

What Others Are Saying about Paul Perkins and *Unexpected Journeys*:

“With exceptional subtlety and clarity, Paul Perkins unfurls a lifetime of personal hurdles that are—one by one, chapter by chapter—overcome with crystalline Christian conviction and personal humility. This memoir is endlessly inventive as Perkins takes the reader on an epic global journey that is, at once, a journey into the very heart of God. With crisp brio, Perkins allows the reader to be swept up again and again in the moment, and always animated by his sensitivity and transparency. As a writer, he has a wondrous touch.”

—Tim Goeglein

Senior adviser, Focus on the Family

“Brave and raw, Paul tells his unfolding adventure with honest self-reflection. His stellar writing style kept me turning the pages. And his discoveries about God, love, and life inspired. A great read.”

—Lara Williams

Speaker and author

LaraWilliams.org

“Paul’s voice is honest, broken, and still hopeful. His story, emotional and raw..., is a universal one that reveals the presence of a faithful and loving God through our suffering. This is a beautiful, redemptive work.”

—Kevin Palau

President, Luis Palau Association

Author, *Unlikely*

“This book is the story of a...[guy] who went halfway around the world, where he discovered God’s unmerited favor. Paul shares the tragic experiences that cauterized his heart—and the unexpected ways God broke through.”

—David Murrow

Author, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*

“Paul Perkins magically cloaks the reader in a refreshingly honest story of adventure, redemption, and the creative spirit inside all of us. *Unexpected Journeys* is a candid account of big ideas in a small world.”

—Marty Makary, MD

New York Times best-selling author, *Unaccountable*

“*Unexpected Journeys* is more than a tale of a twentysomething’s travel through Asia—it brings to life what we know to be true: that even in the deepest of valleys, God is working for our good. Paul Perkins’s writing is authentic, honest and captivating. I enthusiastically recommend this book!”

—Marc Vaillancourt

Blogger and host of *The Conversation Hub* podcast

“There are some books that, when you’re finished reading them, you put them down and go on living life. But then there are other books with such storytelling depth that when you finish reading them, you can’t help but pause and reconsider the story you’re living. *Unexpected Journeys* is this sort of book. I’m thankful for the story God gave Paul, and that Paul had the courage to pen it down.”

—Neal Samudre

Creator of EssentialHustle.com

“Paul Perkins’s spiritual memoir offers an inspiring story of self-discovery and spiritual healing, in which Christian faith prevails against despair. Some in his generation ponderously critique the faith they inherited. In contrast, Paul courageously recounts how he finally found deliverance through divine grace.”

—Mark Tooley

President, Institute on Religion and Democracy

“My White House colleague Paul Perkins has written a book filled with honesty, feeling, and hard-gained wisdom. *Unexpected Journeys* is the moving testimony of a good man. It will be a blessing to everyone who reads it.”

—John P. McConnell

Former Deputy Assistant and

Senior speechwriter to President George W. Bush

“From the halls of the White House to the back streets of Thailand, Paul Perkins takes the reader on a journey around the world. Despite the number of miles traveled and the exotic locales visited, the greater exploration takes place within. Readers will enjoy the travel adventures, but they will really be moved by the personal transformation.”

—John M. Persinger

Author, *The Saint Joseph Plot*

“Paul lays it all out, giving a totally vulnerable and heartfelt account of his trip through Southeast Asia. I know God is everywhere but I think he really reveals himself when you go out on a limb like Paul did.”

—Connor Martin

Front man, Con Bro Chill

“In this deeply personal story, Paul Perkins takes us on a physical adventure to ask the deep questions of the soul, and in doing so wrestles with issues of friendship, failure, pain, and loneliness. Ultimately, his story unveils the need for an authentic relationship with God. *Unexpected Journeys* is a must-read for anyone searching for personal truth.”

—Gary Witherall

Author, *Total Abandon*

Serving with Operation Mobilization

“An honest look at how to navigate the unexpected junk life throws you, and how faith can impact that junk in a positive way. I thoroughly enjoyed reading every page of Paul’s adventure.”

