

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Paul

A Biography

by

N. T. Wright

INTRODUCTION

1. What is your understanding of Paul coming into this book? What questions do you have about him that you hope will be addressed?
2. N. T. Wright poses two sets of questions in the introduction: “How did it happen? What did [Paul] have that other people didn’t? What did he think he was doing, and why was he doing it?” (p. 2) and “How did Saul the persecutor become Paul the Apostle? What sort of transition was that?” (p. 4). What strikes you

about these questions that Wright leads off with? Do they introduce a new way of thinking about Paul, or do they echo questions you already had?

PART 1: BEGINNINGS

CHAPTER 1: ZEAL

1. “And that is why some Jews, and [Paul] among the . . . followed the ancient tradition of ‘zeal’” (p. 29). What was this “ancient tradition of ‘zeal’”? How did it inform Paul’s thoughts and actions?
2. Describe one thing that you learned from this chapter about how Paul viewed the early Christian movement. Why did he respond to that movement in the way that he did?

CHAPTER 2: DAMASCUS

1. When describing Paul’s “road to Damascus” experience, Wright poses the questions, “What was going on in Saul’s mind and heart that day? What transformed the zealous persecutor into the zealous apostle?” (p. 41). Before reading this chapter, how would you have answered these questions? How would you answer them now?

2. “To explain what [Paul encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus] meant in the language of psychology would be like trying to copy a Titian with a child’s crayons. To understand the explosion that resulted, we need history, we need theology, we need a strong sense of the inner tensions of the first-century Jewish world and the zealous propagators of Jewish culture” (p. 52). Why is psychology not enough for interpreting Paul’s conversion and its influence on Christianity?
3. What do we learn about this moment in Paul’s life by placing him in his historical, theological, social, and political contexts?

CHAPTER 3: ARABIA AND TARSUS

1. In answer to the question about why Paul traveled to Arabia, Wright states, “The clunky, obvious, straightforward answer is that Paul was eager to tell people about Jesus and that Arabia was where he went on his first ‘evangelistic mission’” (p. 62). Why does Wright claim that this answer is “almost certainly wrong” (p. 62)? What evidence supports this claim?
2. Wright describes a “silent decade” in Paul’s life from roughly 36 CE to 46 CE, when he was in Tarsus (p. 68). What was Paul doing during this time? How did these years of silence shape his life and ministry?

CHAPTER 4: ANTIOCH

1. “In Antioch a wall had been breached. A crack had appeared in an age-old dam” (p. 85). To what is Wright referring here? What was at stake in this situation, and what impact did it have on Paul’s life and ministry?
2. Wright suggests that the situation in Antioch produced “a project (though they couldn’t have foreseen this at the time) that with long hindsight we might call ‘Christian theology’” (p. 91). How so?

PART 2: HERALD OF THE KING

CHAPTER 5: CYPRUS AND GALATIA

1. Writing about Paul’s motivation and success, Wright notes, “What made him tick? And why did it work?” (p. 104). Before reading this chapter, how would you have answered this question? How would you answer it now?
2. Do you think of Paul’s vision of the kingdom as “political” (p. 106)? If so, how so? If not, why not?

CHAPTER 6: ANTIOCH AND JERUSALEM

1. Wright claims that “oversimplifications . . . have all too easily crept into readings of Paul. This has been a particular problem for modern Western readers” (p. 141). Has this revealed any oversimplifications in your own reading and understanding of Paul?
2. “Four things then happened in quick succession” after “people in Jerusalem heard what Paul was doing and teaching and reacted with alarm” (p. 142). What were these four things, and why are they significant?

CHAPTER 7: INTO EUROPE

1. “Exactly in line with Jesus’s own announcement of God’s kingdom, which took normal political values and power structures and stood them on their heads, Paul and his friends were announcing and modeling in their own lives a different way of being human, a different kind of community, and all because there was a very different kind of ‘king’” (p. 186). What did this different way of being human and in community look like? How have you seen something like this in your own faith journey?
2. “‘The son of God loved me,’ Paul had written to the Galatians, ‘and gave himself for me.’ What we see as Paul makes his way around the cities of northern

Greece is what that love looks like when it translates into the personal and pastoral ministry of the suffering and celebrating apostle” (p. 191). According to Wright, how does Paul display this love during his travels in and around northern Greece?

