

# Hope for a blasphemer?

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 25 February 2018

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[ 0 : 00 ] And in that context, in verse 13, we encounter our first blasphemer. Verse 12, Paul expresses his gratitude because he was appointed to God's service.

Verse 13, even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.

Now, if you've read through the book of Acts any time recently, you'll hopefully be familiar with what Paul's referring to here when he talks about himself as a persecutor and a violent man.

At the end of Acts chapter 7, we find the account of the stoning of Stephen, one of the first men appointed as a deacon in God's church. This man who was accused before the Sanhedrin of speaking against the holy place and against the law.

That's Acts 6, 13. At the end of chapter 7, we find, as they come to stone Stephen, we find what at first looks like an oddly irrelevant detail to the story.

[ 1 : 04 ] Acts 7, 58, they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Saul, who would later come to be known to the church as Paul the Apostle, author of this letter.

And on into chapter 8, verse 1, And Saul approved of their killing him. And again at the beginning of chapter 9. Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

And that story then moves on to the account of his conversion as he comes to turn around and become the Apostle Paul.

Is it any wonder then that Saul describes himself here in this letter as he refers to his former life? Is it surprising that he calls himself a persecutor and a violent man?

[ 2 : 10 ] That is what we've seen, isn't it? He was going around breathing out murderous threats, dragging the disciples away as prisoners back to Jerusalem. And so here, verse 13, Paul calls himself a violent persecutor.

Except if you've got your Bibles open, you'll see he doesn't just say he is a persecutor and a violent man. That isn't all he says about his former life, is it? He also calls himself a blasphemer.

What does it mean to blaspheme? Well, for the Jews, the blasphemer was the one who denied God by speaking the name of Yahweh, the name of the covenant God of Israel, by speaking that name carelessly or disrespectfully.

So to blaspheme is to misuse God's name. And so when a good Jew reads the Torah, reads through the Old Testament, every time the text has that name of God, every time Yahweh is there in the Hebrew, the good Jew doesn't read that aloud.

He doesn't say Yahweh, but rather he says Adonai, which means Lord, or Hashem, which means the name. So scared are they of misusing the name of God, that even in the reading of God's word, they don't use God's name.

[ 3 : 31 ] And this practice has made it even into our modern English Bibles. That's why you won't find the name Yahweh in most of the Bibles that you have before you, but rather the Lord written out in all capital letters.

That's what lies behind that when you find that as you read through the Old Testament. When it says the Lord in capital letters, that's God's personal covenant name, Yahweh. It's roots in this same practice.

So for the pious Jews, the danger of misusing God's name carelessly was so great, they refused to do so even when reading out God's word. And one of the things about the Pharisees, this particular

sect of Jewish leaders that Paul belonged to, is that the Pharisees liked to create a bunch of extra rules around the edges of God's actual law in order to make sure that they kept well clear. They're so scared of breaking God's laws that they make their own law way back and say, well, if I don't go past that line, then I'm very safe from that line. It's like at the top of a cliff, you don't put the fence that keeps you from falling off.

You don't put it right there on the edge, but rather a few paces back. It keeps you safe against even the possibility. That's the mentality of the Pharisees as they try to do that.

[ 4 : 49 ] Now, there are massive downsides to that, and Jesus condemns that behavior in other places. But that's what's going on in their heads, that they're trying to keep God's law so carefully that they're taking a few steps back from it.

And Paul is one of these Pharisees. This is Paul who writes of himself in his letter to the Philippians. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more.

Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. In regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church. As for righteousness, based on the law, faultless.

Paul describes himself as a Pharisee in regards to the law. He was doing this, keeping laws way back from God's actual laws. So how can Paul here call himself a blasphemer?

Surely as a good Jew, surely as a Pharisee, there is no chance whatsoever that he was going and misusing God's name. The chances that he had ever said the name Yahweh once in his life are vanishingly small.

[ 6 : 00 ] He's not a blasphemer. And yet that's what he calls himself here. What it seems is that for Paul, the definition of blasphemy has shifted.

What it seems is that rather than seeing blasphemy as that danger of carelessly misusing God's name, he's seeing it more as coming to refer to the sense of scorn that he felt for the messianic claims about Jesus.

