**Abundant grace** 2/6/24 dkm

Read: Acts 26, 1Timothy 1

Text: 1Timothy 1:12-17

Psalms: 145:8-14, 130, 15, 116:1-9, 72old

On February 24, 2022, the president of Russia sent troops into the neighbouring country of Ukraine. He is still sending missiles and dropping bombs on women and children in Ukraine. Thousands have been killed by this wicked ruler. We pray for the Lord to remove him. I heard someone pray for him to be saved- although if he claims to be a Christian he may be guilty of unforgivable sin.

In the words of a famous hymn, ‘The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives’. Paul, or Saul as he was, was a violent offender when he engaged in a pogrom against the early Christians. He entered houses and dragged men and women off to prison, and he consented to others being killed. But he did all this in ignorance and unbelief (1:13). When the risen Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, his heart was changed and he became a believer, and a servant of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul never forgot that day, and the grace of God given to him at that time. He became a new man and all because of the power of God’s grace. You may not have been as great a sinner as Paul, the chief of sinners (1:15), but you were and are a sinner, a sinner saved by grace, if you truly are saved. Breaking just one command makes you a sinner (James 2:10); besides, you were born a sinner. So do not think that you were in some way a good person who deserved to be saved.

In this letter the apostle Paul urges the young Timothy to stay on in Ephesus to counter the false teachers that had arisen in this church. He urges him to preach sound doctrine, meaning the gospel that was committed to Paul by the risen Jesus and that Paul passed on to Timothy. Maybe it was this solemn commitment given to him by Jesus that reminded Paul of the wonderful way in which the Lord saved him (1:11).

Paul goes on to give a brief but powerful testimony to the grace of our Lord. More details of his conversion can be found in the book of Acts, but in other letters he similarly testifies to being a great and undeserving sinner (1Cor 15:9,10, Eph 3:8). While recalling his conversion here in these verses, Paul is again so moved by the grace of God that he ends up praising God in a doxology. We note three topics in these verses, namely, ‘Grace given to Paul’, ‘Grace extended to the world’, and ‘Glory given by the God of grace’.

**1.Grace given to Paul**

In the book of Acts, Luke tells us about Saul attacking the church, and then being confronted by the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Saul the persecutor became Paul the preacher of the gospel. Luke also records Paul sharing his conversion experience with King Agrippa in the hope that Agrippa, a fellow Jew, might become like him, like Paul, ‘except for these chains’ (Acts 26:29). Paul never denied, or sought to justify, his sinful life as a Pharisee. He spoke about his past life to demonstrate the amazing grace of God. He told Agrippa of his conversion that this man might know the grace of God that abounds towards sinners.

In writing to Timothy, Paul is again sharing his testimony with this young convert and ‘true son in the faith’ (1:2). He is doing so by way of thanksgiving. Paul has the habit of giving thanks to God as he starts a letter. Often it is thanks for others and what God is doing in their lives, but this time it is thanks to ‘Christ Jesus our Lord’ as he remembers what God in his grace has done in his own life (1:12). Unbelievers would try to cover up a past life like Paul’s, but Paul was willing to tell of his own sinful past as he testified to the power of God’s grace in Jesus Christ our Lord.

It took, and takes, great power to change person’s heart. People change what they say when a gun is put to their head of course, but that does not mean their heart is changed- even so, to speak what is not from the heart is a lie, and as believers we will speak the truth and confess Jesus is Lord (Ps 15:2). Paul knew such power when his heart was changed by the risen Jesus. He knew the only power by which a sinful heart can be changed into a righteous heart. And knowing this power, Paul knew the strength of the Spirit of Christ who came to reside in his heart (1:12).

When the Lord touched Paul’s heart, he called him to be a minister or servant (1:12- ‘*diakonia*’). He was called to serve the Lord as a preacher to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). The Lord would enable him or give him the strength necessary for this task (1:12, 2Cor 3:6). Paul had been in this ministry since the time of his calling. It was a ministry involving suffering and persecution, but also of joy and rejoicing in the Lord. That Jesus should count him trustworthy for this most solemn, yet glorious ministry astounded Paul, even to the present.

Paul knew the sovereignty of God in all things, in calling and equipping those he saves for ministry. In worldly terms, Paul was not at all qualified for gospel ministry. What church would appoint a persecutor of Christians to their ministry team? The church in Damascus and Jerusalem was suspicious of Paul. But the Lord knew Paul, and Paul now knew the Lord, and was ‘constrained’ to preach the gospel (1Cor 9:16). [[1]](#endnote-1)He was not preaching for his own profit or glory but for the glory of God.

I could have given this sermon the title, ‘I was shown mercy’, because Paul says this twice in these verses (1:13,16). It is as if Paul was giving his autobiography the title, ‘I was shown mercy’. If you write your autobiography, what title will you use? For this sermon I have given the title, ‘Abundant grace’, which is much the same because grace is the unmerited favour of God. Grace is God’s mercy towards sinners like us.

We are all sinners, men and women born in sin and committing sin in thought, in word, and in deed. If you are a believer, know that it is by grace you have been saved. If you are not yet a believer, know that you must confess and repent of your sin, and when you do this you will know the grace of God in salvation, and in the gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus.

Paul was a sinner *par excellence*; the ‘chief of sinners’ as he says (1:15). He broke the first table of the commandments, as well as the second table. He was a blasphemer, a man who cursed Christ and his followers. Paul, or Saul, was a young man when Jesus was crucified, and when Stephen was martyred (Acts 7:58), but he hated Jesus and Christians even then. Jesus was dead as far as Paul was concerned, so these Christians who said he was risen from the dead were blasphemers and had to be exterminated. But when the risen Jesus met Paul, Paul realised he was the blasphemer; he was told he was persecuting Christ by persecuting believers. Paul admits to being insolent and violent (1:13).

