

There is treasure hidden in Paul's thirteen letters, but the path to find it is not obvious. Here is a tip: in the Bible, Paul's letters are not sequenced in chronological order.

The Bible rarely gives us specific dates about events it addresses, which can be frustrating for modern readers. As an example, this is a very brief timeline of the first four decades of Christianity that is probably correct to within a few years:

27 AD to 30 AD	Ministry of Jesus
30 AD to 39 AD	Death, resurrection of Jesus; Christianity spreads among the Jews
40 AD to 48 AD	Christianity spreads increasingly to non-Jews
48 AD to 57 AD	Paul's three missionary journeys
58 AD to 70 AD	Paul's imprisonment; Paul's death; Temple destroyed

Paul wrote his letters within the two decades of 48 AD to 68 AD. His thirteen generally accepted letters are arranged in the New Testament in two blocks: the nine written to churches, then the four written to individuals. The nine written to churches are generally placed in order by length. (This also assumes *Hebrews* was not written by Paul.)

During the two-decade period when the letters were written, the problems and opportunities of Christianity changed dramatically. Those are reflected in Paul's letters, but it is sometimes hard to see them appropriately unless you understand the problems and opportunities existing at the time he wrote the letter.

A hidden treasure is found when watching the flow of Paul's writing after his letters are placed in rough chronological order. Again, it is impossible to place Paul's letters in exact order or date with 100% accuracy, but here is one expert's suggestion:<sup>1</sup>

49 AD	Galatians (although many scholars date this book to the early 50s)
51 AD	1 and 2 Thessalonians
56 AD	1 and 2 Corinthians
57 AD	Romans
60-61 AD	Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon
62 AD	Philippians

<sup>1</sup> *A Chronology of the Apostle Paul*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, by Paul Tanner. This is shown as Reference 2 in the Eyewitness Bible Series website, eyewitnessbible.org. Other scholars may have different ideas.

62 AD	1 Timothy
66 AD	Titus
67 AD	2 Timothy

This is the order of the episodes of this series. As you will find, the ordering and dating of these books will affect the interpretation of the subject matter in some cases. It will definitely bring to light some ideas that you might not have considered.

What happened in the two-decade period during which Paul wrote his letters?

- Christianity moved from being a Jewish sect to being available to the entire world
- Evangelism efforts moved almost entirely to non-Jews
- Evangelism efforts were emphasized in Macedonia, Greece, and Italy instead of Israel and Asia (Turkey)
- Paul's theology matured
- Church leaders had to learn to deal with the many problems of growing churches, and the churches had to establish leadership structures
- False teachers within the churches became a growing problem
- The source of Christian persecution switched from Jewish leaders to local leaders of the Roman government.
- Many government policies changed dramatically as it went through two lengthy emperors: Claudius (41-54 AD) and Nero (54-68 AD).

Paul's letters deal with these sorts of things. If you follow them in chronological order, you will detect patterns you may not have noticed before. Let's start by looking at Paul's message in a different perspective than you may be accustomed to seeing.

What organization has had the most successful marketing slogan of all time? Coca-Cola? Apple? The US Government? The Russian Government? The possibilities are endless, though upon reflection, you could very easily conclude that the answer is Christianity. By calling their message "Good News," Christians have influenced untold billions of people to listen to them for more than two thousand years.

Did the people of Paul's time accept his messages as good news? It depends on which people. At first, the only people who heard the message were Jews, who were tired of living under the rule of the Romans and wanted a leader who would free them from Roman Rule. Few of the Jews were expecting or wanting a spiritual leader. The Jewish leaders and a majority of Jewish people were very resistant to change their religious views or ways of life. Most did not consider Paul's messages to be good news.

As time went by, Paul preached to other people groups within the Roman Empire. The Empire had been experiencing a half-century of peace and prosperity. Most people were not anxious to change their ways of life or thinking. Most did not consider Paul's messages to be good news.

With that information, you could rightly conclude that Paul and his companions would be persecuted, and that the church would grow slowly for a long time.

It is a testament to Paul's brilliance and the power of the Holy Spirit that Christianity survived, much less thrived. History tells us that the eventual success of Christianity had a lot to do with the influence of Paul's letters.