

# St. Paul

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[0:00] I'm grateful for all of you who've braved the weather to be here.

I'm hoping that the weather will stay this mild at least until the next few hours that we still have here. ! No one even better than I when I say the next few hours. You guys, we can stay here for the next few hours. That's fine. That's good. Yes. Thank you. So this Sunday, this particular Sunday and this day is the day we remember, commemorate the conversion of St. Paul.

And Paul says this about himself. By the grace of God I am what I am. And his grace towards me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them.

Though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. This is Paul's self-witness concerning the grace of God upon his life.

[1:14] But this confession of St. Paul is now unique to him. On a tombstone in the churchyard of St. Peter and St. Paul's church in Olney, Buckinghamshire, in England, are carved these words.

John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.

Now, few epitaphs so plainly confess the gospel as this one does. The tombstone does not say Newton was reformed by discipline, improved by his own efforts, or elevated by his own knowledge and insight pertaining to God's word.

But it says that he was pardoned by mercy and appointed by grace. This former slave trader, degenerate and blasphemer, preached the faith he had once opposed, not as one who had made himself new, but as the one who had been found, found out by God and forgiven.

Perhaps it takes such an understanding of God's unmerited grace and mercy to birth such a champion of the gospel of grace, such as Newton, such as St. Paul.

[3:03] And in their case, they both came to recognize this magnanimous grace of God that transforms life. In Newton's case, he was able then to pen perhaps the most arresting hymn in all of Christendom, Amazing Grace.

He's the writer of that famous hymn. John Newton stands in the long shadow of St. Paul. What Newton was in his generation, Saul of Tarsus was in his.

That is, they were both an enemy of Christ. They were both confident in their own righteousness, violent in opposition to the gospel, and yet, sovereignly, both of them were arrested by grace.

And as with Newton, so it is with Paul. So it was with Paul. His conversion is not merely a moral change, but it was a revelation of the great doctrine upon which the church stands or falls.

And that doctrine is the doctrine of justification, justification by faith alone. The gospels are full of mercy. We know this. And this mercy is shown throughout the earthly life of our Lord as he came not to judge the world, but to save the world.

[4:27] This mercy is even more powerfully displayed by the resurrected Lord in his confrontation of Saul of Tarsus. The conversion of St. Paul is so wonderful that it deserves our special remembrance this day.

And this is why the church has appointed a day to commemorate it. And it is so memorable because of its effect that's reached to the ends of the earth and continues even today in Christ's universal church.

It's like a second proclamation of the gospel. You know, the first was preached by friends to you. The second is announced through an enemy.

And St. Paul was an enemy before God arrested him. And made him a friend. And so important was this event of Paul's conversion that the inspiration speaks through Paul himself in following in his ministry.

And it ends in 14 epistles in our New Testament. Even more than that, history, the history of the early church as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles consists largely of the account of Paul's ministry written by his friend and companion and fellow laborer, St. Luke.

[5:59] But what is more remarkable still, I think, is that the account of his conversion, of Paul's conversion, is recorded three times in even the Acts of the Apostles itself.

It's recorded here where we have it read this morning in Acts chapter 9. It's recorded again in Acts chapter 22. And it's recorded in Acts chapter 26. So I think because of all of these reasons, it's fitting that the history of this event should stand as an epistle and as a reminder for this day.

Who is this man, Saul? Saul, who had consented, if you read earlier in Acts chapter 7 and 8, he had consented to the death of St. Stephen, the first martyr of the church.

We read there in Acts 8.1, there were still breathing threats and they were breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. It is in this context, since Stephen's martyrdom, that Paul, rather, Saul, had taken the reins unto himself to have a personal holy crusade against these followers of the way, these followers of Jesus, to root them out, to hunt them down, wherever they may be.

And he's done so in Jerusalem. Now he's gotten special permission to go even to other areas. So he went to the high priest, asked for letters to synagogues all over where the Jewish diaspora was so that he may go and root them out.

[7:35] And he's on his way to one of these diaspora regions of the area in Damascus, present-day Syria, where many Christians had already fled as a place of refuge.

And he was going there to disrupt their peace so that he may found, if he found any who belonged to the way, that is, who belonged to the way of Christ, that he may, whether they may be men or women, he might bring them back, bound.

That's his intent. Bring them back, bound, in chains, back to Jerusalem. Paul himself later testified that both in Jerusalem and before King Agrippa, he testified that he had persecuted these people, these Christians, to the death.

That's his own self-testimony about himself. He said, I punished these believers in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme. What he means by that is that I compelled them to recount the name of Jesus.

All this, Paul, Saul of Tarsus, did with a clear conscience. He was acting under authority. He was zealous for the law.

[8:49] As to righteousness under the law, he said, I was blameless. That's how he considered himself before he was in conversion. He thought he was doing God's work.

Yet here already, we see the insufficiency of the Lord as it's revealed to us. Saul's zeal was real. His sincerity undoubted.

His obedience was exacting. Yet, with all of this true about him, with his sincerity, with his undoubted obedience to what he thinks was the proper way, he was blinded.

