

THE
LIFE AND
THEOLOGY
OF PAUL

GUY PRENTISS WATERS

ENDORSEMENTS

“Dr. Waters has written an accessible, sound, and pastoral introduction to the life and theology of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Careful exegesis and theological discernment yield concise but rich expositions of Paul’s teaching on sin, salvation, the church, redemptive history, and the future. Each thematic treatment closes with consideration of its relevance to the church’s life today, building bridges from Paul’s proclamation of Christ and His redemptive achievement into the issues that Christians today confront. This brief study is an excellent way to get acquainted with the persecutor-turned-propagator of Christ’s gospel, whom God’s Spirit inspired to write more New Testament books than anyone else.”

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky.

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The Life and Theology of Paul

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INTRODUCTION TO PAUL

It is hard to overstate the influence of the Apostle Paul. One measure of his influence can be seen in that his letters were instrumental in the conversion of three men who would become some of the most important theologians and leaders of the Christian church.¹ In the year 386, Augustine (354–430) found himself weeping beneath a fig tree.² He was overwhelmed by a sense of the guilt and power of his sin. At that moment, he heard a child singing a song—“*tolle lege, tolle lege*” (take and read; take and read). Augustine arose and picked up a book containing the Apostle Paul’s letters. He read the first words that met his eyes: “Not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom. 13:13b–14). The effect of these words on Augustine was immediate and powerful. He comments, “For instantly even with the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of confidence now darted into my heart, all the darkness of doubting vanished away.”³ Augustine had been converted.

1 Much of the biographical material that follows has been drawn from my “Romans” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2016), 169–70.

2 Augustine relates the details of his conversion at *Confessions* 8.12, from which the following account is drawn.

3 *Confessions* 8.12, LCL translation.

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More than a thousand years later, a German monk named Martin Luther (1483–1546) struggled to find peace of conscience. Luther’s years of prayer, fasting, confession, and a pilgrimage to Rome had failed to give him spiritual rest. In 1519, while studying in the Tower of the Black Cloister, Luther came across these words from Paul: “For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Rom. 1:17). Luther realized that the righteousness he needed as a sinner was not something that he could merit by his own efforts. This righteousness was the gift of God in the gospel—received through faith, not earned by his works. Once this gospel insight penetrated Luther’s soul, he was a changed man: “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”⁴ Neither Martin Luther nor the Western church would be the same again.

In the early eighteenth century, a young Anglican priest pursued the rigors of a strict devotional life and even hazarded a perilous missionary trip to the New World. Despite all of these labors, this priest, John Wesley (1703–91), knew that he was unconverted. It was in 1738, on Aldersgate Street in London, that Wesley underwent a life-changing experience. He attended a gathering where the preface to Martin Luther’s commentary on Romans was being read. Wesley commented on what happened to him as he listened: “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”⁵ The message of Paul’s epistle to the Romans, as summarized in Luther’s preface, worked in power on Wesley’s soul.

Paul’s Influence

The influence of Paul’s letters extends well beyond these three towering figures of church history. The entire Christian church is indebted to Paul for much of what we know about the gospel. Without Paul’s letters, we would know far less about such precious biblical truths as election, calling,

4 Cited in Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, eds., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2012), 497.

5 *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. (enlarged from original mss. with notes from unpublished diaries, annotations, maps, and illustrations)*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Culley, 1909), 1:475–76.

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justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. Where would the church be without the Apostle Paul?

One cannot think of Paul without a sense of admiration and wonder at the ways in which the Lord Jesus Christ has used him in the lives of God's people. He is one of the greatest minds ever to have graced the Christian church. He is responsible for penning, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. He was a fearless preacher, bringing the gospel of Christ to "the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). He has left, in the pages of the New Testament, an example that every Christian must follow (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1).

But this is not the way that the very earliest Christians would have regarded Paul. If you were a Christian believer in Jerusalem a few years after the resurrection of Christ, you probably would have regarded Paul with suspicion and dread. When Paul stepped into the church in Jerusalem and announced that he had become a believer, the "disciples . . . were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple" (Acts 9:26).

Why was Paul so feared by the Christian church in those early days? Paul was feared because he had been a ferocious persecutor of the church. Reflecting on his life in Judaism, Paul told the Galatians that he had "once tried to destroy" the faith (Gal. 1:23), and that he had "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (Gal. 1:13). Paul wanted to exterminate the faith—and all those who embraced that faith.