—Justin Scott

Young Life Area Director, Bend, Oregon

“I love *Unexpected Journeys*. It’s interesting, vulnerable, extremely relatable, and intensely personal. It penetrates to the heart of many of my fears and struggles both now and in the past. I’m grateful to Paul for sharing his life with us.”

—Francis Floth

Cru Missional Team Leader

University of California, Davis

UNEXPECTED JOURNEYS

PAUL PERKINS



WHITAKER
HOUSE

Publisher's Note:

In some instances, names, dates, locations, and other details have been changed to protect the identity and privacy of those appearing in this book. Some characters are composites and some events are compressed.

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UNEXPECTED JOURNEYS:

My Search for Adventure, Love, and Redemption on the Other Side of the World

paulperkins.com

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To Hilary

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I'm a private person. Perhaps that seems strange coming from the author of a memoir. But still, it's true. I've never been the sort of guy who wears his emotions on his sleeve. I even have a hard time opening up to friends, sharing my successes and failures, let alone my wounds and flaws.

I know a lot of guys feel the same way. But for me it's not so much a cultural thing. I don't think lowering my guard makes me less of a man or anything. In fact, the men I admire most are vulnerable with their past and expressive of their emotions. That's because vulnerability isn't weakness. It's strength.

Like I said, though, it doesn't come naturally for me.

I mention this because I want you to know this book wasn't easy to write. I'm not sure any book is ever easy, but this one, my first to get published, required more than I thought I could give. Every chapter pushed me beyond my comfort zone. Some stories brought me to tears.

Why, then, am I sharing it with the world? Why am I putting myself out there when I would prefer to lay low? Why am I stepping into the spotlight?

It's simple, really. I believe in the power of redemption. That where we are weakest, where we are broken, where we have been wounded, is actually where we have the greatest power. It's a paradigm shift, an upside-down perspective, yet I feel its truth in my bones. It's taken me a long time to embrace this lesson. I'm still embracing it, actually.

So that's why I wrote this book. Not because I want my stories floating out there, resting between strangers' hands and gathering dust on bookshelves. But because I believe that by sharing my stories—these strung-together words representing my deepest, most profound life experiences—I can nudge even one person closer to wholeness and joy.

Plus, I'm confident you'll have fun reading it. I certainly enjoyed living it.

PART ONE
INDONESIA



TIME OF MY LIFE

Elephants captivate me.

I don't say that because a GOP elephant sticker adorned my car's steering wheel while in college and, a year after graduating, I landed my dream job at the White House working for President George W. Bush.

Rather, I say it because ever since watching *Dumbo* as a kid, I've seen elephants sort of like humans stuck in dinosaur-like bodies. If I had one, I imagined it'd be my best friend and strongest defender—protecting me from my scariest enemies.

But I'd pretty much given up on meeting one up close; according to travel guides, most elephant camps are inhumane. Then, halfway through my journey around the world, I happened upon an elephant sanctuary in northern Thailand. And to my surprise, it checked out. The animals were well-cared for and happy.

At first I stood back and just watched as they snatched bananas from peoples' hands and crushed branches with their trunks. Then I grabbed a banana and held it in front of the

largest elephant, Hallel. He didn't take it, so I stepped directly under his gaping mouth and tossed it inside. He swallowed with a *galumph*.

Before I had a chance to step back, Hallel wrapped his trunk around my chest and squeezed tight. Fearful he might suffocate me, I looked to his trainer who smiled.

"It's okay. He hug you."

When Hallel's grip loosened, the trainer asked, "You want to ride?"

I thought he was joking, but then the giant knelt to the ground. I eagerly climbed onto his back. His skin felt rough and hard like a leather shield. Hair as thick as wire sparsely covered his body and droopy ears flapped back and forth, fanning his face and body, and keeping insects away.

As Hallel walked down a wide dirt pathway, slowly shifting his weight side to side, I grasped onto his wrinkles, afraid of falling ten feet and ruining the rest of my trip with a broken leg. When the elephant spotted a vegetation-covered bush, he bolted toward it. Just as quickly he lurched to a stop, then pulverized the thing with his trunk and stuffed a boatload of leaves into his mouth.

Soon Hallel spotted another bush and rushed toward it. "Slow down," I yelled, holding on for dear life. But he didn't seem to hear me. So I surrendered to his will—I trusted him with my life, or at least my limbs, and tried to enjoy the ride.

