



Timothy's Ministry Assignments

By Michael W. Olewski

BY THE TIME we encounter Timothy in this first epistle bearing his name, the apostle Paul had completed his three missionary journeys and Timothy was already a trusted and valued co-worker. The Greek New Testament mentions Timothy 24 times; 2 books bear his name, making Timothy one of the most-recognized persons in Scripture. Since Timothy was so closely associated with Paul and his ministry, we will consider Timothy's ministry assignments both during and after the Pauline missionary journeys.

✓ During the Second Missionary Journey

Establishing a Relationship—We first read of Timothy during Paul's second missionary journey when Paul and Silas arrived in Lystra. Luke records: "Then he [Paul]

went on to Derbe and Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a believing Jewish woman, but his father was a Greek" (Acts 16:1).¹ Timothy may have become a Christ follower when Paul visited Lystra on his first missionary journey (14:6-23). When he later wrote to Timothy, Paul referred to him as "my true son in the faith" and "my dearly loved son," which may indicate Paul actually led Timothy to faith in Christ (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2). Paul did not use such endearing terms when referring to his other co-workers, other than Titus, whom he may have also led to Christ (Titus 1:4; 2 Cor. 8:23).

Paul determined he wanted Timothy to join him on this mission. He probably chose him because "brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium" held Timothy in high regard (Acts 16:2, NKJV) and because of the prophecies made concerning him (1 Tim. 1:18).

Near the modern Turkish village of Khatyn Serai is the tell of Lystra, which many believe to have been Timothy's hometown.

Before they continued the mission, Paul circumcised Timothy. Although his mother was a Jew, Timothy's father was a Gentile—which meant Timothy would not have been circumcised. Paul knew the Jews would have rejected the uncircumcised Timothy. Consequently, Timothy would not have been able to work in the synagogues nor stay in Jewish homes.²

The Scriptures do not mention Timothy again until Paul was about to depart from Berea. Paul, Timothy, and Silas had continued this second missionary journey and eventually crossed from Asia Minor into Europe (Macedonia). Paul and Silas were jailed in Philippi. After being freed from prison, Paul fled to nearby Thessalonica and from there went to Berea. Paul went from Berea to Athens; Timothy and Silas, however, remained in Berea. After arriving in Athens, Paul sent word for his two coworkers to join him as quickly as possible (Acts 17:14-15).

Assignment in Thessalonica—After Timothy joined Paul in Athens, the apostle sent Timothy back to Thessalonica because of Paul's concern for the church (1 Thess. 3:1-2). Unconverted Jews in the synagogue had stirred up the local populace against both Paul and the church he had founded (Acts 17:5-10). Paul sent Timothy to encourage the Thessalonian Christians and then asked him to report back to him information about the condition of the church.

Writing to Thessalonian believers, Paul referred to Timothy as "our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ" (1 Thess. 3:2). Sending Timothy unaccompanied to work with this church that had encountered much turmoil and opposition was evidence of Paul's confidence in the young preacher.

Assignment in Corinth—From Athens Paul traveled to Corinth. Timothy rejoined him there and delivered the good report concerning the Thessalonian church (vv. 6-8). Because of Timothy's report, Paul was able to commend the church for having stood strong in the face of this opposition (1:6-10). Paul, Silas, and Timothy spent 18 months in Corinth, preaching and teaching about Jesus (Acts 18:11). The missionaries left Corinth and traveled to Ephesus, Jerusalem, and eventually to Antioch of Syria, thus ending the second missionary journey.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (11/15/19)



Left: Roman Era glass unearthed in the vicinity of Corinth. Paul and Timothy spent 18 months ministering to the people of the city.

city of Berea in Macedonia. This is the city to which Paul escaped after the Jews of Thessalonica rioted (Acts 17). Timothy and Silas remained in Berea; Paul left, continuing to Athens.

Above: Overlooking the New Testament

✓ During the Third Missionary Journey

After spending "some time in Antioch" (v. 23, NIV), Paul and his companions began the third missionary journey and settled in Ephesus for about two years (19:10). Staying this long indicates how important the Ephesian church was to Paul. Years later Paul evidently sent Timothy to Ephesus, where he served as pastor (1 Tim. 1:3). While there, Timothy would receive the two epistles bearing his name.

Returning to Corinth—While on the third missionary journey, Paul received word of problems in Corinth and sent Timothy to "remind" them about his "ways in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 4:17). Paul's letters to the Corinthian church give evidence of the severity of the problems that had developed after he left the city. In simple terms, Paul dispatched Timothy to a church where sin had become prominent and where the membership was even challenging Paul's authority. By sending Timothy to deal with this situation, Paul had once again demonstrated his confidence in the younger man's ability to serve as his representative.

