

Paul in Christian Legends

Throughout the centuries, many speculative legends about Paul have been inspired by comments that he makes in 2 Corinthians.

- *Short of stature.* Second Corinthians 10:10 says that Paul had a weak bodily presence. A common tradition took this to mean that he was unusually short. Paul's very name comes from a Latin word (*paulus*) meaning "small," and this may have helped to feed traditions about his height. In any case, John Chrysostom (fourth century) called Paul "the man of three cubits," identifying him as only four feet six inches tall. Medieval artwork typically portrays Paul as the shortest man in a painting or scene.
- *Thorn in the flesh.* Second Corinthians 12:7–10 refers to an unidentified affliction from which Paul suffered as his "thorn in the flesh." What was this problem? One second-century writing says that Paul was congenitally bowlegged. Tertullian (second–third centuries) says that Paul had chronic headaches. Clement of Alexandria (second–third centuries) suggests that Paul may have had a difficult wife (although 1 Cor. 7:7 indicates that he was unmarried). John Chrysostom (fourth century) thought that the thorn was Alexander the coppersmith (see 2 Tim. 4:14) or one of Paul's other opponents. Martin Luther and John Calvin thought that Paul might be referring metaphorically to sexual temptations that he experienced as a result of his commitment to celibacy. Others have suggested a guilty conscience over persecuting the church (see 1 Cor. 15:9) or anguish over Jewish rejection of the gospel (see Rom. 9:1–3). Still others have suggested a speech impediment (to explain 2 Cor. 10:10) or poor eyesight (to explain Gal. 4:15; 6:11) or epilepsy (to explain Acts 9:3–4). A few have even proposed that Paul was possessed by a demon (taking the words "messenger of Satan" in 2 Cor. 12:7 literally).
- *Spirit journeys.* Second Corinthians 12:2–4 relates a visionary experience in which Paul (describing himself in the third person) was transported to heavenly realms. Many apocryphal tales report additional "spirit journeys" undertaken by Paul. A Greek writing from the third century tells of how he visited hell and brokered a deal for all torments to be suspended for one day each week (on Sundays); thus even the damned have Paul to thank for getting them a day off.