CHAPTER 8: ATHENS

1. How does Wright’s fresh take on the historical and cultural contexts of Acts 17 (p. 194) affect how you now read and understand this key moment in Paul’s life and ministry?
2. How does Paul come across as both a “Jewish thinker” (p. 199) and a “Roman citizen” (p. 200) during his hearing before the Areopagus?

CHAPTER 9: CORINTH I

1. About the city of Corinth, Wright notes, “We watch, in a way we cannot do with any of Paul’s other churches, as a community comes to terms with what it meant to be Messiah people in a world full of challenges and questions” (p. 209). What similarities and differences do you see between the world faced by the ancient Corinthians and us today?

2. “This was a momentous event in the history of the church, and one wonders if even Paul had seen it coming” (p. 229). To what is Wright referring here? What was at stake in this event, and what impact did it have on Paul’s life and ministry?

CHAPTER 10: EPHESUS I

1. Writing about Paul’s time in Ephesus, Wright claims, “Paul must have loved those days. He was busy in the shop and busy teaching. People crowded into his lectures, brought sick people for healing, and turned to look as he went by. Jesus was Lord, and he was his apostle” (p. 247). How does Wright make sense of Paul’s “success” in Ephesus? Why didn’t this success last? Why do both matter for understanding Paul as simultaneously a person and an apostle?
2. “I think that, like a plant in harsh winter, Paul in prison was forced to put his roots down even deeper than he had yet gone into the biblical tradition, and deeper again, still within that tradition, into the meaning of Jesus and his death. The roots slowly found moisture. From the depth of that dark soil, way below previous consciousness, he drew hope and new possibilities” (p. 268). How does a moment like this help us see how Paul’s theology and ministry were profoundly shaped by his own life experiences? Why do we rarely think of Paul as influenced by these things?

CHAPTER 11: EPHESUS II

1. “Paul is using letters to teach his churches not just what to think, but how to think” (p. 274). Throughout your life, who has helped you learn how to think “as the Messiah had thought”? Have you ever thanked them?
2. “Most modern Western critics still express doubts about Paul’s authorship of one or both of these letters [Colossians and Ephesians]” (p. 285). How does Wright respond to these doubts? What do you make of his argument?

CHAPTER 12: CORINTH II

1. About Paul’s letter to the Romans, Wright claims, “The letter is not simply a summary of everything Paul had been teaching. It is designed to make vital points to the church in Rome” (p. 318). How does learning more about the context of this important letter influence how you read and understand it?
2. “[The letter to the Romans] is one of the most ecstatic and exhilarating, dense and difficult, intellectually and spiritually challenging, and rewarding writings from any period of church history and, some might argue, from anybody else’s history as well” (p. 337). What has

been your experience with Paul's most famous letter? Where have you encountered its difficulty? Where have you enjoyed its reward?

CHAPTER 13: JERUSALEM AGAIN

1. Wright refers to Paul's trip to Jerusalem as a "great collection project" (p. 339). Why does he describe it this way? What becomes of this project?
2. Paul's message was "the Jewish message reshaped around Jesus: people should turn from idols and serve the living God now made known in Jesus. That message has not changed from his early days, and it was still what a great pagan city needed to hear" (p. 346). How was this message received?

PART 3: THE SEA, THE SEA

CHAPTER 14: FROM CAESAREA TO ROME—AND BEYOND?

1. According to Wright, why does the book of Acts stop where it does (p. 391)?
2. Wright claims, "I have become more open to the possibility of [Paul's] return visit to the East after an initial hearing in Rome" (p. 397). How does he support this claim? What do you make of his argument?

CHAPTER 15: THE CHALLENGE OF PAUL

1. For Paul, Jesus was both “the starting point” and “the goal” (p. 401). What does Wright mean by both of these, and how did they influence Paul’s life and ministry?
2. “Paul’s letters wait for us just around the corner, to take our arm and whisper a word of encouragement when we face a new task, to remind us of obligations and warn us of snakes in the grass, to show us from one angle after another what it might mean to live in the newly human way, the newly Jewish way, the way of Jesus, to unveil again and again the faithful, powerful love of the creator God” (p. 420). Would you add or change anything to Wright’s description of Paul’s letters?

FINAL QUESTIONS

1. How has reading this book changed your understanding of the person, life, writings, and/or ministry of Paul?
2. How has reading this book changed your understanding of God, the gospel, and/or the nature of Christianity?