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P A U L

30 REASONS

J O H N P I P E R

WHY I LOVE THE APOSTLE PAUL

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*WHY I
LOVE THE
APOSTLE PAUL*

30 REASONS

JOHN PIPER

■ ■ CROSSWAY®

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Why I Love the Apostle Paul: 30 Reasons

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Introduction

Liar, Lunatic, or Loved?

I have lived with the apostle Paul for over sixty years—admired him, envied him, feared him, pounded on him, memorized him, written poems about him, wept over his sufferings, soared with him, sunk to the brink of death with him, spent eight years preaching through his longest letter, imitated him. Ha—imitated him! In ten lives, I would not come close to his sufferings—or what he saw.

We Can Know the Real Paul of History

Can you really know a man who lived two thousand years ago? We have thirteen letters that he wrote and a short travelogue of his ministry—the book of Acts—written by his personal physician, Luke. My answer is yes, you can know him. And when you get to know him, you will either love him and believe him, or hate him as an impostor, or pity him as deceived, or, perhaps, simply be oblivious that you are dealing with a real man.

Perhaps you have heard the “liar, lunatic, or Lord” argument about whether Jesus was speaking truth when he claimed to be

the divine Lord of the universe. He said things like, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58), and, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). The argument for his truth goes like this: “Christ either deceived mankind by conscious fraud, or He was Himself deluded and self-deceived, or He was Divine. There is no getting out of this trilemma. It is inexorable.”¹ Liar. Lunatic. Or Lord.

In other words, the argument implies that if you find it difficult to call Jesus a liar or a lunatic, you are being led, therefore, to see him as Lord. In recent times, however, the argument has been complicated by the fact that some add a fourth possibility: legend. Liar. Lunatic. Lord. Or legend. In other words, maybe Jesus did not really say the things the New Testament records. Maybe that portrayal is legend.

There are good reasons against the view that the Jesus of the New Testament Gospels is a legend. I tried to give some of those reasons in my book *What Jesus Demands from the World*.² But the book in your hands is about Paul. So what’s the point? The point is that no one seriously considers that Paul is a legend. Or, to be more specific, no historical scholar I am aware of seriously thinks that we do not meet the real, historical Paul in his letters. Even the most skeptical scholars, who deny Paul’s authorship of five or six of his thirteen letters, believe the real, historical Paul is visible in the New Testament portrait.

Liar, Lunatic, or Authoritative Spokesman?

This means that the argument (liar, lunatic, or Lord) has a very important application to Paul. Paul does not claim to be anybody’s lord. In fact, he disclaims it (2 Cor. 1:24). But he does claim to be an authoritative and truthful apostle—an autho-

1. John Duncan, *Colloquia Peripatetica* (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1873), 109.

2. John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 29–36.

rized representative and spokesman—for Jesus Christ, whom he says has been raised from the dead and is reigning over the universe and will come again in glory (Gal. 1:1, 11–16; 1 Cor. 14:37–38; 15:1–9, 20–25; 1 Thess. 4:13–17).

These, of course, are crazy claims—unless they are true. So with regard to Paul we have a real trilemma. Paul was either (1) a fraud who knew his message was untrue but used religion for some ulterior reason (liar), or (2) deluded (on a par with a lunatic), or (3) an authorized and truthful spokesman for the risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Liar, Lunatic, or Loved?

During the six decades that I have believed in Jesus, I have, from time to time, tried to step back and ask myself, as honestly as I can: Why do you believe? How can you have the confidence to build your whole life around the truth of what Paul teaches? Three years ago I wrote a whole book to answer this question—*A Peculiar Glory*.³ But here’s a short answer: I cannot with any sincerity consider Paul a liar or a lunatic. I cannot see him as a deceiver or deceived. He has won my trust.

