

Chief of sinners

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[0 : 00] As the Lord may enable us, we shall endeavor to consider words which we read in the first epistle to Timothy chapter 1.

And we may read again verses 15 to 17. 1 Timothy chapter 1, reading from verse 15 to verse 17. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief.

How be it for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe in him to life everlasting. Now unto the King, eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, the honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

[1 : 13] Now the Apostle Paul, when he was writing his second letter to Timothy, made the point that all scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable.

Because from Moses onwards, the authors of scripture were not putting down their own ideas, but conveying the truth that God had revealed to them.

And it's a remarkable thing that in a book which was written over thousands of years, that it's such perfect unity of doctrine and how each part contributes to the whole.

And I'm sure there's probably not a part of scripture which has not been blessed at some time to someone in a particular way.

And that is why, because it is the word of God, the Lord's people have to attend to the whole of scripture. And if we are going to be balanced in our Christian belief and living, then we must not concentrate on one part of scripture to the exclusion of others.

[2 : 44] That we should seek to be found constantly throughout the scriptures. At the same time, there are certain parts of scripture which seem to go more directly to the heart of the gospel and which speak more directly to the heart of the sinner.

And that suppose that everyone who has experience of the grace of God has particular passages of scripture which have meant something very special to them in their own personal experience.

And as long as we are giving regard to the whole of scripture, it is perfectly normal and perfectly right that those parts which have meant most to us would be more precious to us than any other part of scripture.

Now, we have here an expression which obviously had become a common expression on the lips of God's people.

This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

[4 : 02] That must have been an amazing truth to those who heard it first and to those who came to know what it meant first. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

When you think of the glory of his person, and I'm not going to try to go into this particular part very much this evening because we were looking at something similar this morning where it's written, You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich yet for your sakes he became poor that ye through his poverty might become rich.

But it's the same truth and how amazing it must have been and how amazing it still is when it becomes real to us. That such a glorious person who had existed from all eternity should have such a purpose from all eternity and should put that purpose into effect.

The purpose of coming into the purpose of coming into the world.

The purpose of coming into the world, it must have been a connection with sin. In connection with sin, remaining perfectly sinless himself but living in a world full of enmity against God. And being held accountable for the sins of his people. And that he should purpose to do that in order to save

sinner.

[5 : 46] order to save sinners. People who had rebelled against himself, people who hated him, people who did not want to know anything about God. And unless his grace had overcome them they would have shown no interest in him. And yet he came into the world to save them, to do all that was necessary in the way of obedience and suffering and death, to deliver them from their guiltiness and from the power of sin and from the love of sin and from all the consequences of their sin against God. This is a precious saying and the Apostle is saying it is faithful.

You can't believe it because it is absolutely true. It is worthy of all acceptance. It's a truth you can rely upon. It has the stamp of God's truth upon it.

This is the explanation of the birth of Jesus and the life of Jesus and the death of Jesus. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And that saying has become so familiar to us that it has almost lost its power to make us feel amazed. When did you last feel amazed at the thought that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners? Very difficult to feel amazed at that truth.

Because perhaps we have so little sense of our sin and we have so little sense of the marvel of His grace, the glory of His person, the extent of His condescension. And because we are so familiar with the truth. But it's a faithful saying. It's worthy of all acceptance. It's a saying you can rely on. It's a saying that we can venture through life upon and venture into death and into eternity.

upon. If we believe this in a way that makes us entrust ourselves to Him. Then we will find even in the great day of judgment that this is a saying that one can depend on. Because it will prove true even in that day.

Isn't that something? To have a hope. To have a hope that will survive not only the trials and temptations of life but also the trials of death and of judgment. Well that's what the apostle is assuring Timothy of. He's telling Timothy that he's had his trials and Timothy will have them too.

[8 : 45] But here is something he can rely upon. Here is something that is sure and dependable. The foundation of the best hope. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

sinner. And isn't that what we're trying to proclaim in the church. And what the church has been proclaiming down through the generations. The sum and substance of the gospel. We can perhaps go off into great avenues here and there. But it all comes back down to this. It's all summed up in this.

Christ Jesus came into the world with all that that meant for him. To save sinners. Now we also notice secondly that this truth had become precious to the apostle in his own personal experience. He says this is a faithful saying. He says this is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance. That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief.

Most sinners who hear this are not in the least interested in it. They don't want to hear it. It doesn't mean anything to them.