That when he talks about blaspheming, he more means his hostility to the followers of Jesus. That's where the evidence seems to point us particularly as we see the terms that he uses in parallel with blasphemer here.

As we see him talking about being a persecutor and a violent man in the same breath as a blasphemer, it seems that that's what he's thinking about. See, behind that definition of blasphemy as misusing God's name is that sense of misunderstanding who God is.

And that then comes into Paul's new definition of misunderstanding who God is by failing to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

[ 7 : 12 ] And so Paul's most damning critique of himself is that he had rejected the claims of Jesus. Now in our culture today, we often prize sincerity, don't we, as one of the most important virtues.

More important even than objective truth, if you like, is whether or not you genuinely believe what you are saying. And yet no one was more sincere than past Paul.

No one was more sincere, no one was more convinced that what he was doing was right than Paul in his pre-conversion life. And yet, how does Paul characterize that state?

Verse 16, he was the worst of sinners. Sincerely wrong. Paul knew it is entirely possible to be absolutely sincere and to be completely wrong.

And this is what makes verse 14 so wonderful. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

[ 8 : 25 ] Grace, faith and love poured out upon Paul. And not just enough to get by, not just the bare minimum that he needed to come into a new life, but rather poured out abundantly, poured out lavishly, overflowing into his life.

All three of these elements presented as gifts bestowed by a loving God. Grace, most obviously the gift of God, but especially as we see it here in the flow of Paul's argument, as we see it in the context of contrasting his experience of grace-driven salvation against the law-driven salvation of the false teachers, as we see it in that context, then Paul's faith is not something he's conjured up within himself, is it?

His faith is a gift from God just as much as the grace that he received. The same is true of his love. This love that enables Paul to love God, and even more importantly in the light of verse 13, a love that enables him to love those who he once persecuted.

So the grace and the faith and the love are all a gift of God, are all by grace, if you like. And so what Paul says here is not to advise Timothy to dig down deep into his heart and find the faith that's lurking within himself.

He is not urging him to reach down and stir up love. He can't be doing that because he knows that's not what happens. Rather, Paul assures Timothy that God makes these gifts available to those who are in Christ Jesus.

[10:08] Verse 14, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. So these things are there for Timothy, not because he finds them in himself, but rather because he trusts the God who provides them to him.

So why does Paul bring up this account of his own conversion? Why is he talking about the depths of his sin before and this change? Well, the answer to that comes in verse 15.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. The argument Paul is making here is from the more difficult to the easier.

If the difficult is possible, well, surely so too is the easier. And so Paul tells his story of being the first blasphemer, being the chief amongst blasphemers.

Paul tells the story of his own conversion from violence and persecuting the church. He tells this story to show that God can save anyone.

[11:33] This is the answer to our first question, by the way. Why did Jesus come? It is there in verse 15. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I mean, it's hardly news to most of us here, is it?

We know this is why Jesus came. He came to save sinners. Very similar sentiments recorded from Jesus' own lips in Mark chapter 2. Jesus said to them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. Paul makes this the backbone of his argument in this section. He introduces this saying, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

He introduces it by saying, here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Paul uses this formula a few times through these letters, the pastoral epistles.

He uses this formula to say, this is a key thing. If you like, Paul is at this point throwing the full weight of his apostolic authority behind this key saying.

[12:37] Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And this fits into his argument because what he's saying is that he was the worst of sinners.

And so, what Paul is arguing is that if the false teachers in Ephesus were right, if right standing before God really did come about by means of their understanding of God's law, then Paul has no hope whatsoever.

Amongst other things, Paul says, if that's your idea of how God works, if right standing before God is on the basis of your observance of the law, then you can write me off because I was a blasphemer and I was a persecutor and I was a violent man.

Paul is not saved by doing the right things, is he? But rather as God extends grace and mercy and faith and love to the very worst of sinners.

And God is in that same business today, isn't he? I mean, don't we sometimes find ourselves thinking that we are too wicked for God to be really interested in us?

[13:51] I've certainly spoken to plenty of people who would say that, who believe that they've burnt their bridges with God, who think that they are too wicked for God to ever be interested, that God will never want them because they are unrighteous before him.

