

Paul's Experiences Before and After Becoming a Christian

1 Timothy 1:12-17

1 Timothy 1:12-17: *"And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, ¹³ although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. ¹⁴ And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. ¹⁶ However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. ¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."*

Background Notes

1 Timothy 1:12-17 is sometimes called Paul's "delayed" section of thanksgiving. In the 1st century, letters normally included a section of thanksgiving following the salutation, and most of Paul's letters followed that pattern. Look at Philippians 1:1-3, for example: *"Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* The author, the recipients, and the greeting are included in the salutation. Then the section of thanksgiving begins in verse 3: *"I thank my God upon every remembrance of you..."* Most of Paul's epistles had a similar section of thanksgiving following the salutation.

However, sometimes no section of thanksgiving followed the greeting in Paul's letters. In these letters, the apostle wanted to move on immediately to a subject of utmost importance - to a subject that demanded immediate attention.

That was the case in this letter to Timothy. No section of thanksgiving followed the greeting, because the apostle wanted to urgently address the problem of false teaching in Ephesus. Immediately after the greeting Paul wrote, *"As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine"(v3).*

In verse 12, however, Paul wrote, *"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord."* This may have been a "delayed" section of thanksgiving, but in any case, Paul broke into thanks and praise to the Lord for his salvation, and for the privilege of being called into Christian service. We should do the same. Let's never forget to thank and praise the Lord for His grace and mercy that has been extended to us, and for the way He is leading and guiding our lives.

At first glance it might seem like this section of thanksgiving is a digression from Paul's case against the false teachers. After all, many teachers and preachers digress at times. They have even been known to go off on tangents from their main subjects! But this section is not a digression or a tangent! It was actually part of Paul's argument against the false teachers.

Remember, the particular false teachers in the context were "Judaizers" - people who had an incorrect view of the Old Testament Law. They didn't understand the purpose of the Law. They didn't realize that God did not give the Law as a way of salvation or as a way of sanctification, as they taught. The Law shows us that we are sinners, but it cannot save us. The Law is like a mirror. It shows us that we are dirty, but it cannot wash us.

"The Law commands - but gives me neither feet nor hands.
A better thing the gospel brings. It bids me fly - and gives me wings!"

So in verses 12-17 Paul demonstrated from his own experience that the Old Testament Law cannot help you or save you. If ever there was a person who had scrupulously kept the regulations of the Law, it was the Jewish Pharisee, Saul! In Romans 7:7 Paul said, *"I would not have known sin except through the law, for I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.'" In other words, from his point of view, before he met Christ he had kept all the Law - except for the sin of coveting! Now that's some record!*

But when Paul met the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, he suddenly realized that he was lost. Keeping the Law had not saved him! In fact, because he had violently rejected Jesus Christ as Messiah, Paul realized that in God's eyes he had blasphemed against God! By Paul persecuting Christians, Paul was an insolent or violent man (v13). In fact, in verse 15 he referred to himself as the "worst of sinners" - probably because he had actually killed true believers.

Paul was sincere in what he was doing - but he was sincerely mistaken! A lot of people today think that if they're religiously sincere, they'll "make it" with God. No way. Paul had sincerely kept the Law - but the Law did not save him. But through Jesus Christ Paul had come to know the grace of God and the mercy of God. The Law could never do that! Christ Jesus had come into the world to save sinners - something the Law could never do!

Now in Christ, Paul had come to experience supernatural power that had enabled him to serve the Lord effectively in the ministry to which he had been called (v12). The Law could never do that. Now in Christ, Paul had come to know what faith and love were really all about (v14). The Law could never do that!

So this "delayed" section of thanksgiving containing Paul's experiences is actually part of the overall case that Paul was making against the false teachers who emphasized the necessity of following the Law and the regulations of Judaism to obtain salvation.