Once he finished snacking, Hallel ambled over to a nearby river and waded in until his body was half submerged. I wondered if cartoons I'd seen as a kid were true—surely elephants don't squirt water out of their trunks, do they? No sooner had the

thought crossed my mind than his trunk swung behind his head. Before I could move, two-and-a-half gallons of water sprayed into my face—completely soaking me.

Hallel then dropped his head, dunking me into the water and lifting me out again. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to do something I'd dreamed about doing. I scurried up Hallel's neck and carefully stepped onto his head. Balancing on the lumpy but stable platform, I stood tall and, for a few seconds, felt at one with the mighty beast. Then Hallel shook his head, catapulting me through the air and into the water.

When I popped above the surface, I laughed until my stomach hurt.

Which was nice—playing with old Hallel in the river. Because I hadn't planned it. And the longer I traveled, the more I realized my plans usually interfered with what God was doing. And he was up to something big.

What I really needed to do was hold on tight and enjoy the ride. That proved more difficult than I could've imagined.

MY JOURNEY AROUND THE WORLD BEGAN WHERE I GREW UP—IN Portland, Oregon. On a rainy spring afternoon, my parents dropped me off at the airport and, after hugging them good-bye, I trotted through the terminal carrying my brand-new grey 70-liter backpack, confident I'd just embarked on the adventure of a lifetime.

For five years I had lived in Washington, DC. And while I had a great time there, the frantic pace left me burnt out—I worked full-time by day and by night attended law school at The George Washington University. It was exciting but exhausting.

As soon as I turned in my last exam, I didn't waste any time leaving behind that hectic life. I stuffed my belongings in the backseat of my black Hyundai Elantra and began the cross-country drive back home to Oregon.

My plan was to take out another student loan and rent a sweet studio apartment in downtown Portland. I dreamed of filling it with fancy furniture and hosting parties with interesting friends while I studied for the bar exam on the side. I couldn't wait to start over and create a new life.

The plan was definitely *not* to crash at my parents' house.

I even told my friends before leaving DC that living with my parents was my worst option. Not because there's bad blood or anything. They're wonderful people. It's just that when I'm with my family, whether it's my parents or either of my older brothers, it's like I jump back into the eighth grade picture of me sitting on my parents' dresser—and believe me, that's the last place I want to go.

But while cruising through New Mexico at 70 mph, my phone buzzed in the cup-holder. It was a text from the one person in Oregon I least wanted to hear from—Adam. "Is everything ok?" he asked. I stopped at a gas station to respond.

By the time I pulled back on the freeway, I had decided to stay in Portland no longer than necessary. No studio apartment, no parties. I'd study hard, hopefully pass the bar, then move on—that's it. Because in all my dreaming, I'd overlooked an inconvenient problem: Portland wasn't a new city for me. No matter how hard I tried to make myself believe I could start fresh there, I couldn't. The city had too much history, and for the life of me, I couldn't shed that fact. And that history, my past there, felt too heavy to shoulder.

I needed to get away—far away.

So, I unloaded everything in my parents' garage and took over their guestroom for a couple months. From six in the morning until nine at night, I read and memorized and listened to lectures and took practice tests—and planned the most epic trip I could imagine.

FROM PORTLAND I FLEW TO SAN FRANCISCO. WHILE WAITING FOR MY connecting flight to Hong Kong—and from there, Bali, Indonesia—I called my girlfriend, Alissa. We'd been dating on-and-off for ten months, but recently our relationship had turned serious.

"I'll miss you," Alissa said, her voice a whisper. Never one to be overly emotional, she still didn't seem happy with my decision to travel. She expected, as did many of my friends, that I would return to DC after taking the bar exam.

"I'll miss you too," I said. "But at least we'll see each other in India."

We had dreamed up the idea of reuniting in India during my final week overseas which coincided with a trip she had planned to Kenya. We had no doubt it would be a romantic rendezvous for the history books, the sort of story we would tell our kids and grandkids after growing old and grey.

"That's right. And it's only eleven weeks away," she said, her voice straining to sound optimistic.

"We can make it. We'll write emails. Lots and lots of emails."

