

1 Timothy 1:12-17

I love a good story. Even better, if it's a true story. There's nothing thrills my heart more than hearing someone else's testimony; it doesn't have to be sensational or hyped-up in any way. Just a tribute to magnificent grace in another man's life; it warms the cockles of my heart, big time.

And that's what we have right here in 1 Timothy 1—Paul tells it like it is; he comes clean and shares the remarkable story of his conversion to Jesus Christ. It's one of those quintessential 'before and after' accounts. Fascinating stuff. It shows what grace can accomplish in a sinner's heart and life.

As they say, 'Been there, done that!' Many of us can identify with the sentiments expressed by Paul when he writes in verse 14: 'the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly.' That's fulsome praise to the ability of God to transform lives from the inside out. Astounding grace. Indeed!

Chuck Swindoll describes this section as 'undeserved mercy for an unbelieving rabbi'. And he's spot-on. It seems to me that in sharing his breathtaking testimony that Paul is celebrating the significance of God's grace—actually, there are six elements to it that he happily extols.

The source of grace is elucidated in verse 12. When it reaches us, it comes to us directly from the heart and hand of God – a God who delights in mercy, a God who holds no grudges, a God who values the individual, a God who sees the potential in very ordinary people, a God who loves to forgive. A God who does what he does because he is who he is ... therefore, when it comes to grace, it's a natural thing for him as a gracious God to dispense, and he does it fully, freely, and fairly.

Such grace touches our hearts through one person – the Lord Jesus Christ; that explains why Paul hits a high note of praise at the outset. No wonder Paul exudes gratefulness, just look at all the Lord did for him. He gave him strength to be and do what he wanted him to be

and do—a powerful reminder to the rest of us that ministry for Christ must be rooted in Christ. He trusted him – when God forgave him on the Damascus Road, he buried the hatchet and didn't leave the handle sticking out; so far as the Lord was concerned, Paul's past was firmly behind him and his future lay before him—God was more than happy to entrust him with the crown jewels of the gospel message.

He personally chose him for his service, to take the potentially life-changing truth of the glorious gospel to the far ends of the earth.

Paul didn't sign up to be an apostle, he didn't respond to a need, God specifically selected him. He was hand-picked, as it were.

We can summarise it like this: there was electing grace for God chose him to be part of his international community; there was enabling grace as he knew the strong hand of the Lord resting on his life and ministry; there was entrusting grace as God saw him as a faithful man; there was employing grace that put him into lowly, humble service. Wonderful grace that God lavishes upon us 24/7, grace upon grace.

It seems to me that Paul never quite got over the sheer impact of God's grace on his life; he knew full well he didn't deserve it, but that only fuelled his enthusiasm and passion for it. The old preacher can't explain it, but neither can he explain it away. When it came to serving Jesus, he was up for it.

We'll take a short break and, when we come back, we'll see the reason why Paul needed a transfusion of grace in verse 13.

MUSIC BREAK

Paul in his former life wasn't the nicest of guys; sure, he was a religious fanatic who was OTT, he was a paragon of piety, he was the crème-de-la-crème when it came to the Pharisees, he was a kind of control freak when it came to the Law and doing this or, more often, not doing that. That's mild, compared to his own words here in verse 13—he calls himself 'a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.'

If anyone needed the Lord, it was Rabbi Saul of Tarsus! As a great sinner, he needed great grace. What we have here is an admission of guilt, he knew what he was like before the Lord in mercy reached down and saved him. He was a bit of a rogue, a rascal, a rebel. But that's the kind of people that God's grace is designed to impact—after all, it reached me!

As a blasphemer, he was an insulter of God. He slandered the good name of the Most High. He ought to have known better, bearing in mind his pedigree and his tutelage at the feet of the renowned Gamaliel. With his arrogant attitude, he shattered the first half of the Ten Commandments on the rock of his own pride. They focus on man's relationship to God—well, he was having none of it; it was his way, or no way.

As a persecutor and a violent man, he used every means at his disposal to deal with the infant church. For him, the only good Christian was a dead one—if these folks didn't die as martyrs, he roughed them up and gave them a terribly hard time. From their perspective, he was public enemy number one! He was relentless, driven, and ferocious. He actually enjoyed inflicting pain on the helpless—it brought a wry smile to his face. Such was his brutal and sadistic behaviour.