And in fact, the truth is that sometimes I think that myself. I think that when I've let God down once again. When I look back on some of the things that I have done in the past, when I look back on the ways that I have not lived up to God's standards, when I look back on those things, the voice that whispers in my ear says, God doesn't want you.

God's not interested in someone like you. And I think maybe at times Paul would have been tempted to say to himself, God doesn't really want me. I'm too wicked for God.

God, I'm a blasphemer. I'm a persecutor. I'm a violent man. I spent my life fighting against what God was trying to do.

I think if it hadn't been for the incredibly direct and dramatic nature of Paul's conversion, I think he would have doubted it was real. I think he would have doubted that God could ever have been interested in him.

[ 15 : 09 ] Now for us, we don't need to be able to look back on that kind of dramatic conversion ourselves, because instead we can look back on this account of what God is like.

We can look back and see the evidence in the life of Paul that God is a God who shows mercy to the worst of sinners. And if God can save Paul, then he can save you and me.

This argument is vital to you and me today. The one who can redeem the man who was persecuting his people. The God who can meet Saul on the Damascus road and say not only, why are you persecuting my friends, but actually say, why are you persecuting me?

The God who can go and say that, that God can cope with anything that we can throw at him. That God can cope. That God is in the business not of saving those who deserve it, not of saving nice little law keepers, but rather of saving the worst of sinners.

And little wonder then that Paul, bowled over by the sheer magnitude of God's grace, of God's mercy, of God's love, little wonder that he ends this section as he began, that he ends it in praise and thanksgiving.

[ 16 : 32 ] Verse 17, Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. That is the only response to the kind of God who saves blasphemers and violent and persecuting men.

That is the only response to a God who saves you and a God who saves me from whatever lies in our own past. But Paul isn't quite done with this argument yet.

But he returns in verse 18 to giving his charge to Timothy. And here we encounter two more blasphemers. Here he encourages Timothy that he has been rightly appointed to this task.

He encourages Timothy that God is behind him. He encourages Timothy that this commission he's receiving is in keeping with the prophecies made about him. This is Timothy's motivation to go and fight the battle well, to hold firm, to hold on to his faith in the face of his disagreements that are coming with these false teachers.

And Timothy holds on to his faith in sharp contrast to the sobering note of the final verse of this chapter. Some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith.

[ 17 : 56 ] Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme. So here are blasphemers two and three, Hymenaeus and Alexander.

And their situation at this point in time is very different to that of Paul, the former blasphemer. I think there are a few things that we can usefully see from this section.

The first thing we see is the incredibly serious nature of this false teaching. Let me remind you of one of the things that we saw last week, that these false teachers aren't just people who've been innocently led astray, but rather these men are those who have actively, who have deliberately turned away from the truth.

Remember from chapter 6 that it seems at least part of their motivation in turning away from the truth is to line their own pockets. There is a profit motive at work.

And remember that these false teachers aren't only deceiving themselves, but rather they are actively going and teaching that falsehood to others, that they are leading other people away from the gospel with them.

[ 19 : 05 ] So what these false teachers have done is not a minor thing, is it? What they're doing is turning away from the true gospel of salvation by the grace of God, salvation by grace along with faith and love, and they are turning to a different religion that misuses the law, the law that they don't even rightly understand.

And Paul has shown us how radically different these two teachings are. They're false teachers who believe that they stand on the basis of God's law.

And Paul who says it is all of grace. He has shown us the gulf of difference between these two things. So what these false teachers are doing is drawing other people away from the only source of salvation.

This is a very serious thing. And so Paul says he has handed Hymenaeus and Alexander over to Satan. Seems most likely that the idea at work here is that of Satan as prince of this world, as the one who has some measure of dominion over the earth on at least some level at this present time. And therefore to be handed over to Satan here in this context, kind of whilst living on earth, would seem to be a reference to the withdrawal of God's protective care and providence.

[ 20 : 37 ] There are other possible ways to understand what's going on here, what Paul means by handing over to Satan. But I think what is unavoidably clear is that it is a serious thing that has

happened.

