



# Paul's Collection for the Jerusalem Church

BY TIMOTHY PAUL JONES



**W**HEN YOU THINK ABOUT the ministry of the Apostle Paul, what comes to mind? Paul, previously known as Saul, the persecutor of the church? Perhaps. Paul, the great missionary to the Gentiles? Definitely. Paul, the passionate fundraiser? Probably not—but, believe it or not, fund-raising *was* part of his ministry.

Even though his ministry of collecting funds doesn't garner as much attention as his other ministries, Paul was quite the writer of fund-raising letters. Twice in his Letters to the Corinthians, Paul made specific, passionate appeals for a collection of funds (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-9:15). This collection was so important to him that he even alluded to it in letters to Galatia and to Rome (Rom. 15:22-29; Gal. 2:9-10).

Paul was not collecting money for himself, though. He was gathering funds for "the poor among the saints in Jerusalem" (Rom. 15:26, HCSB). If Paul was "an apostle to the Gentiles"

(11:13, HCSB), why was he so passionate about this collection for the poor in Jerusalem? To better understand Paul's passion for this offering, let us look at the background, the procedures, and the projected results of Paul's collection for the Jerusalem church.

## Background of the Collection

Paul's passion to help the Jerusalem poor began, it seems, with a request from the pillars of the Jerusalem church: "When James, Cephas [Peter], and John, recognized as pillars, acknowledged the grace that had been given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to me and Barnabas, . . . They asked only that we would remember the poor, which I made every effort to do" (Gal. 2:9-10, HCSB).

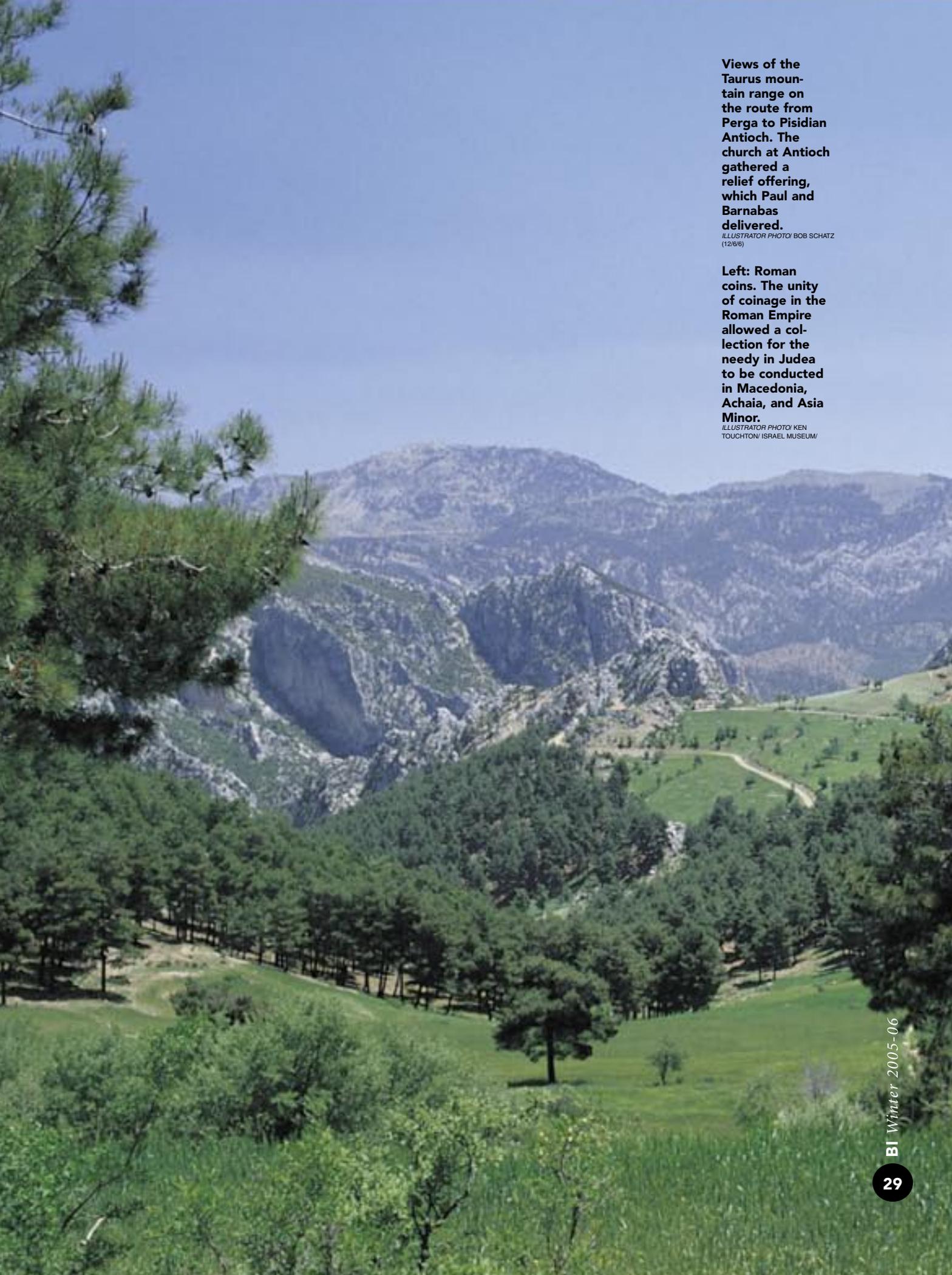
Why were the poor in Jerusalem to be remembered in a special way? A passage from the Book of Acts provides a hint:<sup>1</sup> "In those days some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus,

stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world. This took place during the time of Claudius. So each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers who lived in Judea. This they did, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:27-30, HCSB; see also 12:25).

The Roman historian Suetonius referred to frequent famines that afflicted the empire between A.D. 45 and 48. The effects of these famines became especially severe in Judea. The Jewish writer Josephus testified that the queen-mother of the kingdom of Adiabene sent a shipment of grain and figs to Judea to relieve the poor; her son sent money to the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> If the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem were the

## LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: Romans 15:14-33



**Views of the Taurus mountain range on the route from Perga to Pisidian Antioch. The church at Antioch gathered a relief offering, which Paul and Barnabas delivered.**

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**Left: Roman coins. The unity of coinage in the Roman Empire allowed a collection for the needy in Judea to be conducted in Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia Minor.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KEN TOUCHTON/ ISRAEL MUSEUM/



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ/KONYA ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (12/10/1)

**Above: From Iconium, which was in Galatia, column capital with the face of man. Paul urged the Galatian**

**believers to “remember the poor” (2:10) and to share their material goods with others (6:6-10).**

administrators of these gifts, possibly Jews who had embraced Jesus as their Messiah would not have received any share in the bounty. So perhaps the poverty of the Jerusalem church was due partly to famine and partly to some sort of passive persecution.

Even after Paul and Barnabas parted ways (15:36-41), Paul continued to pursue this task of providing for the poor in Jerusalem. As he planted churches in the Macedonian, Achaian, and Galatian provinces, Paul also collected funds for the Jerusalem church (Rom. 15:25-26; 1 Cor. 16:1).

When Paul related his reasons for the collection to the Roman church, he was headed to Jerusalem to deliver the funds (Rom. 15:25-28). He stopped in the region of Greece, apparently spending the winter months in the city of Corinth (Acts 20:1-3). From the home of his friend Gaius in Corinth, the Apostle Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans (Rom. 16:23; see also 1 Cor. 1:14), probably in late A.D. 56 or early 57.<sup>3</sup>

### Procedures for the Collection

The offering Paul requested was not compulsory. “Each person should do as he has decided in his heart,” Paul had commented to the Corinthians, “not out of regret or out of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7, HCSB). Thus Paul could inform the Romans—not once but twice!—that the Christians in Achaia

## A SUGGESTED CHRONOLOGY OF PAUL’S MINISTRY

<b>32</b>	<b>Conversion</b>
<b>35</b>	<b>First Jerusalem Visit After Conversion</b>
<b>35–43</b>	<b>Silent Years</b>
<b>43–44</b>	<b>Ministry with Barnabas in Antioch</b>
<b>44</b>	<b>Death of Herod Agrippa I</b>
<b>45/46</b>	<b>Famine Visit</b>
<b>45/46–47/48</b>	<b>First Missionary Journey</b>
<b>48</b>	<b>Return to Antioch</b>
<b>48</b>	<b>Jerusalem Conference</b>
<b>48–52</b>	<b>Second Mission</b>
	<i>Antioch to Troas</i>
	<i>Macedonia and Athens</i>
	<i>Corinth</i>
<b>52</b>	<b>Return to Antioch via Caesarea and Jerusalem</b>
<b>52/53–57</b>	<b>Third Mission Period</b>
	<i>Ministry in Ephesus</i>
	<i>Administering the Collection</i>
<b>57</b>	<b>Arrival in Jerusalem and Arrest</b>
<b>57–59</b>	<b>Caesarean Imprisonment</b>
<b>59–60</b>	<b>Voyage to Rome</b>
<b>60</b>	<b>Arrival in Rome</b>
<b>60–62</b>	<b>House Arrest in Rome</b>