The result of Timothy's ministry to the Corinthians is the subject of disagreement among biblical scholars. Even though the Scriptures do not state definitively that Timothy failed, some have concluded he did,³

and Paul thus had to replace him with Titus, who had success working with the Corinthian church.

Timothy rejoined Paul in Macedonia and accompanied him throughout the remainder of the third missionary journey. Acts records Paul's arrival in Jerusalem and his subsequent arrest. The Acts narrative ends with Paul being imprisoned in Rome, from where, according to tradition, he wrote the Prison Epistles (Colossians, Philippians, Philemon, and Ephesians). Since Paul mentioned Timothy in the introductions of the first three of these letters, we can deduce that he was likely with Paul during this imprisonment.

In the Letter to the Philippians, Paul listed Timothy as his co-writer, indicating that he had "no one else like-minded who will genuinely care about your interests" (Phil. 1:1; 2:20). Again this demonstrated that Paul strongly trusted Timothy and saw him as a co-worker, who approached ministry in a manner similar to Paul's.

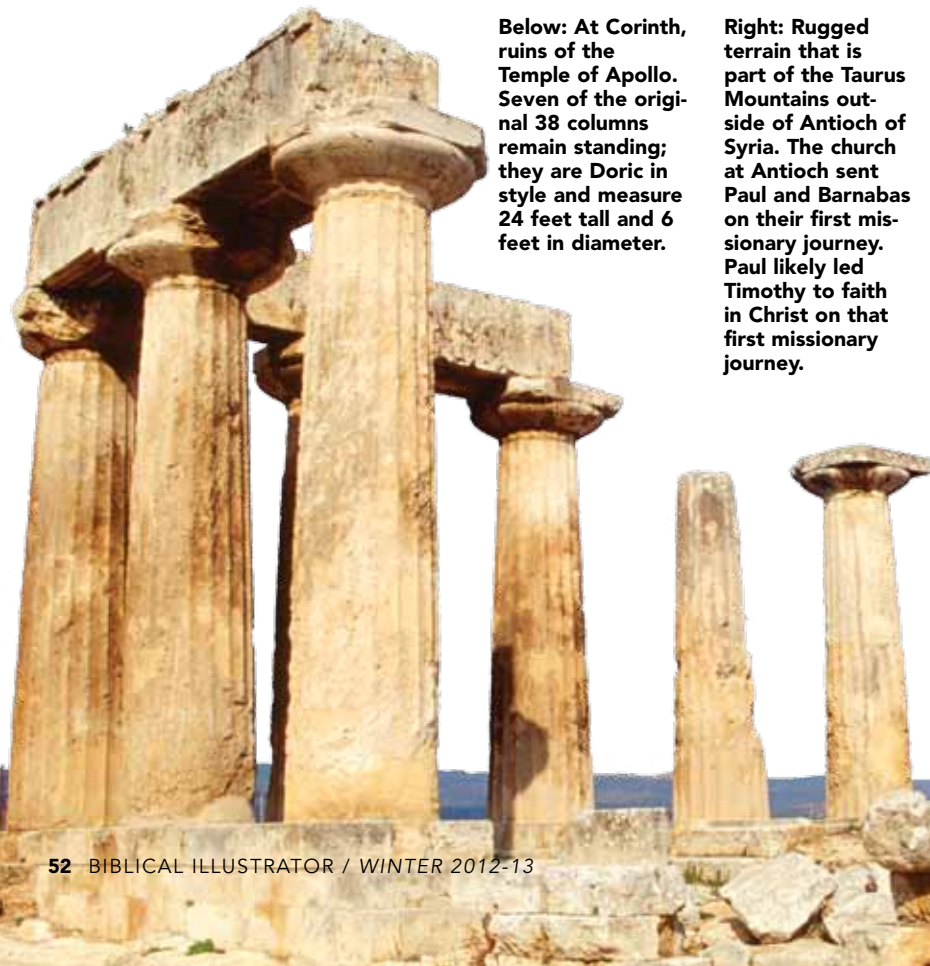
✓ After the Pauline Missions

Assignment in Ephesus—When he received the epistles bearing his name, Timothy (as mentioned above) was in Ephesus as Paul's representative to deal with problems in that church. False teachers had come in, and Timothy's task as pastor was to oppose

their false teachings and to instruct the Ephesian Christians about how they should conduct themselves.⁴ Paul wrote this letter to Timothy to give him encouragement and instructions for dealing with the church until Paul could come to Ephesus himself (1 Tim. 3:14-15).

