

What Was the Apostle Paul Thinking Just Before His Death?

What inspired you to write *Moments 'til Midnight*?

I once had the privilege of visiting the prison and dungeon in Rome where the apostle Paul was held in the days leading up to his execution. In that very prison, Paul wrote a letter that we refer to as 2 Timothy. It was the location where Paul spent his final days.

I still see that prison when I teach about Paul's life and impact on the world. This one man led the movement of Christianity and contributed 13 books to the Bible. Yet, at the end of the day, Paul was merely a Christ-follower, an earthly pilgrim wandering toward heaven. Yes, we study and hope to emulate his theology and methodology, his leadership and his impact. But like all of us, Paul was just trying to go home.

I've reflected on that Roman prison, on what those walls have seen. What if, sitting alone in that dark, damp dungeon, Paul had discovered the exact time his pilgrimage would come to an end? What would this faithful pilgrim have pondered during the final hours before his execution? Perhaps he would relive the events and ideas and relationships that had led him here—and were leading him home.

What ideas did Paul model and value as his life was coming to an end?

There are two ideas that marked Paul's life in a profound way. The first was the concept of grace. It was the theme he wrote about most often. It was the essence of his own transformation into a follower of Jesus.

Second, Paul's life demonstrated that "with God, all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). He wrote in Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things because of Christ who strengthens me." His journey was so amazing in part because he seemed to continually overcome all odds. I mean, let's be honest, Paul should or could have died so many times along those 10,000 miles and 30 or so years as a pilgrim wandering this world:

- There were multiple attempts and plots on his life (Acts 9:23, 29; 20:3; 21:30; 23:10, 12; 25:3).
- He was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19).
- He endured satanic attacks and pressure (1 Thess. 2:18).
- He was beaten and jailed at Philippi (Acts 16:19–24).
- He suffered name-calling and ridicule (Acts 17:16–18; 26:24).
- He was falsely accused (Acts 21:21, 28; 24:5–9).
- On five occasions he was given thirty-nine lashes by the Jews (2 Cor. 11:24).
- He was beaten with rods three times by the Romans (2 Cor. 11:25).
- He survived numerous violent storms at sea (2 Cor. 11:25, Acts 27:14–20).
- He was bitten by a poisonous snake (Acts 28:3–4).
- He was forsaken by friends and co-laborers (2 Tim. 4:10, 16).

The power of grace transformed Paul's life, and the power of God empowered him throughout his journey toward heaven.

What is most misunderstood aspect about Paul's life?

Perhaps most misunderstood aspect of Paul's life and legacy was that, like all pilgrims and temporary residents of this world, he was simply trying to wander well towards the heaven country. Yes, he was extraordinary in so many ways, and that point cannot be overstated. But there is also something extraordinarily similar about his pilgrimage and our own.

He had very real struggles, some he never overcame (2 Cor. 12:7); he had good days and bad days; he knew what it was like to be abandoned and alone. In other words, Paul was a real person who faced real challenges and went on a real journey. He was headed to another country, heaven, just as we are. Like Paul, we can embrace our pilgrimage home:

1. A pilgrim is consumed with the understanding that his/her life is all about a journey or pilgrimage.
2. A pilgrim is willing to exhaust his/her resources to journey well.
3. A pilgrim believes that one journey can change the world.
4. A pilgrim lives with the tension between the present journey and the destination.

Paul's life story, preserved in the Bible, is a tale of grace and adventure. Why do stories so powerfully impact our lives?

Because we were created for stories. Stories are like "illuminating magnets" that draw us in and teach us simultaneously. God expressed his desired will in the form of a narrative, a grand narrative. The Bible is a story that is true through and through. It is the story—theologians call it the meta-narrative—and provides meaning and definition for all other stories.

God's story is a lamp, a flashlight of sorts, that illuminates the pathways of our journey. We can wander well through this broken world because of the Word of God. Our wanderings—each step, each sunrise and sunset, each day at school or work, each meal we eat and the company we keep, all our comings and goings—create the pilgrimage that is the story of our lives.

You wrote *Moments 'til Midnight* for two audiences—students and adults. What do you hope students learn from the life of the apostle Paul?

My hope is that they will begin to see themselves as modern-

day pilgrims, that they will allow Paul's journey impact their own journeys. The truths that guided Paul's life will also guide the lives of 21st-century pilgrims.

The grace of God still transforms lives. The power of God still makes the impossible possible. The world still needs Christians who believe God can use them to accomplish what so many believe to be impossible. The world needs young sojourners who are willing to ask questions others won't even consider—pilgrims who believe their journey is meant to intersect with the Mount Everest-sized crises in our culture. The world needs young leaders who, just like Paul, dare to take Jesus' words seriously: "With God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26b).

How do you hope adults respond as they explore Paul's life pilgrimage?

First, I hope they will awaken to the grand adventure of life. That they will discover, or rediscover, that we are part of that ancient tradition of people who believed Jesus of Nazareth was infinitely more than a renegade rabbi from the backside of nowhere. I hope they see that following Jesus is the daring adventure that makes up the pilgrimage of our lives.

Second, that they would have a firm grasp on what it means to be a sojourner/pilgrim who is seeking to wander well in this broken world. I hope they will truly embrace the identity of a pilgrim on an epic journey towards the heaven country. {eoa}

Brent Crowe *is vice president of Student Leadership University, a Christian program that awakens student potential and equips young people for leadership. Brent's latest book is Moments Til Midnight: The Final Thoughts of a Wandering Pilgrim (B&H Publishing).*