurrection stories. Most famously, both prophets Elijah and Elisha had raised people from the dead. Even after his death Elisha was able to resurrect people. (2 Kings 13:21)

It would be easy to argue that these resurrections were effected by someone else (Isis, Orpheus, Elijah, Elisha); easy but inaccurate. Some of the ancient myths involved self-resurrection as well. So what is the difference between the familiar resurrections and the one Paul preached? Perhaps the difference was a matter of time. Other than the miracles of the Jewish prophets, most of the resurrection myths happened long before they were recorded. Nobody had a personal acquaintance with Osiris, or Persephone. Paul, on the other hand, said he had personally seen the resurrected Christ. And if nobody believed him, "he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present." (1 Cor 15:6) Resurrection is well and good when it is an abstract concept. It becomes a sticking point when it is a provable fact.

The resurrection of Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova has been, at best, a nice theory. The resurrection of Jesus was well established. For some, that was a problem; for others, that is hope.

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# IN WHAT ORDER?

To a historian, timelines are important. Too often American history is taught as if the country were in isolation. Most people have no idea what was happening in Europe (or Asia or Africa) when certain events happened in America. For instance, many people do not associate the War of 1812 with the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, although that association is vital to an understanding of both conflicts. Victoria was queen of England from the presidency of Andrew Jackson through William McKinley. Hong Kong became a British territory during the presidency of James Polk. Many other examples could be given. Even a comparison between the timelines of various European and Asian countries yields interesting correspondences. Sometimes knowing what was happening at the same time as other events helps us to understand the events. Sometimes what was happening when books of the Bible were written helps us to understand the books themselves. So it is with a timeline of the letters of Paul.

It is easy to assume that Paul's letters were written in the order we find them in most Bibles. That would be a mistake. Generally, they are placed according to length and not chronology. Romans, for instance, is actually the

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fourth, fifth, or even sixth of Paul's letters. It is interesting to find that the Thessalonian letters are probably the first, and written within a couple of years of the establishment of that church. In terms of the book of Acts, Paul's letters can generally be divided into three groups: written on journeys, written from the first Roman imprisonment, written after Acts closes.

## Journey Letters

These letters include Romans, the Corinthian letters, Galatians, and the Thessalonian letters. Most scholars are in essential agreement as to when each was written, except in the case of Galatians.

Paul preached in Philippi on his second journey. From there he went to Thessalonica, then Athens and Corinth. He spent a year and a half in Corinth. It was during this time that he wrote both letters to the Thessalonians (approximately 55 AD). This means the errors that he was correcting cropped up quickly in the

Thessalonian church. The most prominent of those errors was the idea that the Christians could stop working because Jesus was to return imminently. This leads one to ask whether there was something in that city that predisposed them to this belief (commonly associated with many modern cults) or whether someone was following Paul and teaching this doctrine. Either one is possible. What is clear, though, is that young congregations may be vulnerable to strange teachings. In modern terms, that should teach those who plant churches and then ignore them that such a policy is dangerous to the new believers.

Probably a little over a year later Paul began his third journey, and spent over three years in Ephesus. (Acts 19) It is possible that he wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, but some scholars place it after leaving the city. (Acts 20:1) In either case, it is again evident that error can creep into a church very quickly. This first letter to the Corinthians shows it to be a church with many problems. In it Paul addresses partyism, marriage, the Lord's Supper, misuse of spiritual gifts, and benevolence.

The second letter to that church is generally considered to have been written shortly after the first, because of a reference to forgiving a brother mentioned in the first letter. Most scholars place it just before or just after his visit to Greece in Acts 20:3. This means that it was written probably less than a year after the first letter.

If this letter is dated approximately 56 AD, it poses an interesting issue with a common assumption. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul speaks of a person who was caught up into heaven and given visions of things he could not repeat. Many preachers believe that Paul is talking of himself, and some say this may have happened when he was stoned and left for dead at Lystra during the first missionary journey (about 48 AD). This poses a problem. Paul claims that the catching up happened over fourteen years before he was writing in 2 Corinthians. If he wrote the letter when most scholars believe, that would put the heaven incident before 42 AD, when Paul was in Tarsus before going to Antioch. It could refer to the events on the road to Damascus that led to his conversion, but then he would have said it was over twenty years, not the very specific fourteen. If he was referring to the incident in Lystra, then 2 Corinthians would have to have been written about the time he was released from his first Roman imprisonment, which doesn't fit with the idea that it was written shortly after the first letter. Probably 2 Corinthians 12 refers to an incident of which we have no other record.

The letter to the Romans is commonly dated at about the same time as 2 Corinthians (and possibly a few months earlier). Most scholars place it in Acts 20:1-3. This would indicate that Paul hoped to come to them as

soon as he delivered the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. (Which, it so happens, is what occurred, although not as he had expected.)

The letter to the Galatians is problematic. Some place it as early as the beginning of the second journey. (Acts 15) Others place it during his first time in Corinth (Acts 18). These dates would make it possibly the first letter written. Others date it to his three years in Ephesus or the same time as Romans and 2 Corinthians. The earlier dates would mean that he had never visited the congregations to which he was writing. Yet in the letter he marvels that the Galatians are “so soon removed” from the truth they had received. This seems to indicate that he had visited the congregations, and was writing shortly thereafter. This fits with the later date. Galatians 4 also indicates that Paul had personally met with some in the churches to which he was writing. That would place it at the later dates, and possibly the last letter written (of which we have a copy) before Paul’s imprisonment. That Paul addresses issues related to early Gnosticism would also place this closer to the letters of John than his own early letters.