Adapted from John H. Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 80.

and Macedonia were “pleased” to share in this collection (Rom. 15:26-27). The Macedonians begged “insistently for the privilege of sharing in the ministry” (2 Cor. 8:4, HCSB). Individuals set aside their gifts week by week, so no offering would need to be conducted when Paul arrived (1 Cor. 16:1-4).

A curious clause appears in Romans 15, in the midst of Paul’s description of his plans for the future: “So, when I have brought this to completion and *when I have sealed unto them this fruit*, I will go by means of you to Spain”<sup>4</sup> (v. 28, italics added). The imagery of “sealing the fruit” came from the world of commerce and referred to the wax seal that merchants placed on commercial documents, guaranteeing the correct contents of the merchandise.<sup>5</sup> Paul was implying he would personally inspect and oversee the delivery of the offering. (Hence, the HCSB renders the sentence, “When I have finished this and safely delivered the funds to them, I will go by way of you to Spain.”) He was even willing to allow churches to send their own representatives to assist in transporting the funds to Jerusalem

(1 Cor. 16:3-4; 2 Cor. 8:16-21). According to Acts 20:4, seven representatives from at least three churches accompanied Paul when he delivered the collection to the Jerusalem church.

### Projected Results of the Collection

What did Paul wish to accomplish through this collection? Certainly, he wanted to relieve the suffering of the church in Jerusalem. Yet it seems that he had a greater goal than mere relief. Even though the death of Jesus “tore down the dividing wall of hostility” between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14), many believers in Jerusalem still viewed Gentile believers with suspicion, and *vice-versa*. In this context, the Apostle Paul saw his collection as a prime opportunity for Gentile believers to express their appreciation for their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Gentile believers were, according to Paul, “indebted” to the believers in Jerusalem, “for if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual benefits, then they are obligated to minister to Jews in material needs” (Rom. 15:27, HCSB). What Paul was saying, if I



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**Above: The tell of Derbe in Galatia (modern Davri, Turkey). Paul visited Derbe on his second missionary journey. Paul's appeal to Galatian churches likely included the believers at Derbe.**

**to Thessalonica (Acts 17). Romans 15:26 says that believers in Macedonia "were pleased to make a contribution to the poor among the saints in Jerusalem" (HCSB).**

**Right: Ancient Byzantine church on the site of Amphipolis, one of the Macedonian cities Paul and Silas passed through on their way**

**Below: Christian symbols from probably the Byzantine period at Corinth. Believers at Corinth had the first direct reference for a collection for "the saints" (16:1).**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (11/21/13)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KEINTOUCHTON (10/6/15)

may paraphrase his intent, was this: "Given that salvation is from the Jews and that Gentiles have been grafted in among them, the least the Gentile churches can do is to provide relief for Jewish believers whose lives have been wrecked by famine and persecution" (John 4:22; Rom. 11:17).

Does this pattern possess any significance for contemporary Christians? I think so. For the earliest Christians, it was much simpler to talk about unity with their fellow believers than

to demonstrate their oneness in tangible ways. Through his collection, Paul challenged the Gentiles to express their love for their Jewish brothers and sisters not only through their words but also through their actions. Only then would the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Jesus Christ become apparent to the world around them.

Do you want the world to see unity in your church? Try following Paul's pattern: Don't just talk about it; *do* something. Find a group of people that others have given up on—and plan an event to help them. Look for a child in your congregation that others have overlooked—and invest your life in that child. And the one family

in the church that, even after all these years, still gets on your nerves ... well, how about taking them out to dinner this Sunday?

Hey, I never said it would be easy. **B**

1. For more details, as well as a chronology of the events described in this article, see John Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 73–80, 306–316.

2. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 231–231; I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 204; Josephus, *Wars of the Jews, The Works of Flavius Josephus*, William Whiston, trans. (Philadelphia: The John Winston Co., n.d.), 20:51–53.

3. F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 13–14.

4. Author's translation, from *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th edition.

5. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary—New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 446.

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