I tell you, this guy certainly has a past—not one to be proud of, but a past, nonetheless. It's easy to understand, therefore, why Ananias and the disciples in Acts 9 were slow to accept him. In a sense, it proves the point that no man is too bad for the grace of God. 'The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.' Hey, folks, I wouldn't be here today if it were not for the Lord's amazing grace.

We catch a glimpse of the power of grace at the end of verse 13. Sure, his need for grace was great, but the power of grace was so much greater. That's the genius of abounding grace, however—in spite of his sinful past, he was shown mercy. His horrendous vileness and wretchedness was met with oodles of compassion from the open hand of God. He could sing with the hymnwriter: 'And

from my smitten heart with tears, two wonders I confess, the wonders of redeeming love, and my unworthiness.'

There's a slight difference between mercy and grace and it's worth reflecting on that for a moment—mercy differs from grace in that grace removes guilt, while mercy takes away the misery caused by sin. John MacArthur hits the nail on the head when he writes: 'Paul received the undeserved relief of misery that accompanies saving grace.'

The measure of grace that Paul received is the theme of verse 14, and it's all so intensely personal. Paul writes: 'The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.' Such grace is greater than all his sin, such grace is adequate to meet his deepest needs, such grace will prove to be more than sufficient for him in ministry. God never short-changes his people.

Allied to this superabundant grace is faith and love—in a sense they are intertwined, they are all part of the salvation package. Trust in Jesus as Saviour and you get grace, you get faith, and you get love! It's not only faith and love to start the journey, it is something that we continue to enjoy and experience; it's the kind of thing we grow deeper into. A graced life soars on faith and love—it reaches new heights.

There's Paul, many years later, and he hasn't lost the thrill of all the Lord has done for him. He shouts it from the rooftops that Jesus saves and satisfies, and he just wants to 'thank him'. For Paul, former scoundrel, now apostle of grace, how true it is, the longer he serves the Lord, the sweeter his relationship with the Lord grows.

This preacher was drenched with the blessings of God, he was soaked to the skin with the mercy and grace of God.

We'll pause there and in a moment or two we'll pick up the rest of his story in verses 15-17.

MUSIC BREAK

One of the best known evangelistic texts is found in verse 15, it's the one where Paul reminds us that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to

save sinners.’ That’s the heart and soul of the old fashioned, Christian gospel. Jesus came, he lived a perfect life, he died an atoning death, and he did it all for you and me.

Paul’s intro to this declaration is an intriguing one—he calls it a ‘trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance’. That phrase is unique to this trilogy of letters; you’ll not find it anywhere else in the New Testament scriptures. It’s used five times in the space of thirteen chapters. These statements were familiar to a lot of people in Paul’s day—they were a shorthand version of a particular doctrine or truth. One of those can’t-forget, easy to remember digests.

In the original language this quickie summary of the message is only eight words. That’s how succinct it is! See how verbose we are compared to Paul when it comes to getting the message across! Each word is chosen carefully.

‘Christ Jesus’ is the word order preferred by Paul, especially in the Pastoral Epistles. He uses it twenty-five times compared to six uses of ‘Jesus Christ’. Bound up in those two words is all that he is.

Christ is the anointed one, the messianic king, he’s the one who came to redeem us; Jesus is what he became at the incarnation, that moment when God became man. The fact that the ‘came into the world’ indicates something of his pre-existence; he was around before Day One, he always has been, there’s a touch of eternity about him.

The word ‘world’ refers to the world of men and women, boys and girls—it covers every continent on the face of the earth, it embraces all people groups. It’s where we live right now, but it’s a place that is and always has been incredibly hostile to the Son of God.

Paul spells out the reason why Jesus came into the world—it was ‘to save sinners’ ... that has to be fantastically good news. This is what Calvary is all about. Jesus saves, he delivers, he sets men gloriously free, he gives us a genuine reason for living and he gives us a bright hope for tomorrow. He saves us now, he will save us in a coming day when he takes us into his near presence eternally.

So far as biblical truth is concerned, Paul is not putting a gloss on our lost and hopeless condition; he doesn't use a spin doctor to make the grim reality a bit more palatable – we are sinners, full stop.