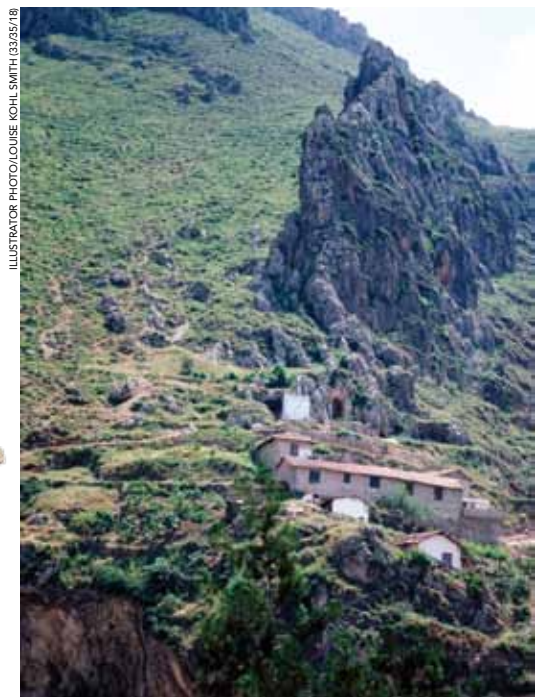
The situation was different, however, in Second Timothy. Paul evidently had been rearrested and was awaiting execution.⁵ He wrote this epistle to encourage Timothy to continue faithfully the work in spite of the difficulties and hardships he faced. Paul also asked Timothy to join him in Rome as soon as possible and to bring the elder apostle his coat (2 Tim. 4:9,13). If Timothy did take Paul his coat, as requested, then Rome was the final destination to which Timothy went at Paul's request. Timothy's final ministry assignment was personal in nature and for the benefit of the now-aged apostle himself.

The only other mention of Timothy in Scripture is in Hebrews 13:23, where Timothy had been released from prison. The passage does not give any detail concerning the situation. We can only hypothesize that Timothy may have been imprisoned in Rome when he took Paul his coat, but we cannot know for sure. Post-biblical tradition holds that Timothy died a martyr's death in Ephesus.



Below: At Corinth, ruins of the Temple of Apollo. Seven of the original 38 columns remain standing; they are Doric in style and measure 24 feet tall and 6 feet in diameter.

Right: Rugged terrain that is part of the Taurus Mountains outside of Antioch of Syria. The church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Paul likely led Timothy to faith in Christ on that first missionary journey.



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Right: At Ephesus, which is located in western modern Turkey, ruins of hillside houses. The individual homes typically had two or more floors and sometimes separate units—similar to modern condominiums. While Timothy was in Ephesus, Paul sent him two epistles. In the first century, Ephesus was a major port city.

Below: Ruins of the Roman forum at Thessalonica. Two-story stoas surrounded the site; shops were located on the lower level.



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✓ Reflection

After examining the biblical record, some observations about Timothy are in order.

1. Having a Jewish mother, Timothy had a strong religious heritage. He possibly became a believer during Paul's first missionary journey.

2. Paul recognized Timothy's potential for ministry and enlisted him to join the mission.
3. Paul mentored Timothy and considered him his son in the faith. In time, Timothy became a trusted and faithful co-worker.
4. Even though some scholars interpret Paul's writings as an indication that Timothy was a weak and timid minister, the stronger interpretation is that Paul's words were merely an encouragement to the younger man whom he had trusted to work in difficult situations. **B**

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

2. Paul taught elsewhere (see Gal. 3:1-26) that Christ's followers had been freed from the requirements of the Law. In spite of that, he chose to circumcise Timothy. For a more detailed discussion of why Paul circumcised Timothy, see John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 342-44.

3. Because Timothy returned to Paul without the problems in Corinth being resolved and was replaced by Titus and based upon the wording of statements made to Timothy in the pastoral letters, some writers have concluded Paul was concerned about Timothy's character and ability. These scholars see Timothy as having been weak and timid and in need of encouragement. See George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 8. This view is not universal: other scholars view Paul's statements merely as encouragement for Timothy, who was sent to deal with a difficult situation. See William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), lviii.

4. The heresy that Timothy encountered is considered Judaistic influence with a nascent gnostic element. For a more thorough discussion of the problems in Ephesus, see Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr., 1, 2 *Timothy, Titus*, vol. 34 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 27-45.

5. Acts ends with Paul imprisoned in Rome awaiting trial. Some scholars have concluded that Paul was freed from his first imprisonment and not only continued his mission activities, but wrote First Timothy and Titus during this period of freedom. He was later rearrested and, while apparently awaiting execution, wrote Second Timothy. For a discussion of the two-imprisonment theory, see Lea and Griffin, 1, 2 *Timothy, Titus*, 32-35.

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