## Prison letters

The prison letters (Acts 28) are generally considered to be Philemon, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians. They were all presumably written from Rome, although some scholars date Ephesians as early as his time in Caesarea while awaiting transfer to Rome. In either case, this would place these letters three to five years after the earlier ones. These are letters of a more mature Paul to more mature churches or individuals.

Philemon lived in Colossae, a city that Paul had apparently never visited, although Paul seems to have known him personally. The letter to him had a very specific purpose, and was clearly written after he had spent some time in Rome, but before his release from the first imprisonment. It is probable that it was written at the same time as the letter to the Colossians. Paul was pleading with Philemon to accept back his former slave, Onesimus. Colossians 4 says that the letter was being delivered by Onesimus. So the letter to Philemon was probably a personal letter of reference so that the other letter could be delivered without incident. This would argue that Colossians was also written from Rome and not Caesarea.

Some date the letter to the Ephesians to some unrecorded imprisonment, presumably during one of the first two journeys. Some date it to the two years of imprisonment in Caesarea. The letter bears a striking resemblance to Colossians, however. Sometimes it is almost word-for-word identical. This would seem to indicate that they were written and delivered at the same time. One is a copy of the other, modified for the specific circumstances of the target audience. Since it is probable that the Colossian letter was written from Rome at the

same time as the one to Philemon, then it is likely that Ephesians was also written from Rome.

Philippians is a thank-you letter for years of assistance. This was probably the last letter he wrote (that we know of) from his first imprisonment, and the last to a congregation rather than an individual. Because of Paul’s situation and the maturity of the congregation, it only indirectly addresses some minor problems in the congregation, but is mostly in praise of their faithfulness. This is the letter established congregations today would wish to receive.

## After-Acts letters

The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome for the first time. Although under guard, he lived in a private house for two years. After that, he was apparently freed for a time and traveled extensively. Thus he was not in Rome when Nero burned the city and blamed it on the Christians. Four years later he was again imprisoned and

# The letter to the Galatians is problematic.

then executed. This coincides with the first Jewish revolt, and may have been a direct result of that rebellion. While he was traveling and during his last imprisonment he wrote letters to individuals, more as a father guiding his adult children than as a preacher guiding a congregation.

The first letter to Timothy may have been written shortly after Paul was released from prison. It cannot be one of the journey letters, because Paul urged him to stay in Ephesus while he went to Macedonia. In all the journeys in Acts, Timothy was with Paul in Macedonia. It is probably early in the post-Acts period because it doesn’t mention any other places, unlike the two remaining letters.

Titus can be placed late in the period between Roman imprisonments. Paul may have been to Spain. He had certainly been to Crete, and left Titus there. This cannot be during the trip to Rome in Acts 27, so was probably later in Paul’s life.

The second letter to Timothy is clearly the last letter we have from Paul. It was probably written from Rome, but may be dated only slightly earlier. Paul had spent some time in Asia Minor, but had apparently not visited Timothy in Ephesus.

Some would mention Hebrews. It is intentionally left out of this timeline because its date is difficult to determine, and it may have been written by someone else, such as Silas or Priscilla.

What does all this mean? Knowing when the letters were written may help us understand why they were written. The earlier letters tend to deal with problems of young churches. The prison epistles encourage more mature congregations. The post-Acts letters are those of an elder to his younger protégés. It all makes sense when

# CHICKEN OR EGG?

It is good that Christian music has been gaining in popularity over the past few years. But it is also a double-edged sword. For those in non-instrumental churches—such as the Church of Christ, the Orthodox churches, and some Baptists—this popularity has added to the difficulty of teaching our children why we believe what we believe about vocal-only music in the worship assembly. When the popular songs, especially among the youth, all have instrumental accompaniments, people don't want to hear the very proper arguments against it. This article, however, is not about that edge of the sword.

Because of the popularity of Christian music, it is easier for errors in doctrine to creep into our minds. Sometimes the songs sound good, until put under the microscope of scripture or logic. Previous articles in *Minutes With Messiah* have discussed some of these songs. There is another song that is recently popular that sounds good, but demands closer scrutiny. Part of the chorus asks God to help me “want the healer more than the healing,” and “the savior more than the saving.” Wanting Jesus more than anything appears to be good. After all, preachers tell us that everything is about Jesus. Jesus himself said that following him was a top priority.

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (Matt 10:37)

That part of the song may bear up. The first time I heard it, however, I immediately had a negative reaction. Should we want the healer more than the healing; the savior more than the saving? Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?

That sounds a lot like the “Jesus yes, church no” philosophy. Everything is OK as long as you believe in

Jesus; just don't ask that we make significant changes in our life. Belief in Jesus is acceptable, but Paul altered Christian doctrine to change it where Jesus himself would not recognize it. Or the age-old Gnostic philosophy that the spirit and the body are separate, so you can believe in Jesus with your spirit and the body can go on sinning according to its nature.

What do the scriptures say? Jesus said wanting him was not enough.

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. (Matt 7:22-23)

In Acts 19, several Jewish exorcists tried casting out devils “by Jesus whom Paul preacheth.” The devils responded by beating up those men. Some might argue that they really did not believe in Jesus, and that is a possibility. Another possibility is that they wanted Jesus (or the power he granted) more than the saving.

If you were diagnosed with cancer, would you refuse to see any doctor but your favorite general practitioner because you wanted the healer more than the healing? If you were drowning, would you ask the ethnicity or politics of the one who threw you a life preserver? Would you not want the saving more than the savior? Granted, Jesus is the only savior; but is it enough to come to him because he is Jesus without acknowledging the need of a savior? It is wanting the saving that motivates faith in Jesus. Salvation is not a mere by-product of faith.

Timothy J. O'Hearn  
737 Monell Dr NE  
Albuquerque NM 87123