Luke's account in Acts confirms Paul's testimony. Had Jesus not stopped Paul in his tracks on the road to Damascus, Paul would have followed through on his intent to bring "any belonging to the Way . . . bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:2). Paul was not content with seeing Christians arrested. He wanted them dead. "I persecuted this Way to the death" (Acts 22:4); "but when [the disciples] were put to death I cast my vote against them" (Acts 26:10). Not even women were exempt from Paul's persecution (Acts 22:4). Because of Paul, husbands and wives were forcibly separated and children were left without their mothers and fathers.

Paul never forgot this dark chapter of his life. In one of his last letters, writing to a beloved younger colleague in the ministry, Paul reflected on his past:

Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.
But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and

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the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:13–17)

In these autobiographical reflections, Paul testifies to the main themes of his letters. He exemplifies, in the first place, a deep awareness of human sin. Paul is the “foremost” of “sinners,” that is, at the front rank of a sinful humanity. Paul points to nothing in himself that would commend him to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.⁶ On the contrary, his record merits only judgment and condemnation. Second, he cites the historical reality of Christ Jesus’ having come “into the world” in order to “save sinners.” As a result, Paul received overflowing “grace” and “mercy” from Jesus. This grace not only rescued Paul from the guilt and bondage of sin, but it also established Paul as an “example” to others—the prototype and pattern of Christ’s redemptive work in human beings. Third, Paul emphasizes that the goal of Christ’s mission and its redemptive fruit in the lives of sinners is the glory of God (1 Tim. 1:17). God the Father sent Christ into the world to save the undeserving, and Christ accomplished the work of salvation in order to bring glory to the Father. Believers should, in every area of life, strive to declare and show forth the excellencies of the God who both made and redeemed them.

Paul’s Pre-Christian Life

Paul’s life was a testimony to the gospel that he preached, so knowing something about his life helps us have a fuller and richer grasp of his message. In

6 When Paul says, “I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,” he is not pointing to his ignorant unbelief as a meriting or procuring cause of divine mercy. He is likely stressing that his persecuting activity was not an instance of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (see Mark 3:22–30). To blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to render oneself “guilty of an eternal sin” which God has purposed not to forgive (Mark 3:29). In that respect, Paul had not found himself outside the appointed bounds of God’s mercy.

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the remainder of this chapter, we will look at what may be said about Paul's life before his conversion. In the next chapter, we will give special attention to Paul's call and conversion.

We have no biography of Paul, whether from his own hand or from someone else's. Paul's thirteen letters and Luke's account of the early church (Acts), however, give us a window into Paul's pre-Christian life. The details in Acts and Paul's letters provide the necessary context for coming to a fuller appreciation of the ministry and message of the Apostle, since many of these details have relevance for our understanding of Paul's Christian life and Apostolic ministry. Nine of these details have special import.

The first concerns Paul's appearance. The New Testament does not provide a physical description of Paul. It does, however, include an indirect comment from his opponents: "For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account'" (2 Cor. 10:10). Based on this caricature, Paul does not seem to have been a physically imposing person, and his rhetorical abilities were not well regarded by his opponents. An early but apocryphal second-century description of Paul describes the Apostle as "a man of little stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state in the body, with eyebrows joining and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace."⁷

We do know that Paul undertook his Apostolic ministry in physical infirmity. He appears to have suffered some illness or debilitation when he preached in Galatia (Gal. 4:13). His listing of sufferings for Christ in 2 Corinthians 11:23–29 includes lashings, beatings, and being stoned. His body would surely have borne the marks of this brutal treatment (see Gal. 6:17). No assessment of Paul's ministry, then, may attribute its success to the Apostle's outward appearance. But Paul did not regard this factor as disqualifying him from his Apostolic ministry. On the contrary, he said such "weakness" was a mark of his ministry (see 2 Cor. 10:1–12:21).

The second detail of note concerns the Apostle's name. Attentive readers of the New Testament observe that early in the narrative of Acts, Luke

⁷ Acts of Paul 3, as cited at John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003), 39.

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consistently references the Apostle as “Saul.” Beginning in Acts 13:9, Luke consistently references him as “Paul.”⁸ Why the change in name?

