

Nov 21st: Why I am still a believer series:#5 The Apostle Paul: Acts 26

It has been said of the Apostle Paul that he is by far the most influential person in the whole history of the Christian Church outside of Jesus Himself. His ministry saw the church of Jesus move from being a localized and predominantly Jewish movement to being an organization that shock the mighty Roman Empire to its core. He saw his calling as the Apostle to the Gentiles, and not long after his death the number of Gentile Christians far outstripped the number of Jewish believers.

His letters make up some 13 of the 27 New Testament books and contain a major definition and exposition of the doctrines of the Faith that govern the outworking of the Christian belief system to this day. He was indeed a chosen instrument of God, not just for His generation, but for the whole world ever since.

But above everything else Paul was always a man in love with his Saviour and Lord. He wrote to the Ephesian church and said to them in Eph 3:17-19:

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

That I believe was Paul's own experience. He had experienced all the wonder of Christ's love for him and it had amazed him. Consider the way the Message paraphrase presents this prayer of Paul's:-

14-19 My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask Him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

Paul had done that. He had explored the height, length, and depth of Christ's love for him and he never stopped being in awe at what he discovered. That he, who had persecuted the Lord who had died on a cross for him by pursuing his followers to a terrible death, was loved by Jesus.

Paul wrote to the young Timothy and told him in 1 Timothy 1:12-17(CEV)

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord. He has given me the strength for my work because he knew that he could trust me. ¹³I used to say terrible and insulting things about him, and I was cruel. But he had mercy on me because I didn't know what I was doing, and I had not yet put my faith in him. ¹⁴Christ Jesus our Lord was very kind to me. He has greatly blessed my life with faith and love just like his own.

¹⁵"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." This saying is true, and it can be trusted. I was the worst sinner of all!

The incredible transformation that Jesus brought about in Paul is manifested here in what Paul declared about himself. To admit to being the worst of sinners was as unlike the pre- converted Paul as you could ever get.

For Saul, as he was known, came from a family background that encouraged him to think of himself as better than others. Raised in a Gentile city he was taught from childhood that he was a Jew with pure Jewish blood. He had a pedigree that could be traced back to Benjamin. That was one of the reasons, I'm sure, for him being sent to Jerusalem when he was 13 to study under the greatest Rabbi of that time, for Saul was destined to become a Pharisee. One so in tune with God's law that they were given the right to look down upon others and expect others to glorify them as righteous.

And Paul got there. He testified of himself that under the Jewish law he was considered righteous. A Pharisee of the Pharisees. He saw himself as one who could do no wrong, and when he chose to persecute the Christians—to imprison them, beat them, and support the execution of someone like Stephen—he saw that as a righteous act. He was simply protecting the Jewish Faith that he was a custodian of. He would have despised Gentiles and avoided their company. They were the heathen—he, in contrast, was one of the chosen people of Almighty God.

For him to get to the point where he saw himself as the worst sinner of all was due to that meeting on the Damascus Road when he saw Jesus and realized his own sinful state. He knew then that his sin in rejecting Jesus and actively working to destroy His followers, made him a worse sinner than those who crucified the Son of God, because, with his knowledge of Scripture he should have known better. Yet he was also aware that Jesus in His great love for him had cleansed even him and made him His own.

So he goes on to say in 1 Timothy 1:16-17(CEV)

But since I was worse than anyone else, God had mercy on me and let me be an example of the endless patience of Christ Jesus. He did this so that others would put their faith in Christ and have eternal life. "I pray that honor and glory will always be given to the only God, who lives forever and is the invisible and eternal King! Amen.

Paul was a driven man before he became a Christian. That was part of his personality. He was still a driven man when he became a follower of Christ, but now he was driven by the desire to see people saved from condemnation.

Paul knew about hell and eternal judgment. He had stumbled on to the very edge of God's wrath when he had persecuted Jesus and he never forgot how close he had come to everlasting torment and punishment. He constantly gave thanks to Jesus for saving his soul, but even more than that he constantly gave all that he was to the task of spreading the Gospel, because he feared what was ahead of people, religious or otherwise, who did not surrender their hearts and lives to Jesus.

Speaking in Romans 2:5-6 to the stubborn hearted who don't believe that God's judgment awaits them he says:

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God "will repay each person according to what they have done."

Paul knew there was an answer to the coming judgment and that it was found in Jesus Christ who had already borne that judgment in our place. But he also knew that such a salvation had to be accepted. People had to choose to receive it in a very definite way by believing in their hearts that Christ was their Lord and confessing with their lips that God raised Him from the dead. That's what Paul lived and died for. So that more and more people would be assured that for them there would be no condemnation ever, because they had by God's Grace, placed themselves in Christ Jesus.

That was Paul's over-riding passion in life. That's why he endured persecution, opposition, and struggled through many a hazardous and unpleasant situation. He knew about God's wrath and he desired to pluck as many sticks from the burning as he possibly could.

Yet I don't believe that Paul would have cited that passion of his as the reason he was still a follower of Jesus. The compulsion to tell others about the great rescuer of souls was simply a natural flow on from the reason he

was still a follower of Jesus. For I believe that if we had been around to ask him why are you still a follower of Jesus, he would have quoted his words to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:12 as his response:

That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.

Many of us would recall the hymn by James Whittle that contain these words as the refrain:-

**I know not why God's wondrous grace
to me he hath made known,
nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
redeemed me for his own.**

**But I know whom I have believed,
and am persuaded that he is able
to keep that which I've committed
unto him against that day.**

The words of the verse simply confirm everything I have just been saying about Paul. He knew that a day would surely come—he calls it 'that day'—when God would judge all people according to their wrong doings against Him, and he also knew that on such a day he, along with everyone else, would justly be found guilty. Expect for the fact that he had put his trust in Jesus, God's Son.

Paul knew without any shadow of doubt—he was absolutely convinced—that because of his belief in this Messiah, Jesus would guard the life that Paul had entrusted into his care.

That's why Paul never ever gave up following Jesus, even when they lead him outside of Rome to the place of execution and beheaded him. And that's why he never stopped trying to convince others—even someone like King Agrippa, to put their trust in Jesus while they still were able to do so.

That day of God's judgment has not as yet arrived. We are still living in the age of grace—of mercy—of forgiveness. But the signs are all around us, and when that day of our Lord's return comes, the hearts of those who have never completely entrusted their lives to Jesus will be full of fear, why those who love Him will overflow with excitement, joy, and adoration.

We all need to be as convinced as Paul was that our lives are already in the care of our merciful and loving God. Not because of any worthiness in us, but because we have believed in Jesus and follow Him. Is that true for you

today, or do you need to open your heart to God in complete surrender? To pray the prayer that seeks from Him the rescue He yearns to give.

The words of the final song this morning sum up so much of Paul's relationship to Jesus—but they are not just about him. They are about all who love Jesus as their Lord. Are they yours? Can you truly sing out these words to Him today?

***You are my world
You are my God
And I lay down my life for You***

***You are the one I love
No one could ever take your place***

***And everything I have I give to you my Lord
The One I live for—I live for You.
And all my days are gifts from You,
I pray I'd use them as You want me to—Use them for you.***