How does that happen? It usually doesn’t happen overnight. It comes from *knowing* a person. But knowing a person usually takes time. And coming to know a complex, many-faceted person may be slow and difficult. Such a person, over time, will prove to be a tangle of confusion and contradiction, or will prove to be a person of integrity and profound consistency. Paul is not confused. He is not duplicitous. He is not trying to be one of what he calls “people-pleasers” (Eph. 6:6). He does not need my approval. He doesn’t fear my rejection. He does not have his

3. John Piper, *A Peculiar Glory: How the Christian Scriptures Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

finger in the air to discern how the winds of culture are blowing. He is authentic.

I have found that the criteria for discerning that someone is not a lunatic or a liar overlap with the criteria for love. In other words, the traits that show a person to be mentally whole and morally honest are the same traits that awaken admiration and affection and appreciation. This is why I have written about my love for Paul. The pilgrimage of coming to love him and coming to credit him have been one pilgrimage.

Two Kinds of Love for Paul

Part of the reason why loving him and believing him have a common root is that my love is both an appreciation-love and an admiration-love. I deeply appreciate Paul's life-giving teaching, and I have huge admiration for the extraordinary traits of excellence in his life. His words have been my salvation, and his life has more than warranted those words. I owe my life to the gospel of Jesus—and no one has taken me deeper into the mysteries of the gospel than Paul. After the Lord Jesus himself, no one has won my appreciation and admiration more. And these are rooted in the very things that make a person trustworthy. They are a real validation.

That You Might See Paul as Admirable and Trustworthy

What follows in these chapters is not anything like a comprehensive overview of Paul's thought. It is highly personal, and even idiosyncratic. That is, it reflects my own peculiar pilgrimage and passions. If you love Paul and make your own list of reasons why you do, it could be very different from mine without being wrong. These different lists would not be a mark of Paul's inconsistencies. They may be a mark of his greatness.

My aim is not to establish the definitive list of Paul's authenticating traits. My aim is to commend Paul as a trustworthy witness. I believe that the reasons I love him, taken together, are a compelling case that he is not a liar or a lunatic. I want you to be deeply and joyfully persuaded that he is admirable and trustworthy and that what he writes is true.

Paul is not God. He is not the highest authority. Only Christ is the Himalayan touchstone. Christ never sinned! Paul shares not only my humanity, but also my *sinful* humanity. But, oh, what heights of greatness and Godwardness he attained—most of it through suffering! I love him for the Christ he shows me. I love him for the unsearchable riches of truth he opens to me. I love him for the constellation of his own personal excellencies, which are all the more compelling because of how diverse, even paradoxical, they are. The power of these beautiful paradoxes will be evident in the chapters that follow.

I welcome you to share my admiration—and my love—for the apostle Paul. And he would be very displeased if I did not pray that in this way, you would see and trust his Lord Jesus as your Savior, and Lord, and the supreme Treasure of your life.

PART 1

THE BEAUTIFUL
TRANSFORMATION

From Angry Killer to Apostle of Christ

A massive change came into Paul's life through his experience on the Damascus Road, turning him from being a killer of Christians into a lover of Christ and his people.

Paul had been a Pharisee—part of the strictest religious sect of the Jewish people (Acts 26:5). He had been schooled in his faith by Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), one of the most esteemed teachers among the Pharisees of that day (Acts 5:34). He could say in public, with no fear of contradiction: “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal. 1:14).

His pedigree for radical commitment to the strictest traditions was unsurpassed:

. . . circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the

law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Phil. 3:5–6)

When the first Christian martyr, Stephen, was stoned, Paul, as a young man, was there holding the coats of those who killed him (Acts 7:58). But before long he had moved from passive coat holder to aggressive persecutor.

The Event That Turned His World Upside Down

Three times, Luke, Paul’s physician and travel companion and chronicler, describes the event that turned Paul’s world upside down.

Breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, [Paul] went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1–2)

Paul had recognized that if this menacing Christian “Way” were true, it would shatter his world. He found the meaning of his life and his “righteousness” in meticulous Mosaic law-keeping. So much so that he called himself “blameless” in this law (Phil. 3:6). Among his contemporaries, this achievement was a great “gain” (Phil. 3:7), and he outshone them all (Gal. 1:14). If the Christian Way was true—if Christ was raised from the dead—Paul had a profound sense of the implications for his own boasting. It was over.

And when Paul decided to carry his murderous persecution north to Damascus, God stepped in and turned Paul’s world upside down. Paul came to believe that God had chosen him for this moment even before he was born (Gal. 1:15). Luke tells the story of Paul’s crisis three times in the book of Acts (in chapters 9, 22, and 26). For example:

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:3–9)

Then God sent a man named Ananias to explain to Paul what was happening. God had said to Ananias,

Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. (Acts 9:15–16)

Or, as Paul himself put it,

He who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles. (Gal. 1:15–16)

His Change Was Widely Known

The news of this conversion was stunning to the Christians in those regions because they saw the radical change that happened to Paul. Paul expresses it like this:

You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. . . . [But now those who once feared me are saying,] “He

who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” And they glorified God because of me. (Gal. 1:13, 23–24)

Paul’s public life, before and after his conversion to Christ, was known by hundreds, probably thousands. His transformation, from murderer to lover, was widely known and undeniable. He is not claiming a *private* conversion experience. He is stating a public fact. His own explanation of dramatic and public change was that he had seen Jesus Christ, who had been crucified and was raised from the dead.

Jesus, Whom He Had Persecuted, Was Alive

This encounter on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus convinced Paul that Jesus was alive. And that changed everything. Jesus’s offer of divine forgiveness was real. Paul received it and bowed to the absolute lordship of this risen Savior. Just as decisive for his life, he also received a mission. Nothing would ever be the same again. The persecutor was now the foremost spreader of what he had hated. He had received the gospel from the risen Christ.

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared . . . to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive. . . . *Last of all . . . he appeared also to me.* For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Cor. 15:3–9)

I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost [sinner], Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as

an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Tim. 1:16)

Everything that causes me to love Paul flows from this change. Either it is all owing to a great delusion or a great hoax, or it is worthy of my deepest amazement and admiration. The kind of human soul that emerges from his letters is not the soul of a deluded fanatic or a deceptive shyster. Why I believe this, is largely what this book is about.

Beyond Rational Persuasion to the Revelation of Glory

Paul was converted by a blinding encounter with the brightness of the risen Lord Jesus. But when he commends the truth of the gospel in his letters, he rarely uses this undeniable experience as the warrant for why his readers should believe. He is aware that many readers will need better assurance than they can have through historical testimony.

Twice Paul referred in his letters to seeing the risen Christ on the Damascus Road, where his life was forever changed from being a persecutor of Christians to being an ambassador of the Christian faith (see chapter 1).

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? *Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?* Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?
(1 Cor. 9:1)

[The risen Jesus] appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, *he appeared also to me.* (1 Cor. 15:6–8)

Why People Should Believe Paul’s Gospel

There is no doubt that Paul considered this encounter with the risen Christ, and the dramatic change in his life that followed it, as a strong reason for people to consider him a true spokesman for the Son of God.

I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. *For* I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Gal. 1:11–12; see also Acts 22:17–21)

Notice the nature of his argument. His gospel is not merely “man’s gospel,” *because* he did not receive it from man. He had encountered the risen Christ.

Then he builds the argument for the truth of his gospel further with another *because* clause in Galatians 1:13: “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.” In other words, “the change that you see in me now—risking my life for the One I used to hate—is inexplicable except for my encounter with Christ.”

But What about Us Nonhistorians?

But what about the nagging questions of doubt that arise in our hearts about a gospel whose verification hangs on a distant, historical human testimony? It may be that careful historians

who know how to sort through evidences and pursue long chains of reasoning can arrive at a strong probability that Paul's explanation of things is true.