The change is not because “Saul” was Paul’s pre-Christian name and “Paul” was his Christian name, as is commonly thought. For a significant portion of Paul’s early Christian life, Luke refers to the Apostle as “Saul.” Luke gives us a clue concerning the shift, rather, in Acts 13:9 (“But Saul, who was also called Paul”). Paul had both a Jewish name (Saul), and a Roman name (Paul). Paul’s Jewish name reflects his descent from the tribe of Benjamin (Phil. 3:5), whose most famous son was King Saul. The name “Paul” was one of three names that he would have received under Roman naming conventions; the other two are lost to history. “Paul” was his *cognomen*, or personal name.⁹ The occasion when Paul began to use his Roman name with consistency was a crucial one. It marked the beginnings of the Apostle’s labors among largely Gentile populations. In the providence of God, Paul was a man whose names facilitated his ease of movement in both Jewish and Gentile circles.

The third detail of the life and ministry of Paul concerns his heritage. In Philippians 3:5, Paul remarks that he was “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews.” That Paul was circumcised on the eighth day according to the Mosaic law (see Gen. 17:12) tells us at least that his father was an observant Jew. That he was likely named for King Saul suggests his father’s embrace of his own heritage as an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin. That Paul describes himself as “a Hebrew of Hebrews” tells us that Paul himself embraced his Jewish upbringing and did so with enthusiasm. For all the cultural pressures either to apostasy or to syncretism, Paul consciously remained an observant Jew.

The fourth detail we learn about Paul from his letters and from Acts concerns his family. We have already seen indications that Paul’s father was observant of the Mosaic law. We may presume that the family was faithful to worship regularly at their local synagogue and to travel regularly

8 Two important exceptions are found in Paul’s autobiographical account of his conversion on the Damascus Road before the Jews in Acts 22 and before Agrippa in Acts 26. Here, Paul quotes the words of the risen Jesus as they were spoken to him on that occasion (“Saul, Saul”; see Acts 22:7; 26:14), and the words of Ananias spoken to him shortly afterwards in Damascus (“Brother Saul, receive your sight”; see Acts 22:13).

9 For more on Paul’s Roman names and on Roman names in the New Testament, see McRay, *Paul*, 25–28.

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to Jerusalem in order to worship at the annual feasts that the Mosaic law required old covenant believers to attend. However, we do not have many specific details about Paul's family members.

We do know that Paul's father was a Roman citizen, since Paul was born a Roman citizen and did not acquire his citizenship later in life. We do not know, however, under what circumstances or when Paul's father came by that citizenship. In Acts 23:16 we learn that Paul had a nephew ("the son of Paul's sister") who presumably resided in Jerusalem. Paul, then, had at least one sibling and appears to have been on cordial terms with her. Nowhere in his correspondence does Paul mention a wife or children of his own. At the time that he wrote 1 Corinthians, he was single, and that by God's calling (1 Cor. 7:6–7).¹⁰ It is possible that Paul was a widower, but his marital history remains a matter of speculation.

The fifth significant detail concerns the Apostle's citizenship. Paul, we have noted, was born a Roman citizen. He appeals to his citizenship twice in the course of his Apostolic ministry (Acts 16:37; 22:28). In both cases, Paul invoked his citizenship because Roman officials were depriving him of rights that were his by Roman law. On another occasion, Paul invoked his right as a citizen to have his legal case transferred from the governor, Agrippa, to Emperor Nero (Acts 25:11). This transfer, Luke suggests, likely saved Paul's life (Acts 25:3). In each instance, Paul used his citizenship to prolong his Apostolic preaching ministry and to extend its sphere.

Paul's place of birth is the sixth detail specified by the New Testament. Paul tells us that he was born in "Tarsus in Cilicia" (Acts 22:3). Tarsus was located not far from the Mediterranean coast in what is today southeastern Turkey. It was connected to other major cities by road, and it was an international center of learning. It was no backwater village; it was, in Paul's words, "no obscure city" (Acts 21:39). Like other major Mediterranean cities, Tarsus housed a Jewish community. First-century Jewish communities, while distinct, were not isolated from the other peoples and cultures among whom they lived. As we shall see, Paul himself gives indications of having been raised in a cosmopolitan environment.

¹⁰ That Paul was not married was not a requirement for the Apostleship, nor is it a requirement to hold office in the church. Neither does Paul view single believers as the spiritual superiors of married believers. See the whole of 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Corinthians 9:5.