Sinners by birth. Sinners by nature. Sinners by practice. We were dead and defiled and doomed [Paul says as much in Ephesians 2]. I love the way Paul writes about himself at the end of the verse; he doesn't elevate himself, he doesn't push himself forward, he doesn't set himself on a pedestal, no, for he sees himself as 'the worst' of sinners. I mean, this guy was a big sinner! Actually, he saw himself as being at the bottom of the pile.

He's not being proud in his humility—he's simply stating a fact and telling it like it is. He doesn't need to embellish it. Well, my friend, if God can do it for him, and he did, then he can do it for you! Thank God, he's done it for me!

You can almost see the glint in Paul's eye when he writes like this, he's moving into overdrive and the adrenaline is rushing through his veins—he's getting really excited as he focuses on God's marvellous grace. In fact, the more Paul understood the magnitude of outrageous grace, the more conscious he became of his sinfulness. Hence his rapturous comment in the very next verse: 'but for that very reason ...' Yes, Paul, we get the message.

God makes no mistakes—when he saved Paul, he did a great job. Worst of sinners, yes, but that just gives grace a chance to do something stunningly spectacular. Nothing run of the mill here; wow, this guy was on a religious man's Skid Row, then grace took him by the scruff of the neck and cleaned him up; in a flash, he became a sparkling new man.

Paul, believe it or not, is lost for words at this point—his pen is moving faster than his brain. He doesn't understand why the Lord did what he did in his life, albeit, he has a reasonable idea as to why the Lord drew him to himself—he says it was so that he 'might display his unlimited patience [in him] as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.' That's verse 16.

God didn't save Paul just to keep him out of hell or to even take him into heaven; he didn't save him to preach the Bible all over the region or even write a few letters to a handful of churches; others could have done that! But God saved him, because he wanted him to be an example of what grace could accomplish in a man's heart. He was to be a kind of prototype. That's how Paul saw himself—a model with a sign hanging on it that read: 'This is what a life looks like when it's shaped by the grace of God ... and it could be your life.' That's why God singled him out. And when you stop and think about it, that's why he's been working in your life as well. He wants others to see his handiwork in you. So, my friend, let his incredible grace shine through, you just never know who might be watching. Look at this, did you see what Paul does in verse 17? He's on a high, he breaks out in praise and worship to the great God, it's a benediction to God's glory. You see, having said so much on the mercy and grace of God, he's bowled over with the wonder of it all. This is a stupendous doxology.

It has been said that mercy is God's ministry to the miserable. So it is! The mega question is: how should formerly miserable souls respond to God's mercy? How else, but with undiluted praise and rousing worship to the King who spans the ages.

Listen to Paul's noble exclamation: 'Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.' Every word is pregnant with meaning, this is one of the most compact doxologies you'll find anywhere. It is crammed full with theology—this guy knew his Bible, and he knew his God. That's grace.

Take the word 'eternal', for example; that means 'of the ages'. God spans the aeons of eternity; he exists outside of time even though he acts in it; God had no beginning and he will have no end. He'll always be there!

The word 'immortal' has the idea of something imperishable or incorruptible. It implies that our God will never know death, or

decay, or loss of strength. His arms never become tired, he never grows weary. See, he's always there, and he's always the same! The word 'invisible' means that God can only be known by his self-revelation. He communicates with us in the person of his Son and through his word by the Holy Spirit. We may not be able to see him, but that doesn't mean he's not there.

'The only God' is one of those basic truths of scripture—the Lord is staggeringly unique, he is standalone, he is a one-off God. There are no replicas anywhere! He is incomparable in every sense of the word.

Because that's who he is, we owe it to him to ascribe 'honour and glory for ever and ever'—he is worthy of it, he deserves it all and more.

'Amen' is how Paul rounds it off; it's an emphatic note, a note that affirms all that has just been mentioned; it simply means, 'yes, Lord', or 'let it be said'. A thunderous note to finish off a phenomenal paragraph of praise. Wow! Paul explodes with a doxology when he zooms in on grace—you take a look at your life right now, marvel at his outstretched hand of mercy, bask in his love, and allow yourself a loud 'amen' to his glory.