None of us can pretend that to be handed over to Satan is a minor thing, whatever the details of it might be. And amid this seriousness, amongst the sobering reality of what's happening, I think there are two very important encouragements.

The first encouragement, I think, is that they are handed over for a clear purpose. It says they are handed over to be taught not to blaspheme.

What do you think will happen when they learn that lesson, when they are in fact taught not to blaspheme? Well, if Paul, in this section at least, is using blasphemy to refer to refusing to accept the claims of Jesus as Messiah, then to learn not to blaspheme is to come to accept those claims, is to come to accept what Jesus says about himself as the Messiah, as the only way to salvation.

So for them to learn that lesson is for them to come to accept what Jesus says about himself. And what that means is that they are handed over to Satan for the ultimate purpose of their salvation.

[ 22 : 02 ] The objective is that they will come to repentance, that they will come to blaspheme no longer, that they will come to have faith in the Messiah. They are handed over, hoping, praying that they will return.

And I think the second encouragement is related to this. And the second encouragement lies in the fact that Paul pairs these blasphemers alongside himself, that he has these two stages of his argument next to one another.

Because if Paul believes that he was, in his past life as a blasphemer, the very worst of sinners, if Paul believes that that was the reality for him, and that he was the worst of sinners, then that means God's grace is sufficient for all.

If God's grace is sufficient to save Paul the blasphemer, then God's grace can be sufficient to save Hymenaeus and Alexander the blasphemers.

We saw back in verse 7 that the false teachers, of whom this pair are presumably ringleaders, they didn't really understand the law. They don't know what they're talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

[ 23 : 16 ] I think we could say the same, couldn't we, about pre-conversion Paul. That whatever his pharisaical understanding of the law, he was surely an expert in the words of the law, and yet surely we say he did not know what he was talking about.

He did not know what he so confidently affirmed. He did not rightly understand then what he now understands about God's law. So Paul hands them over to be taught not to blaspheme because he knows it is possible to learn that lesson.

He knows it is possible to turn away from that blasphemy. And again we ask ourselves, so what? What do I do with this today?

And to my mind the impact of what we're saying here is similar to the impact of the last section. And maybe for many of us even more directly relevant.

Because the point is that it is always possible to come back. In other words, we aren't only saying that God's grace is sufficient to redeem the worst of sinners once, that they can be saved and then they need to keep walking the right line so that they will continue to be right before God.

[ 24 : 32 ] We're not saying you get God's amazing grace once and then you're out on your ear. You get handed over to Satan. What we're saying is God's grace is sufficient to redeem the worst of sinners day by day, moment by moment, year by year, that it is sufficient for a whole lifetime's worth of terrible sinfulness.

And that is true on whatever level we find ourselves. So when that accuser whispers in your ear that you're not good enough, that you have blown it this time, that what you just did then, what you did earlier this week, that you've gone too far now, when he whispers that in your ear, that God has run out of patience with you, when you find yourself wondering whether there is a way back yet again, the answer of this passage is yes.

The answer is that the door to the party stands open and waiting for the prodigal to return and the door stands open for the self-righteous elder brother who wants his standing on the basis of the law.

The door to the party stands open for him too. The door stands open for those like Hymenaeus and Alexander who are under the official censure of the church.

The door stands open for me. The door stands open when I need to come back in day by day. And the door stands open for you. We don't know how these two end up.

[ 26 : 00 ] We don't know the full story of Hymenaeus and Alexander. We don't know whether they learn that lesson, whether they are taught not to blaspheme or whether they persist in it. But what we do know from this passage is that the door stands open because Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, even the chief amongst them.

Let's pray. Lord God, would you give us great confidence in this truth, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Lord, when we think we don't deserve to be in your presence, would you allow us to say, yes, that is true, we don't deserve it, and yet to rejoice that we are?

Might our response to the fact that Jesus came to save sinners be that we stand in praise and worship, that with Paul we respond to grace poured out to the chief of sinners, that we respond in thanksgiving, in adoration, in praise, and in worship.

In Jesus' name, amen. Our final song picks up some of these themes as we sing together, I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene.

[ 27 : 26 ] We stand in the presence of Jesus, and we wonder how he can...