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The seventh detail about the life of Paul concerns his education. Paul was a man with a reputation for learning (see Acts 26:24). By his own testimony, he was “brought up in [Jerusalem], educated at the feet of Gamaliel, according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers” (Acts 22:3). Although he was born in Tarsus, Paul received his formal education in Jerusalem, under the tutelage of the noted rabbi Gamaliel (see Acts 5:34). Paul describes himself as a “Pharisee” (Phil. 3:5). The Pharisees were an influential and respected group within Judaism who were committed to upholding both the written law of Moses and the oral law, the body of unwritten traditions that had grown up around the Mosaic law.¹¹ Identification with the Pharisees set Paul apart, for example, from the Sadducees, who accepted the authority only of the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy) and who did not believe in the resurrection from the dead (see Acts 23:6–10). Efforts to situate Paul in one of the competing Pharisaic “schools” in the first century have not proven persuasive. What we do know is that Paul embraced the Pharisaical education that he received and excelled in it. He tells the Galatians that “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). Paul, then, sat at the “top of his class” as a young student.

Paul would have received a thorough education in both the Old Testament Scripture and the legal traditions that had grown up in Judaism after and alongside that Scripture (see Gal. 1:14). Paul’s frequent citations of the Old Testament suggest that he had committed large portions, if not the entirety, of the Old Testament to memory. In Romans 15:8–13, for example, Paul cites four passages of Scripture (2 Sam. 22:50 [=Ps. 18:49]; Deut. 32:43; Ps. 117:1; Isa. 11:10). What each of these passages has in common is the word *Gentiles*. Since Paul did not have available to him a printed concordance, we are bound to conclude that he accessed these passages from memory.

The New Testament indicates that Paul was conversant in at least four languages. His use of the Old Testament in his letters suggests competence in Hebrew. His letters show that he was fluent in Greek. Luke tells us that he spoke in Aramaic, the language commonly spoken by Jews in Palestine

¹¹ The Pharisees were the immediate forebears of the rabbis who, after the temple’s destruction in AD 70, would be responsible for transforming first-century Judaism into the Judaism of the medieval and modern eras.

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(see Acts 21:40). His travels in the western part of the Roman Empire, and his plans to minister in Spain (see Rom. 15), suggest that Paul was fluent in Latin, the main language of that part of the Roman world.

The New Testament also suggests that Paul was familiar with non-Jewish literature. In Athens, he quotes before the Areopagus the poets Epimenides of Crete (sixth century BC) and Aratus of Cilicia (third century BC) (Acts 17:28; see Titus 1:12). His Areopagus address also evidences awareness of and deft interaction with Stoic and Epicurean philosophy. Paul did not shy away from the study of Greco-Roman literature and thought, and he was not afraid to employ it in service of the gospel.

The eighth fact about Paul revealed in the New Testament is his occupation. Paul was a tentmaker by trade (Acts 18:3), and he likely learned this trade from his father. That a man with extensive formal education should have engaged in manual labor may surprise modern readers, even as it would have scandalized many Greeks and Romans in the ancient world. It was customary, however, for learned Pharisees to earn a living, and many Pharisees worked with their hands.

Tentmakers built and repaired tents, which were in demand among military personnel. Tent making was a portable trade and well suited for an itinerant such as Paul. For Paul, tent making afforded him financial independence from the congregations he served. This independence was important to Paul, who was concerned to distinguish himself from the often financially predatory traveling teachers in antiquity. It was Paul's boast and delight to offer the gospel "free of charge" (1 Cor. 9:18) and to tell his churches that he had "worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you" (1 Thess. 2:9).¹² Paul did so, in part, to substantiate his claims that his ministry was not motivated by greed (Acts 20:33–34) and, in part, to offer a model or example to believers of diligence in a lawful calling (2 Thess. 3:7–9).

The ninth aspect of Paul's pre-Christian life revealed in Acts and the Pauline Epistles made an indelible impact on the Apostle's self-consciousness—his persecution of the Christian church. In Paul's own accounts of his

¹² Paul insists throughout 1 Corinthians 9, however, that the minister is owed the support of those whom he serves. The Apostle opted not to exercise this right in Corinth, Thessalonica, and other places because the interests of the gospel demanded it.