[10 : 14] I suppose if one was to advertise a meeting of some kind where people were very likely to win hundreds and thousands of pounds. People would fill this church and every church within reach in order to hear all about that kind of news.

But people are not interested in hearing that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Because they are not sinners in their own estimation.

Or if they think they are sinners, being a sinner is a very insignificant matter. It's just like being like everyone else. None of us is perfect. None of us is perfect.

And I'm a sinner like everyone else. And it doesn't mean anything. But that wasn't the way with the apostle Paul.

For the apostle Paul had come to see himself as the chief of sinners. There never was a sinner like him. Now he wasn't exaggerating when he said that.

[11 : 22] Because when the apostle Paul said that he was the chief of sinners. He was not really comparing himself with other people. But he was looking at himself in the light of God's holiness and in the light of God's grace.

And when a sinner comes to see himself in relation to God, all the other sinners and their sins fade out of the comparison.

As long as we are comparing ourselves among ourselves and thinking that there is hope for us because we are not as bad as Manasseh. Or we are not as bad as Saul of Tarsus.

We are not as bad as the people next door. As long as we are comparing ourselves like that. It would seem to be a great exaggeration on our part to call ourselves the chief of sinners.

But when we become, when we come face to face with sin, with our sin, in a situation where there is no one coming into consideration in the matter, but ourselves and God, our sin takes on an aspect, it takes on a character in our view that makes us feel that if there ever was a sinner, that sinner is me.

[12 : 46] There was an old minister in Coulthardity last century who became a little muddled in his old age.

And somebody heard him on one occasion speaking out in his room having a discussion with the Apostle Paul, he was saying, the Apostle Paul, you are saying you are the chief of sinners. But he was saying that he was going to contest that statement. If you are saying that you are the chief of sinners, that no greater sinner than you could ever be saved, then there is no hope for me. If you are saying that you are the chief of sinners, because amongst all the sinners that have been saved, you are the greatest. I cannot agree with you either. Because I am a far greater sinner than you are.

But if what you are saying is that when you see yourself, and I am not quoting this exactly, but when you see yourself in relation to God, then you see yourself as the greatest of sinners, then he said, I can agree with you.

[14 : 06] Because I can stand there beside you and say the same thing. And I think that is the solution to the problem.

It is not a bad thing to be arguing over who is the chief of sinners, if we are honestly inclined to take that place ourselves.

And we do not do it, as I was trying to say, by comparing ourselves with others, but by comparing ourselves with the standard of God's holiness.

So that there is nothing before our eyes but the fact that I have sinned against God. It was not always like that with Saul of Tarsus.

He used to think he was the greatest saint that ever lived. That there was no one like him in his obedience to the law of God. But what a change came over him.

[15 : 03] When the Lord shone his light into his heart and mind and conscience. And he realized that he had never done one good thing.

That his enmity against God was what was coming to expression. Even when, out of his conscientious devotion to God, he was persecuting Christians.

I think that is where Saul of Tarsus saw himself as the chief of sinners. He was a man of God in his own estimation. He was persecuting the Christians, not because he was cruel, but because he thought they were opposed to God.

It was out of concern for the honor of God and of the Jewish religion. And how it opened his eyes. When he realized that the thing that he was doing out of such devotion to God as he thought it, was itself an attack upon God and a revelation of his ignorance and his enmity.

He was a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious. But he obtained mercy. I obtained mercy, he says, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.

[16 : 14] And what Paul is saying, I think, is this. That he went to the very limits of sin and yet there was pardon for him. He did it ignorantly and in unbelief.

That didn't excuse his sin. But where there is ignorance and unbelief, however great that ignorance and unbelief is, there is scope for the mercy of God and there is the opportunity of forgiveness. He had a personal experience of sin. He had a personal experience of the salvation which Christ came into the world to give to sinners.

Now another thing we notice in looking at this is that Paul saw his own experience as an encouragement for other sinners.

How be it for this cause I obtained mercy that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe in him to life everlasting.

[17 : 26] Why was mercy shown to Saul of Tarsus? No doubt there were various reasons. Ultimately it was in order that God would be glorified in his salvation.

It was also in order that he himself might know the blessedness of salvation. But here is another reason. It was in order that when sinners down through the ages would hear about Saul of Tarsus, they would realize that he is just an example, a prototype of what can be expected by the chief of sinners who believes in Jesus.

