

# ALL ABOUT PAUL

The words we have in the Bible were written down by lots of different people. They represent views of God and of history from all sorts of different perspectives, all brought together in one book to give us a chance to understand the multiplicity of ways that God can connect with human beings. But there's one person who wrote more of those words than anyone else—lots more—and that's Paul. We've heard some of the stories *about* Paul—he didn't write those. What he did write were lots of letters to individuals and groups of believers—churches—and several of those letters say things that are interesting enough and important enough that people later thought they should become part of the Bible.

There were other people whose voices might have seemed important to have in the Bible. Peter was one of Jesus's closest companions, and Jesus's brother James organized the believers in and around Jerusalem after Jesus left. I bet they could have told us more about what Jesus was like as a person. Jesus's friends who were women, like Mary Magdalene and Joanna, would also have had important insights about his teaching, but we have almost none of their story—and nothing at all of their own words. But lots of Paul's. I wonder why?

One thing that seems clear is that Paul was an especially dedicated and passionate person. When he did something, he did it all the way! At first, before he met Jesus, he didn't like what Jesus followers were saying about God's law. He had gone to Bible school and thought that the law, as it was given in the Bible, was the most important thing in the world. He was even ready to kill people for it! Then, as soon as he began following Jesus himself he became just as excited about telling everyone all about God's love, and how it was unmeasurably more valuable than the law.

More than Peter or James or any of the other apostles, Paul was willing to spend much of his life traveling around all over the Roman world to tell people about God. He visited Asia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and maybe even Spain. And unlike most of the other apostles, he was able to cross cultures: he could talk to Jewish people as a Pharisee who knew all about the Bible, but he also knew Greek and Roman culture and could put Jesus's teachings into language people from those areas could understand.

Paul's passion also shows in how he threw himself into danger and even into fights. He brought lots of people to Jesus, but he made lots more furious at him for his teachings. His life was threatened dozens of times, and spent years in prison. He wrote some of his famous letters from prison, calling himself a "messenger in chains" and describing how his imprisonment encouraged other people to spread the Good News.

His passion for conflict wasn't always his best trait, though. At one point he angrily confronted Peter when Peter hesitated at fully including gentiles in the life of the community, and his accusations frustrated most of the other apostles. That argument might have also contributed to the end of Paul's productive partnership with Barnabas; soon afterwards, following years of working together, they fought badly enough that each went his own way. Clearly, Paul was ready to stand firm for what he believed in.

But at the same time, he also worked to keep everyone focused on what was important: following Jesus. When he heard that members of one community were arguing about who had the right teachings, with some following Paul's ideas and others going with Peter's he exploded. "Isn't there just one Jesus?!" he wanted to know. "Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? Please, let's all be on the same team!" In his

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letters, he tried to lay out a way of following Jesus that everyone could be part of. Gentiles didn't need to worry about the law, he said. But did that mean the law wasn't important, or that Jewish people shouldn't care about being Jewish? "Absolutely not!" he wrote. "It's God's connection with the Jewish people that made it possible for Jesus to do his work."

Maybe the reason that so many of Paul's words are in the Bible is that he wrote so many good ones. Just as he travelled all over sharing the Good News, he wrote about it constantly in all sorts of different ways, to different groups of people with different problems. He thought deeply about God's plan for the world, and he shared his thoughts in a way that other people could understand. Of course, even with his ability to cross cultures Paul was a person who lived in a certain place and time, and some of his ideas can feel like they might not fit as well in our world. But overall, because of his passion and his thoughtfulness and his dedication, his words are something we can still learn from and think about today.

## Wondering Questions

I wonder what Paul looked like? How do you imagine him, based on what you know about his personality?

I wonder if you know anyone with a personality like Paul's?

I wonder what it would be like to read what James had to say about Jesus, or Mary Magdalene?