

GOD'S MERCY TO PAUL

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The Apostle Paul is one of the greatest examples that we have of faith and obedience to God that we have in the entire Bible. Of course, the greatest example of all is God's Son Jesus Christ, who never sinned, and always did what pleased the Father (John 8:28-29,46; Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:21-22). Next to Christ, the chief corner stone, his apostles are part of the foundation of his holy temple, the church (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 2:19-22). And of the apostles, Paul "labored more abundantly than they all" (1 Cor 15:10). And Paul is the one that we have been commanded to follow as he followed Christ (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1). Yet to reach that great spiritual height that Paul reached, he first had to obtain great mercy from the Lord, because prior to being converted to Christ, Paul was a great persecutor of the Lord's church.

God's mercy in Paul's conversion

As a young man, known as Saul of Tarsus, persecuted the church beyond measure and had many Christians killed (Acts 7:57-8:4; 9:1-5; 22:3-8,19-20; 26:9-15; 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13-14; Php 3:6; 1 Tim 1:13-16). Acts 8:3 says, "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison." Acts 9:1-6 says, "And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do." Paul saw the resurrected Christ, and became a believer in him, confessed him, and clearly had repented. Three days later, he was baptized into Christ and his sins were washed away (Acts 9:7-18; 22:5-16). Many times thereafter, the Apostle Paul reflected on the grace and mercy shown to him by God and the reasons why.

Ignorance and unbelief

In 1 Corinthians 15:3-10, Paul said, "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: and that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: after that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle,

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(continued)

because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.” According to 1 Timothy 1:12-15, Paul obtained mercy from God because he had committed his terrible sins in ignorance and in unbelief: “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: *but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.* And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. 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.” But even while committing those terrible deeds that made him “the chief of sinners,” Paul’s motive was to zealously serve God (John 16:1-3; Acts 22:3; 26:4-5; Gal 1:14; Php 3:4-6). Therefore, he had a clear conscience in everything that he did (Acts 23:1; 24:16). What he did was still wrong, as Paul himself acknowledged over and over again, but it was not the same as if he had been intentionally and knowingly opposing God. Paul’s desire was always to diligently and wholeheartedly serve his Maker. Therefore, God was willing to show mercy to Paul.

A pattern of God’s longsuffering

Paul also obtained mercy from God as an example to others. “*Howbeit 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 on him to life everlasting*” (1 Tim 1:16). Without God’s goodness, forbearance and longsuffering, we would all surely be lost for eternity. Romans 2:4 asks, “Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that *the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?*” We have all sinned in our lives and need God’s goodness and mercy (Rom 3:23; 1 John 1:8,10). Romans 5:6-11 says, “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.” But of all sinners, Paul was called the chief (1 Tim 1:15). Therefore, if the chief of all sinners could obtain mercy from God and become a disciple of Christ, then anyone else can too. Thus, Paul serves as a pattern for all in obtaining God’s mercy. Nobody has an excuse for not repenting.