And that is a very precious description of Paul's experience of mercy. He did not experience it just for his own sake.

It is recorded. It is recorded. And how he loved to record it, it is recorded so that other sinners who come to feel themselves in need of a saviour will be encouraged to believe that there is a saviour for them.

That the same Lord Jesus who was longsuffering towards Saul of Tarsus and who showed mercy to Saul of Tarsus, who made him feel his sin and who brought him into the experience of salvation, is still able and willing to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him.

[19 : 15] And that is one of the benefits that we have of the records that are in scripture of the experience of people like Saul of Tarsus.

In a sense they are recorded because they are not unique. But they are patterns, they are sketches of what the Lord is doing still and of what the Lord will do yet for a sinner who trusts in him.

And when you come to the point where you are afraid that you have gone beyond the reach of mercy, that your sin is of such a character that it is a great question whether or not the Lord will look in mercy upon you.

It is meant to be an encouragement to turn to the case of Saul of Tarsus and see a man who did all that was in his power to destroy the cause of Christ and the name of Christ.

A proud, self-righteous Pharisee, a blasphemer of God, a persecutor of saints, injurious to his fellow men, ignorant and unbelieving.

[20 : 37] And yet, the chief of sinners became the chief of the apostles. And although he felt he was less than the least of all saints, he is there in scripture as one of the greatest of the saints of God who ever walked on this earth.

What grace can do? What grace can do? Can take a man who is running headlong against God and running headlong to perdition and save his soul and make him one of the greatest instruments in God's hand for the building up of his cause.

And Paul is saying that this is recorded, not so that we will think what a wonderful man is Paul, but so that we will think what a wonderful saviour is Christ.

That he would deal in such a way with such a man. And who can tell that he will deal in such a way with me if I cast myself upon his mercy.

That is the encouragement which sinners still can find in the experience of the apostle. It's recorded for our benefit.

[21 : 59] It's recorded in order to encourage a poor sinner who is despairing and despondent, cast down and wondering what to do with his sin.

Here is a saviour who has saved down through the ages consistently people who had nothing about themselves to commend them to him.

But he saved them because he is a God of mercy and his mercy is sovereign and his grace is free to sinners of mankind.

It's a wonderful thing, the freeness of the grace of God in the gospel. Now, the final thing that I would note from these words is that Paul's knowledge of this truth that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Paul's experience of that salvation. Paul's assurance that all sinners of mankind who would come to know their sin and seek the saviour would find him the same as he found him.

[23 : 19] These things made him full of the spirit of praise and of worship. Now unto the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.

What effect does the grace of God have on a sinner? We notice that it made him thankful for the confidence that other sinners would find him such a saviour too.

And if we have experienced the grace of God, it gives us great pleasure to think that even the worst of sinners who are still rejecting him can experience that grace too.

Isn't that what encourages the church of Christ in its endeavours? The world is against Christ. It wouldn't mind if the church went out of existence. And yet God keeps his people in the world as a testimony to others. And others too, in spite of what they are, will come to know this salvation.

[24 : 46] That's one effect of knowing this grace. But another effect is that it makes us feel how great and glorious and worthy of worship is God our saviour.

And how often we find in the epistles, when the apostle has been describing the grace of God, He breaks forth into a kind of doxology and ascribes praise and glory to God his saviour.

And that's what we have here. Now unto the King, eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory forever and ever.

God is the King. That's the impression that the experience of grace made on Paul. God is King. God is sovereign.

If God were not sovereign, then he would not have saved me. That is what the apostle seems to be reasoning. Why ever did God choose a person like Saul of Tarsus?

[26 : 02] Why did he save a person like Manasseh? Why does he take his people not only from the wise and mighty, very few of them from that category, but from those who are despised of men?

Why does he save one and not another within the same family circle? Why does he save the person in the parish who is the most notorious scoundrel, when many who have been respectable all their days are left to go on ignorant of the grace of God?

Why does he save anyone? His salvation is of such a character that it reveals his kingship, his sovereign lordship over all that he can do what he wills with his own.

And Saul of Tarsus, Paul the apostle, was saying to himself often, we're quite sure what a mercy it is that God is sovereign and free in his actions.

Because if he had been bound to deal with me as I deserved, I would have been lost forever. It's because he is king, because he is sovereign, because he can do his will in heaven and on earth, that there is salvation for a sinner.