But what about the ordinary person? And are we supposed to stake our lives on a strong probability? And what about the preliterate, primitive tribesman who hears a missionary tell, for the first time, the story of the gospel? Jesus bids him to take up his cross and possibly die for his faith (Luke 21:16). Is there a way he could know the truth of Paul's message with such confidence that martyrdom would not be folly?

Paul's Supernatural Defense of Truth

Here is where Paul amazes me by moving beyond his own supernatural conversion as evidence, to the intrinsic glory of the gospel itself as the ground of its truth. Listen to these profound words about how we see the truth of the gospel:

The god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from *seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has *shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God* in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:4–6)

First, Paul speaks of a failure to see "*the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.*" Then he speaks of God's remedy for that failure: God has "*shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.*" In both statements, Paul speaks of a "light." Ponder the nature of this "light." In the first statement, it shines out from the "gospel of the glory of Christ."

In the second statement, it shines out from the “knowledge of the glory of God.”

In other words, this is not a *physical* or *material* light, as from the sun or from a candle. It is a *spiritual* light. It is not seen by the eyes of the head, but by what Paul sees as the eyes of the heart (Eph. 1:18). But it is not less real than physical light. This is the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Or the “glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” It is divine light shining through the story of the gospel.

How Precious That We May Know by the Sight of Glory!

This is the kind of glory the apostle John was speaking about when he said of Jesus, “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). But most of the Pharisees did not see it when they looked at Jesus. Hence, Jesus said, “Seeing they do not see” (Matt. 13:13).

But John saw it. And Peter saw it (Matt. 16:17). Theirs was a real seeing. And the glory of Christ was real evidence. It was a real and sure ground for faith. But it was not a physical seeing, since so many saw Jesus (and heard the gospel) and did not see this “glory” or “the light of the gospel.”

I am deeply thankful that Paul was led beyond historical argumentation for the truth of the gospel. History is necessary. If there were no historical Jesus, and if there were no death for sins and resurrection from the dead, then all our faith would be in vain (1 Cor. 15:14).

But historical evidences alone do not go to the depths of our souls, where spiritual conviction rests. If we are going to live and die for Jesus, we must see his glory with the eyes of our hearts. My thankfulness to Paul at just this point is part of what I mean when I say I love him.

Steady in His Calling through Incomparable Sufferings

Paul was utterly devoted to the calling that the risen Christ had given him, even though it carried him into incomparable sufferings.

Many religious converts have a flash of temporary zeal, but after a while the flame burns out, and they return to the normalcy of ordinary life in this world. They choose comfort and security and live out their lives as nice people. Paul's reversal—from persecutor of Christians to radical, risk-taking promoter of Christianity—did not burn out. His life was astonishing in its single-minded devotion to the person and the cause he came to love—Jesus Christ and salvation by grace.

The Beauty of Single-Mindedness in a Great Cause

I love single-mindedness. I love to see an entire life devoted to one great thing. To me it is beautiful when a human soul,

instead of flitting from one interest to another, sets a course of life and stays on it till the end. Of course, this is praiseworthy only if the goal is worth a lifetime of focus. In a few places, Paul distills the passion of his life into a sentence. For example:

I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:24)

I summarize this magnificent sentence as follows: *better to lose your life than to waste it*. And for Paul, not wasting his life meant staying on one single course all the way to the end—the course of “testifying to the gospel of the grace of God.” He uses this same word *course*, translated *race*, in his farewell words at the end of his life:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the *race*, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness. (2 Tim. 4:7–8)

He made it. All the way to the end. Is this not a beautiful thing, when a man has a great, worthy, single passion in life and burns for it all the way to the end? At the end, as he came to Rome for the last time, even then, as an older man, he was planning to go to Spain because there was a specific angle to his passion for the “gospel of the grace of God.” Namely, to go where the gospel hadn’t gone:

I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation. (Rom. 15:20)

As far as we know, he didn’t make it to Spain. But I would rather see a man die abruptly, on his way to one last conquest, than to see him drift off course into the comforts of old age.