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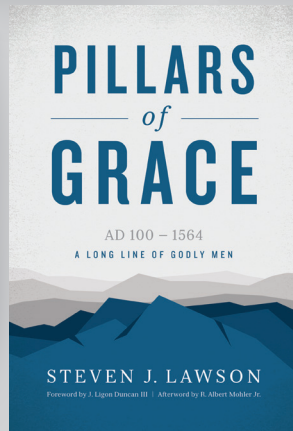
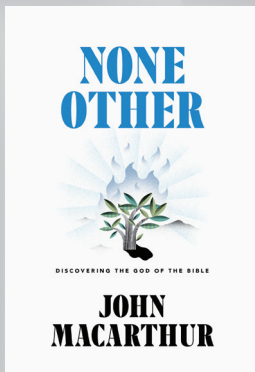
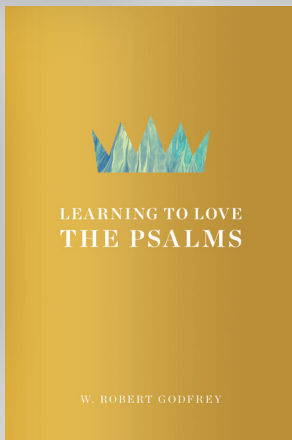
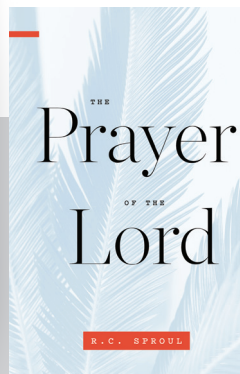
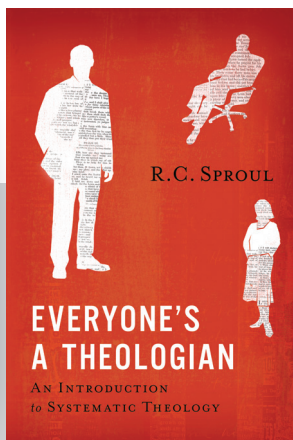
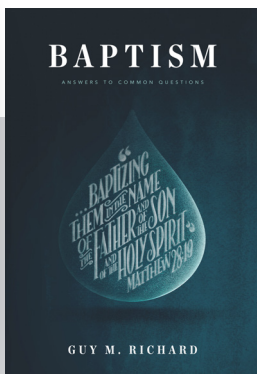
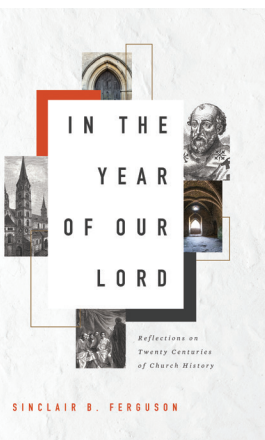
pre-Christian life in Acts (Acts 22; 26) and in his letters (Gal. 1; 1 Tim. 1), persecution dominates his autobiography. Writing to Timothy, we have seen, Paul could state of his pre-Christian life that he was “formerly . . . a blasphemer, a persecutor, and insolent opponent” (1 Tim. 1:13). That Jesus of Nazareth, who had been deemed a blasphemer by the Jewish leadership and executed for treason by the Romans, should be regarded as Israel’s Messiah and worshiped as the Son of God was too much for Saul the Pharisee to bear. Only the risen Lord Jesus Himself could bring Paul’s ferocious persecution to a swift and final conclusion.

Lessons for Today

Paul’s pre-Christian biography speaks to the church today in two important ways. First, we see that God, in His providence, was preparing Paul from the womb to be the “Apostle to the Gentiles.” God was doing so in ways that Paul could not have foreseen. Paul’s place of birth, his heritage, his education, and his vocation were all means by which God was molding and fashioning Paul to be the servant whom God had purposed him to be. All Christians should look back in gratitude to the God who makes and sustains us when we trace the paths by which God has brought us to the places we are now. Reflecting on God’s providence in this way helps us renew our trust and confidence in God to lead us into the future even when that future may seem grim and uncertain.

Second, when the saving grace of God transformed Paul’s life, it did not make him into someone other than Paul. That is, Paul did not cease to be of Jewish heritage, an educated man, a tentmaker, a citizen, and so on. Grace transformed Paul and brought him under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Whereas these aspects of Paul’s life had once been employed in rebellion against Christ, after his conversion they were employed in the service of Christ. We should think about our lives in the same way. As Christians, we have a brand-new relationship with sin and a brand-new relationship with Jesus Christ. Therefore, we should ask how we can use the details and experiences of our lives to advance the glory of the One who loved us and gave Himself for us.

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FROM ENEMY TO APOSTLE OF CHRIST

Much of what we know about theology—about justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification—comes directly from the writings of the Apostle Paul. If we removed Paul's writings from Scripture, our understanding of these truths would be greatly impoverished. Paul's inspired writings and the story of his life continue to be a precious gift to the church. Dr. Guy Prentiss Waters leads us on a doctrinally enriching and spiritually edifying journey from Paul's life, conversion, and call to key themes in his theology.

DR. GUY PRENTISS WATERS

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