She sighed. "Yeah. But I like seeing you in person better."

"Me too." I paused and glanced at the growing line at the gate. "Maybe we can Skype."

“I hope so.”

The phone went quiet for a few seconds. I got up. “I better go. I think my plane’s about to board.”

“Bye, Paul. Let me know when you get there.”

“I will. Talk to you soon.” I slipped my phone into my pocket, grabbed my backpack, and stepped to the back of the line.

THE MOMENT I WALKED OFF THE PLANE, I DIDN’T NEED ANYONE TO tell me I wasn’t in Oregon. The heat felt like a straitjacket squeezing every ounce of sweat from my body. Beads of perspiration emerged on my forehead and above my lip. Everyone wore shorts, t-shirts, and flip-flops. And no one looked like me—pasty white with a charcoal fedora over shaggy dark hair.

At the curbside of the airport, I spotted my friend, Eko. Indonesian by birth, Eko spent twelve years in the United States. We met soon after I moved to DC at the Anglican church we both attended. Although he was at least fifteen years older than almost everyone else, no one treated him differently—he was too nice and unassuming not to like, the type of person you immediately felt comfortable around. At the same time, you couldn’t help feeling bad for the guy. For whatever reason he couldn’t hold a steady job, and he rarely had his own place, but instead slept on friends’ couches.

Eventually, he moved into a house I shared with some friends. It was fun having another roommate around, especially someone known to cook a mean Top Ramen with egg and teriyaki. Some mornings he woke up early just to walk with me to Union Station, keeping me company on my commute.

After a while, Eko started growing distant—at first he stopped staying at our house, then he stopped coming by altogether. It was the same pattern he always followed, but I felt rotten about it, like it had somehow been my fault.

Sometime later he returned to Indonesia and we lost touch. When I began thinking about traveling, he immediately came to mind. I had always wanted to see Indonesia, and I figured it'd be nice to reconnect. After all, I still considered him a friend.

Eko gave me with a hug. "I've missed you, buddy," he said, patting my back and speaking in a thick Javanese accent. He looked older than when I last saw him; wrinkles extended from the corners of his eyes, and his hair, jet black before, now blended grey with black.

"It's great to see you," I said. Not wanting to come across as an overeager tourist, I tried to conceal my excitement and play it cool, but I couldn't. A smile consumed my face.

"Follow me." Eko grabbed my arm, led me across a packed parking lot, and stopped in front of an old motorbike. Scrapes scarred its black plastic body and a faded license plate hung behind the seat.

"It's...nice."

Eko stared at the bike adoringly. "Uh-huh."

"So this is what we're driving around Bali," I said, more as a question than a statement. Although Eko and I were small guys, I couldn't imagine it hauling us around the island with my ginormous backpack strapped to my body. I foresaw myself tipping off the back as we chugged up a hill.

"We will have the greatest time, Paul. I am so happy." Eko hopped on the bike and started the engine, revving it a few times. He looked at me and popped a smile.

I took a deep breath, tightened my backpack straps, and saddled the bike. Gripping the metal seat rail behind me, I held on tight as Eko raced out of the parking lot and toward Kuta Beach, one of the most popular spots in Bali.

We stopped at a food stand on the edge of the beach and, with a view of the Indian Ocean, ate grilled fish and caught up. Since leaving DC, Eko had moved around Indonesia, but he recently settled in a remote village in East Java.

“You’ll love it there,” he said, his eyes gazing at the ocean. “It’s quiet and serene and still—about as unlike DC as you can find.”

“Perfect,” I said quietly.

As the sun neared the horizon, a sea of people flooded the beach to watch a rainbow of colors transform the sky into a painter’s canvas. The sunset felt like a sacred ceremony. A hushed silence descended upon the crowd as waves softly crashed nearby.

Later, while checking email at our hotel, I received a message from a high school friend, Jeremy. Calling him a friend is probably overstating it. One year we played soccer together, but we never actually hung out. He and his surfer buddies were a bit too cool for me. I emailed him several days earlier after hearing he and his wife were in Bali volunteering at an orphanage. He suggested meeting for breakfast the next day, and I said sure.