The Passion in All His Passions

Perhaps the expression of Paul's single passion that has captured my heart most deeply is the one found in Philippians 1:20. Whether Paul says that his single course is to testify to the gospel of the grace of God or that his ambition is to preach that gospel where it's never been preached—in either case, in and under and through that single life passion was the ultimate goal of living and dying *that Jesus Christ be magnified in Paul's body*. This was the life passion unifying all his strategic aims:

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored [or magnified] in my body, whether by life or by death.

Every dream, every plan, every strategy, every movement, every message—with this one all-unifying passion: “that Christ be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.”

Through Unremitting Suffering

But it is not just the singleness of his passion and the steadfastness of his focus that win my admiration and love; it is the fact that in this unwavering commitment to his God-given mission, his sufferings were unremitting and almost unbearable—and he still kept to the course. To be sure, it is noteworthy when anyone holds fast to a single glorious cause in life. But it is staggering to do this through unremitting suffering.

I choose the word *unremitting* carefully. At the time of Paul's conversion, Jesus said of him: “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). And then, when Paul describes his life of trials, they sound not only unremitting, but as if they come from every direction:

[I have served Christ] with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:23–28)

If you read that with a warmhearted sense of imagination and empathy, you can easily come to tears. Remember, he was not married. And though he had many close friends, how alone he must have felt much of the time. Picture him late at night, recovering alone from wounds, when others were cared for by a wife.

A Sane Man Knows When He Is Speaking Like a Madman

Of course, maybe your response is not one of imaginative empathy and tears, but one of suspicion. Perhaps you say, “This list of sufferings sounds like bragging.” You would be onto something. It was a kind of bragging. And you should ask (I certainly have), “Why would that be admirable?” Why wouldn’t this be evidence that he is losing his bearings and talking like a self-consumed madman?

Here’s my answer. False apostles were trying to undermine Paul’s work in Corinth, where he sent that list of sufferings. They boasted of great credentials. So Paul says—and he knows

this is very risky!—"Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking *like a madman*" (2 Cor. 11:23).

In other words, only fools brag like this. So, yes! He says it right out loud: "I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing" (2 Cor. 12:11). That's risky.

And I love him for taking the risk. Because I know from thirteen letters that this man is not a craven egotist who needs propping up through praise or pity. The difference between a sane man and a madman is that when the sane man talks like a madman, he knows it, and names it. Why does he take the risk of talking like a madman? Is it "because I do not love you? God knows I do!" (2 Cor. 11:11).

Yes. He loves them. That is the meaning of these sufferings. I too feel loved by this "madman" and his list of sorrows in the pursuit of his single passion—magnifying Christ in life and death. How can I not love him in return?

“Besides Jesus, no one has kept me from despair, or taken me deeper into the mysteries of the gospel, than the apostle Paul.”

JOHN PIPER

No one has had a greater impact on the world for eternal good than the apostle Paul—except Jesus himself. For John Piper, this impact is very personal. He does not just admire and trust Paul. He loves him. Piper gives us thirty glimpses into why his heart and mind respond this way.

Can a Christian-killer really endure 195 lashes from a heart of love? Can a mystic who thinks he was caught up into heaven be a model of lucid rationality? Can a rabid, ethnocentric Jew write the most beautiful call to reconciliation? Can a person who lives with the unceasing anguish of empathy be always rejoicing? Can a man’s description of the horrors of human sin be exceeded by his delight in human splendor? Can a man with a backbone of steel be as tender as a nursing mother?

If we know this man—if we see what Piper sees—we too will love him. Paul’s testimony is a matter of life and death. Piper invites you into his relationship with Paul in the hope that you will know life, forever.

JOHN PIPER (DTheol, University of Munich) is the founder and teacher of desiringGod.org and the chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. He served for thirty-three years as the senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and is the author of more than fifty books, including *Desiring God*, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*; and *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*.

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