‘But I obtained mercy’ writes Paul. This man had sunk to the depths of depravity, but the Lord still found him. He was an enemy of Christ and the cross, but Christ still showed him mercy. Jesus will find and save all his elect. This is the wonder and power of God’s sovereign electing grace. We speak of ‘depravity’ in the first of the five points of Calvinism, referring to the state of every human being before God. We are all born enemies of God and thus depraved in God’s sight. So, although Paul calls himself a blasphemer and the chief of sinners, do not think that you are any better. Paul’s conversion was ‘dramatic’, but so is every conversion; there are no half-converted people, no believers who have not confessed their sin and been saved by grace alone through faith alone.

Paul is not making excuses when he writes, ‘I did it ignorantly in unbelief’ (1:13). Ignorance is no excuse before the law, and no excuse in the court of God’s judgment. What Paul is saying is that he was blinded by unbelief. Violent persecutor that he was, Paul was sincere to what, as a Pharisee, he believed. Those who put Jesus on the cross were similarly ‘misguided’ in what they believed; they believed the lie, as many still do. I often ask what Hindus really believe when they bow down to idols; even educated people do this! Paul was an educated man, yet he believed that by keeping the law he would be saved. He now admits to being ignorant (1:13).

Paul was sincere and zealous in his ignorance, but sincerity and zeal never saved him, even if people praised him for his religious zeal. Paul was not acting against his conscience; he was not wilfully breaking God’s holy law (Heb 10:26). He actually believed he was serving God by persecuting Christians (John 16:2). So, while ignorance is no excuse, it is possible for God to shine the light of his amazing grace upon such a darkened and deluded heart. ‘If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation’ (2Cor 5:17). Faith and love will mark the changed life of this recipient of God’s abundant grace (1:14). Love was not a mark of Paul’s life before he received grace!

**2.Grace to the world**

In verse 15 we come to the first of four ‘faithful sayings’ in Paul’s letters to Timothy, with one more in Titus. Are these ‘sayings’ coming from the church, as some think? 2Timothy 4:11 seems to be, but this ‘saying’ in which Paul declares, ‘of whom I am chief’ could hardly be a general ‘saying’- unless we are all to say this with the apostle! The first part of the saying is of course, for all the world to declare: ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’ (1:15).

We often look to John 3:16 as a clear statement of the gospel, but this verse is similarly a clear statement of the gospel- although it does not tell just how Jesus saves us. The gospel begins with sinners, sinners who will die and go to hell. Any ‘gospel’ that denies this truth is not the true gospel. If we are not all sinners, and not all going to hell, what are we saved from? And if we do not need salvation, or if we think we can save ourselves, why do we need Christ and the cross?

The gospel truth is that we are all sinners (Rom 3:23, 6:23). And being dead in sin we cannot save ourselves. We need a saviour, which is where Jesus comes in: ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.’ Jesus is the eternally begotten Son of God (John 1:1). The incarnation was not his beginning; it was his coming into this world. God sent his only begotten Son into this world, this world of sin and death. ‘World’ does not mean ‘planet’ but the realm where sinners like you and me rule, or think we rule!

Paul qualifies the word ‘sinners’ by saying, ‘of whom I am chief’ (1:15). In light of what he has just said about himself and his past, he is referring to himself- at least in the first instance- and doing so without exaggeration. Moreover, note that he says, ‘I am chief’ or, ‘I am the worst’; he is still a sinner in need of forgiveness and renewing grace everyday (Rom 7:23-25).

In verse 16 he returns to his theme of thankfulness, thankful that he was shown mercy. Paul was, and is, a sinner saved by grace. And being the chief of sinners, and one of the first converts, he saw his conversion as a pattern or example of the power of God’s grace. A mark of God’s grace is his patience or longsuffering towards sinners (1:16). Great sinner that he was, God could have justly cut him off instead of saving him. He deserved judgment not mercy, but he was shown mercy by the gracious and patient Lord who saved him.

Paul shared his testimony that others might see and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul knew that God has his elect, ‘those who are going to believe on him for everlasting life’ (1:16). Jesus prayed for those ‘who will believe in me through their word’, the word of the apostles (John 17:20). His prayer was answered in the ministry of the apostle Paul and is being answered still today. Are you an answer to this prayer of Jesus, and of Paul?

**3.Glory given to the God of grace**

Abounding sin was met by abounding or super-abounding grace in the life of Paul (Rom 5:20). His heart and his life were completely changed when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. He was given new life, eternal life, a life of faith, hope, and love in Jesus Christ. Such a gift could never be repaid. To try repaying this gift would be a great sin in itself because Christ laid down his life for your forgiveness. What the Lord wants from you who are saved is not sacrifice but praise for his glorious grace (Heb 13:15). In this doxology we find such praise.

Paul calls for honour and glory to be given to God for ever and ever (1:17). He acknowledges the Lord as ‘King eternal’, the forever King of kings and Lord of lords. All other kings will pass away, as will the earth itself, but the kingdom of God remains forever. God is immortal or incorruptible. He is spirit, not flesh and blood, which means he is also invisible. Jesus is ‘the word became flesh’ (John 1:14), but he has returned to the glory of his throne in heaven.

There is no other being in the universe having the attributes or characteristics of our God, the true and living God- obviously so because God made the universe. That this all powerful and eternal Being should also be the God of grace, amazed the apostle Paul, amazes me, and I hope amazes you. So let us together say, ‘To him be all honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen!’

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)