IN THE MORNING, EKO AND I WOKE UP EARLY AND HEADED ACROSS town to a restaurant called The Balcony. When we arrived, Jeremy was already seated at a table overlooking the raucous street below. He must have heard us walking toward him, because he turned and waved.

“Hey man,” Jeremy said, standing up and shaking my hand.

“Good to see you,” I said. “This is my friend, Eko. We met in DC, then for some crazy reason he decided to move back here.”

Eko and Jeremy laughed as they shook hands. “Haven’t regretted it for a minute,” Eko said with a smile.

I grinned. “It’s not so bad.”

Eko and I sat across from Jeremy, and while they got to know each other, I perused the menu. When the waiter came by, Eko and Jeremy ordered, then I asked for nasi goreng and a banana shake.

“So what are you doing out here, Perkins?” Jeremy asked after a while. “I heard you made quite a name for yourself in DC, working at the White House. Why’d you leave?”

“Dude,” Eko interrupted, “one time Paul snuck me into the White House and walked me through all the fancy rooms. I was freaking out—I’d overstayed my visa by about ten years.”

I laughed awkwardly. “I didn’t sneak you in. It was just one of those tour things for staff, and I figured Secret Service was more concerned about catching terrorists than good people like you.” I looked at Jeremy and he was chuckling.

“So did you and G’ Dub ever kick it in the Oval?” he asked.

“Not quite,” I said with a laugh. “But I did occasionally see him around.”

“That’s cool. You meet anyone else?”

“You mean, like, politicians? Yeah, of course.”

“No. I mean cool people.”

I laughed. “Well, I met tons of professional athletes and Olympians. Arnold Schwarzenegger. One time I sort of met Brad Pitt. The best, though, was Bono.”

Jeremy looked impressed. "That's awesome."

"Yeah, working there was definitely the honor of a lifetime. But someone else got elected so my job disappeared. Then once I finished law school and took the bar exam, I decided to see the world before I jumped back into the rat race."

"I hear ya, man," Jeremy said, shaking his head. "Lucy and I have been out here for half a year, and it's spectacular. The food, the surfing, the people. We love it."

"Yeah? You're helping kids, right?"

Jeremy nodded and said, "They're amazing. Every day they inspire me."

"Wow, that's great. You know, that's something I've always wanted to do."

"You should. It'll change you."

I nodded. "Maybe you're right."

"So," Jeremy said, stretching his arms above his head, "are you dating anyone?"

The thought of Alissa made me smile. "Yup. This great girl in DC."

"Doing the long distance thing?"

I sighed. "Trying."

"That's what Lucy and I did for a while."

"Really? Any words of wisdom?"

Jeremy appeared to consider the question. Then he looked at me seriously. "Do you like her?"

"Yeah." A moment later, "Of course."

"No. I mean, do you *really* like her—as in, she might be The One?"

I thought for a few seconds. “Maybe. I hope.”

Jeremy smiled. “Then go all out, man. If you think you two might one day get married, don’t hold back. You won’t regret it, and she’ll appreciate it.”

I nodded my head. “That’s good. Really good. Thanks.” I wasn’t flattering him, either. His words moved me, and right then, I determined to follow his advice. Alissa was worth it.

“So what are your plans here?” Jeremy asked.

“We’re exploring Bali for a week, then it’s on to East Java—where Eko lives. I’ve gotta get back here in four weeks to catch my flight to Thailand, but otherwise, we’ll probably take our time traveling the country.”

“Sounds perfect, man. You’ll have the time of your life. Indonesia is amazing.”

And Jeremy was right—I had the time of my life. Over the next week, Eko and I circled Bali on a motorbike. We slept on beaches, snorkeled with fish, chased dolphins, explored a remote island, and watched a magnificent sunrise and sunset every day. Then we ferried across the Bali Sea and traveled around East Java, mostly by train. From cities and beaches to volcanoes and deserts, we saw it all.

We kept a brisk pace and never planned ahead more than a day, which was exactly as I wanted it. After years of studying and working and anxiety, I needed to hang up the suits and let my hair grow out. I needed to move beyond the rigid role I’d played and enjoy life. I needed to stop avoiding risks and embrace adventure.

But I couldn’t shake the feeling I also needed to get away from Eko and head out on my own.