[27 : 28] And when a sinner is saved, he comes to that conclusion. How great and majestic and sovereign is God. He is the king eternal.

It's from eternity that this purpose of salvation came. And what has happened in our experience here in time will have eternal consequences.

It's a great encouragement to know that our salvation is not something that sprang up in time. It didn't originate in our own thinking. It didn't originate in someone else's thinking or someone else's effort.

Whatever instruments were used in our awakening, it originated in the eternal purpose of God. And it will last into eternity.

For our Savior is the king eternal. The king immortal. There's no human limitations. No decay.

[28 : 33] No change. Characterizing God, our Savior. He's free from every human, every temporal limitation whatsoever.

This is what becomes manifest in his work of salvation. He's the sovereign God of eternity who is unlimited in accomplishing the purposes of his grace.

Who's not subject to any weariness. He's not subject to any decay of any kind. He fainteth not, neither is weary. He is the king immortal.

And invisible. Perhaps invisible refers to the fact that God is a spirit.

But more likely it's emphasizing the fact that God is incomprehensible. That we cannot know him except to the extent to which he reveals himself.

[29 : 40] And when a person is saved by the grace of God, that person gets an impression of God. That God is great. Far beyond what we can see.

Far beyond what we can comprehend. He is the only wise God. He is the only God. And his wisdom like himself is infinite.

All other wisdom comes from him. But wisdom belongs essentially and to an infinite degree to God himself.

And that comes out in his work of salvation. When you think of the apostle Paul himself and his conversion. What infinite wisdom was coming to expression in that event.

We can see how that conversion resulted in the conversion of multitudes. Through his own instrumentality and down through the generations since.

[30 : 47] Man would never have thought of Saul of Tarsus as a likely instrument in God's hand. When he was introduced to the church in Jerusalem first they were all afraid of him.

They didn't believe he was a genuine believer. But that shows how different is the wisdom of God from the wisdom of man.

And if we have experienced his grace. If we have been saved by his grace. Then we will have this same impression of God. How great he is.

Great in his sovereignty. His eternity. His unchangeableness. His incomprehensibility. And his infinite wisdom.

And we will be saying what the apostle said. To him. Be honor and glory. Forever and ever. There are many marks.

[31 : 47] Of a Christian. And there are many differences. Between Christians. Accounted for by their different experience.

And so on. But there is one point to which every Christian is brought. And that is this point. To desire above everything else.

That God would be glorified for his salvation. And that God would be glorified to all eternity. There is nothing nearer to the heart of a believer.

When he is true to himself. Than this desire. That all the ends of the earth would worship God. And that God would be worshipped.

Throughout the endless ages of eternity. And if we have a hope of heaven. That hope consists. To a large extent.

[32 : 46] Of wanting to be able. Perfectly. And forever. To glorify. The God. Of our salvation. And that's what brings a Christian.

To the house of God. That's what makes a Christian want to. Devote himself and all he has. To the service of God. And to the cause of Christ. That's what makes him try to pray.

And try to praise God. And try to live a consistent Christian life. Because he wants God to be glorified. This is an infallible mark and proof.

Of experiencing the grace of God. It was manifested in the apostle. It will be manifested in all. Who like him. Taste that God is good.

To him be honor and glory. May his honor and glory be recognized. And may he be given the worship. That is due to him. And he finishes up and he says.

[33 : 50] Amen. So let it be. And isn't there something in your own heart. That responds to that. When you think of the grace that the Lord has.

Shown in your own soul's experience. You say amen. To the apostles desire. That whatever will become of him. Or of us.

God. Will get the honor. And the glory. That are due. To his name. Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Gracious God.

We thank thee. For the wonders of thy redeeming grace. In Christ. Which reveal how great thou art. In all thine attributes.

And which make us desire. To praise and to honor. And to serve thee forever. And we pray that each of us. Within these walls.

[34 : 48] Tonight. Might know ourselves to be sinners. And that we might know. Christ. To be a savior. That we might be like that.

One of thy people in days of old. Who forgot. Everything he ever knew. But was able to say. On his death bed. That he remembered two things.

That he was a great sinner. And that Christ. Was a great savior. May these things be made real to us. So that we may live.

To the praise. Of thy glorious grace. Not only in this. Short life. But in the life. To come. We ask it with the pardon.

Of all our sins. In Jesus name. Amen.