He was still an enemy of God. The law that he was following could inform his conscience. That law could sharpen his zeal and condemn his sin.

All of that could be true about the law. The law can sharpen you, your zeal for God. It can inform your conscience. It can condemn your sin.

[9:54] But the law could not justify him. Because as Paul himself will write in Romans 3, for by works of the law, no human being will be justified in his sight.

And so, this is what's true about Saul of Tarsus. He was a man who followed the law. But he was following the law to his own damnation until he had an encounter with Jesus.

And as Saul journeyed and drew near to Damascus, we're told in Acts chapter 9, at the height of his anger towards these people, we're even told that it was in the noonday sun of Damascus.

There is no brighter sun than a noonday sun in the Middle East. And suddenly, a light from heaven shone around him.

Suddenly, a light that puts even the noonday sun that pill the noonday sun in comparison.

[11:03] This light shone around Saul. And suddenly, like the angels appearing to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus, suddenly, there was the descent of the Holy Spirit, like the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In the same way, with this lightning immediacy, we see this light shone around Saul. And Christ appear to him.

And what does he do? He fell to the ground. And as he fell to the ground, blinded by this great light that has shone upon him, a voice cried out, saying, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It's as if truth entered through both sight and hearing for the first time for Saul. And as it were, he was changed as he hears the voice of his Lord.

And he says, who are you, Lord? And the answer to his question would have shattered every ground of self-righteousness that he was standing on.

[12:22] Because as he asked that question, the answer to it was, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. And in that moment, Saul learned what the law could never teach him.

That the risen Christ so identifies himself with his people that to persecute them is to persecute him. more than this, Saul learns that the one that he opposed, the one that he was waging this crusade against is not a dead man.

But he was alive. He is reigning. And even more importantly, he is merciful. Because what would you have expected the law to do at this point?

Perhaps a strike, and this is probably what Paul deserved, and we all deserved. You would expect Christ to strike him down in judgment as he called him by name to extinguish his life right there.

But God was merciful to him. Instead of condemning him, he saved him, transformed him, and gave him a great, gave him even at that moment a greater mission for his life than he could ever imagine.

[13:53] So, Saul, trembling at this point, and astonished, he responded to this, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. And he says, in surrender, Lord, what will you have me do?

It's crucial to observe the order of grace in this. Saul is not justified because he obeys. That's important for us to note. Rather, we should see that he obeys because he had been encountered by grace.

That's what led to his obedience. His obedience was not what justified him. The justifying grace of God is what led him to obedience, what led him to surrender.

He's not accepted because he willed to do Christ's will. He was an enemy of Christ. But because he was so overcome by the grace of God upon his life, he asked Christ what his will will be for his life. Because at this point, he's been stopped by the awesome power of God, of the risen Christ. He has been spared by the incomprehensible mercy of God.

[15:12] He's been spared. And because of God's great love and grace, he's been addressed by God Almighty himself. And all that is left for him to respond to this grace that has been shown him in surrender.

How will you respond? how have you responded to this same grace that's come to you in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Here, brothers and sisters, there's a doctrine of justification by faith that shines clearly in this passage.

Saul brings to his conversion no works. He brings no repentance that is perfected. He's not because he's perfectly repentant.

He's not because he had obeyed to the full extent of the law. He brings nothing to this. In fact, all he brings is proof of his own condemnation.

And he also brings his need, the great need for the gracious mercy of God. The great need for the truth to come and overwhelm his life.

[16:33] The great need for his blindness to be cured so his eyes can be opened to see clearly. And Christ receives him, not on the basis of what he's done, but on the basis of who Christ is.

And Paul will later write in Galatians 2 verse 16, we know that a person is not justified by works of the law. We know that a person is justified only through faith in Jesus Christ.

And so we see this sort of interesting reverse of circumstances as Paul saw of Tarsus encounter Jesus, the risen Christ.

He was spiritually blind, but now he can see after that encounter. Physically he had sight, but he was so blinded by the light of Christ that he could not see anymore for a period of time.

So Saul rose from the ground and though his eyes were open, Luke tells us, his eyes were open but he could see nothing.

[17:48] And so he had to be led by the hand and brought into Damascus. Imagine this, he was coming to Damascus with his cohorts, armed men, probably riding on horses, coming into the city to arrest and perhaps to kill if necessary the followers of Jesus Christ.

But now he's been led into that same city by the hand blind. And we're told that for three days he was without sight, for three days he could not see. And in those three days he neither ate nor drank.

There's outward blindness which mirrored his inward illumination. It's like all of what Saul of Tarsus thought of himself, his self-esteem, his self-view of himself, all of it has been stripped away. And he's been stripped away that he might receive a righteousness that is not his own. Perhaps maybe that's sometimes the obstacle in our way to Jesus or that we've observed in many who are still opposing and resisting the gospel of Jesus is that they have a self-conception of themselves as good people, holy people, keepers of the law.