Doctrinal Points

1. God's mercy takes the ignorance of man into account.

In verse 13 Paul said that he had obtained mercy because he had acted ignorantly in unbelief. Before he became a Christian, Paul really thought he was doing God's will when he persecuted believers in Jesus. Paul was convinced that Jesus was not the Messiah. In Acts 26:9 Paul said, *"Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth."* God took Paul's ignorance into account. He showed mercy to Paul, and saved him. Verse 13: *"But I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief."*

It's important to realize that *ignorance does not change God's standards as to what constitutes sin*. But God takes a person's ignorance into account when He deals with that person.

This principle is seen in Numbers 15, in the way that God dealt with people under the Law. He differentiated between *unintentional sin* and *intentional, deliberate sin*. Numbers 15:27-28: *"And if a person sins unintentionally, then he shall bring a female goat in its first year as a sin offering. So the priest shall make atonement for the person who sins unintentionally, when he sins unintentionally before the Lord, to make atonement for him; and it shall be forgiven him."* Now verses 30-31: *"But the person who does anything presumptuously, whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the Lord, and he shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the Lord, and has broken His commandment."* So even under the Old Testament Law, God took into account whether a person sinned ignorantly and unintentionally – or whether a person sinned defiantly and deliberately.

God did not change His moral standards in the way He dealt with sinners. *Ignorant sin was still sin*. However, the guilt involved depended on whether the person sinned in ignorance, or whether he knew better but sinned deliberately. When judging sin, God takes into account where a person is coming from. The amount of light and truth a person has received is a factor. Paul was shown mercy because his sin and unbelief was in the context of ignorance.

This verse certainly bears on the subject of how God deals with people who are ignorant of the sin in which they are involved. **God is a merciful God**. However, Romans 1 clearly states that **no one is ignorant of the existence of the one true God**. Even an ignorant sinner must come to God for salvation.

But God is merciful. He takes the initiative! He confronts people with their ignorance of the truth - as in the case of Paul, when he was an unbeliever. God's mercy takes the ignorance of man into account.

2. God's mercy is not separate from the sovereign plan of God.

In verse 16, Paul gave another reason why he obtained mercy. Paul was Exhibit "A" of God's grace. Even a sinner like Paul had received mercy and grace! This was part of God's sovereign plan and purpose. Paul was to become an

example, to demonstrate God's amazing patience and longsuffering. Paul would be an example and pattern for those who would become believers in the future - and that includes you and me. What an encouraging example!

If ever you meet someone who thinks he or she is "too bad a sinner" or is "too far gone" for salvation, you can share the example of Paul. As an unbeliever, Paul apparently delighted in getting Christians arrested, tortured, and even killed. In Acts 26:10-11 Paul said, *"This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities."* It appears that many Christians were martyred because of Paul.

However, in line with His sovereign plan for Paul to be an example of what He could do in salvation, God showed mercy to this Christ-hater, and He saved him. What an example of God's mercy! And what an example of God's sovereign ways! God's mercy is not separate from His sovereign plan.

Practical Application

Do you have periodic bursts of praise?

In verse 17 Paul suddenly burst forth in a doxology of praise to God! *"Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."* This outburst of praise was typical of Paul, and we see this frequently in his letters.

Are we like the apostle Paul? Do we break out in our praise to God? When we think of what God has done for us, are we exuberantly grateful for His amazing love? Do we ever burst out in spontaneous thanks and praise?

Notice the content of Paul's praise to the Lord. He praised God for His marvelous character and attributes. God is the "King Eternal" – the King of this universe *forever*. He is immortal – God cannot die. He is invisible, in contrast to His creatures and creation. He is wise, in contrast to the limited knowledge and wisdom of mankind. He is **the only God! To Him alone be glory and honor forever and ever!**

When was the last time you burst into praise like this? Periodic bursts of praise characterized Paul, and they should characterize us as well. I love to read Christian writers who occasionally break into praise in their writing! We need to do this, too!

Sometimes I burst into praise to God when I'm running. I like to sing along with praise music when I'm driving alone. It's spiritually healthy to break into bursts of praise!

Do you lift your heart to God in bursts of praise?