Right? I go to church. church. I serve in church. I know my Bible. I was raised in this faith.

[19 : 27] And you start to build up categories of which of self-conception that makes you think that you have a standing before God instead of seeing yourself as wretched, a wretched sinner as Paul describes himself, a blasphemer of God, as Paul describes himself, as once was.

Instead of seeing yourself as someone who is in desperate need of mercy, knowing that no righteousness of your own can merit you God's favor.

You need the righteousness of another. I think that's what's going on with Paul now. He's being stripped of all his false self-conception of himself.

And during those days, the Lord says simply regarding this Saul of Tarsus, behold, he's praying. That's when God then goes to Ananias and says, go to this man, Saul of Tarsus.

In chapter 9, verse 11, he said that he's praying. This is the heart of Paul now, crying out to this Lord now, that he knows, truly. And this kind of prayer does not merit grace.

[20 : 52] It's the kind of prayer that responds to having received grace. He's praying to God. And the same thing was true of Cornelius in Acts chapter 10, verse 4.

He was praying to God. This kind of prayer that mocks the soul that has been brought low and made ready for mercy. And so it is in this state, in this posture, that Ananias comes to Saul.

The Lord sent Ananias, a humble disciple, sent him to Saul. And the Lord said to Ananias, go, go to this man, for he is a chosen instrument of mine.

The Lord said to him, go, carry my, he is a chosen instrument that I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles and before kings and the children of Israel. And so, this is who Saul will be.

He will be someone who God calls to bear his name, not his own righteousness, to bear Christ's name to the world. And Jesus says he will suffer.

[21 : 58] He will suffer many things for that name. And his suffering, you shouldn't read this and think Paul's suffering is his punishment for what he was doing before he came to Christ.

No. His suffering was not punishment. It's not a payment for his sin, but his suffering was as fellowship with Christ. Paul himself would say this, I am sharing in the suffering of Christ.

And he understands that very intimately because when Christ came to him, Christ says to him, why are you persecuting me? Christ, he understands that for the believers, for the people of Christ to suffer, Christ suffers.

And when we suffer, our suffering is not in vain. We are sharing in the suffering of Christ as we do so. And so Ananias comes to Paul and laid his hands on him and says to him, imagine this, Ananias will have been one of the men that Saul was coming to arrest.

And now this man, also in obedience to the Lord's message, goes to somebody who would have been his enemy, who should have been his enemy. And he goes to him and he lays his hand on him and he says, Brother Saul.

[23 : 14] That's what the gospel does. The gospel makes enemies into friends. The gospel makes enemies into brothers and sisters in Christ, as families.

He lays his hands on Saul and says, Brother Saul. And he says, The Lord Jesus has sent me to you, that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And immediately what happens? The scales fell from his eyes. He rose and was baptized. In baptism, the gospel he would later proclaim was first preached to him visibly.

He was washed in baptism. He was received and he was united to Christ and his body. And at once, as once were told, Saul began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues.

And what is he saying about this Jesus whom he once persecuted? He now proclaims that this Jesus is the Son of God. Acts chapter 9 verse 20. The persecutor became the preacher, the one who trusted in the law, now preached Christ.

[24 : 27] And the heart of that preaching would always be this, to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteous.

This is the heart of Paul's preaching, wherever he went, to the one who does not work, but believes in him, that is Jesus Christ, who justifies the ungodly.

His faith is counted as righteousness. This is the gospel of grace. Grace. Grace. Saul became Paul. And this Paul was a man that was little in his own eyes, but great in the grace of God. He became the man who labored night and day.

He once labored night and day to destroy the faith. He's now been transformed into a man who labored night and day to proclaim the faith. so much so that he said towards the end of his life, I am the least of the apostles, but by the grace of God, I am what I am.

[25 : 44] Grace not in vain was given to Paul. And as with Paul, so it is with the man John Newton, a former slave trader, so it is with many more countless people who have come to Christ, who many of us, the world itself would have said, that person is beyond the scope of God's mercy and God's grace.

But Christ comes always with undeserved mercy. He graciously interrupts our lives and he freely forgives all who come to him on bended knees.

laying down their pride, laying down their lifelong disobedience and obstinacy against God's might and sovereignty, and coming to him asking for mercy.

Christ always receives such people. The danger is not that grace is too free. The danger for us is that grace is received in vain.

And so brothers and sisters, if you have received the grace of God, let it not be in vain. If you have heard of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is that grace being offered to you.

[27 : 08] That is the free gift of the gospel being proclaimed. It is free. Bring no money. Come and eat and drink of this gospel message.

it is freely given. But do not receive it in vain. Do not turn your nose up to the free grace of God that can save you and can rescue you from death and give you life.

Let every mercy that is given by our Lord lead us to faith. Every calling of it, let it lead us to obedience. Let every privilege that we have been given as the people of God, let those privileges lead us to humility, not pride.

And may we, together with St. Paul, be found at the last, not trusting in ourselves, but in Christ alone.

Not having a righteousness of our own, but that which comes through faith in Christ. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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