



A Study of 1st & 2nd Timothy

1st Timothy 1:12-17 That Saved a Wretch like Me

I am reading from 1st Timothy chapter one, verses twelve through seventeen. If you're using one of the pew Bibles, the passage is located on page 991...1st Timothy 1:12-17.

This is what God's Word says:

ESV 1 Timothy 1:12...I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.

ESV 1 Timothy 1:13b...But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

ESV 1 Timothy 1:15...The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

ESV 1 Timothy 1:16...But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

ESV 1 Timothy 1:17...To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, **be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.**

Let's pray.

Father, we come to you this morning confessing to you our great need. Father we need and we desire that the Holy Spirit come now and take the things of Christ and make them real to our hearts...to come and take the written word and as its true author and therefore its infallible teacher to instruct us in the truth of your Son. Open the book we pray to see what you have accomplished on our behalf, in Christ, in whose name, we pray, Amen.

*Amazing Grace (How sweet the sound)
That sav'd a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Not many men in English history have had the kind of enduring impact that the one-time infamous slave trader John Newton has had. I suppose a person could argue that William Shakespeare has had a greater impact on English history than Newton...but saying that I know without even needing to ask that more people can quote Newton than can quote Shakespeare. They may not know they can quote Newton, but they can. I suppose too that Oliver Cromwell has had a more enduring impact on English history than Newton...even though I know most moderns aren't quite sure who Oliver Cromwell was. I think I would also have to argue that William Tyndale has had a greater impact on English history than Newton. But saying that I know I would have to unpack a lot of history for most modern listeners just to explain to them who Tyndale was. That is true even for English speaking Christians who should know better.

But none of that is so with Newton.

Everyone knows Newton. Well, they don't exactly know him or his story or really even his name. But everyone everywhere knows Newton's song...*Amazing Grace*.

Actually, *Amazing Grace* is not just a song; it's a hymn. Before it became a hymn, of course, it was simply a poem...a few verses written by Newton in order to illustrate a New Year's Day sermon he preached in 1773. It was first published as a hymn in 1779 in a little hymnal entitled the *Olney Hymns*. Olney was the small town where Newton ministered as an Anglican pastor. Newton co-authored the hymnal with another man named William Cowper. He did so during the sixteen years or so he pastored at Olney. A few of Cowper's hymns are also quite well known. Two of his hymns in the Olney hymnal were *God Moves in Mysterious Ways* and *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood*.

Newton also wrote a number of other hymns contained in the hymnal that are quite famous: *Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*, *How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds!*, *Let Us Love, and Sing, and Wonder*, and the very haunting *Approach, My Soul, the Mercy-seat*.

But none of the two men's hymns are as well-known or famous as Newton's hymn *Amazing Grace*. American musicologist Gilbert Chase once wrote that *Amazing Grace* is the most famous folk song ever written in the English language.

The original melody attached to *Amazing Grace* in the hymnal was not the same melody we use today. The melody we know and love today is entitled *New Britain* and was an American folk melody. No one knows who developed the melody. It

was not finally attached to the hymn until 1835. In the west, even most unbelievers know the tune.

One modern Newton biographer, Jonathan Aitken, estimates that the hymn *Amazing Grace* is sung in various parts of the world at least ten million times a year. I think Aitken's number may be quite conservative.

Now one of the things that lends the hymn so much weight is its back story.

You see originally John Newton was a slave trader. That is, he was the captain of a ship that transported slaves. Prior to his becoming the captain of a slave ship Newton suffered a dreadful number of terrible providences. He was actually once made a slave himself for a short period of time. As a sailor, Newton was known for his foul mouth and for his blasphemy. He was so vile in his language and temperament...so prone to foul language...that his fellow sailors often referred to him as the "The Great Blasphemer." Imagine just how foul a man's language would have had to have been to have gained that sort of reputation among sailors. Anyway Newton was converted, according to his own biography, in the middle of a terrible storm at sea in 1748. But even after his conversion, Newton continued on in the slave trade.

It wasn't until Newton had a stroke that he finally gave up the sea. He was twenty-nine years old at the time. The year was 1754.

When Newton was first converted, he began to study in earnest. He did that even while he was still away at sea. He wanted to improve himself and his mind partly because he had become converted and partly because he had gotten married.

Newton learned Latin and geometry and even studied a bit of Hebrew and Greek. He consumed whatever religious literature he could get hands on. After he had his stroke, Newton gave up the sea. He worked several odd jobs growing more and more convinced all the while of his call to the ministry. Eventually, Newton applied for permission to minister in the Anglican Church. At first he was rejected outright...I suspect he was rejected not simply because he lacked an education but rather because of his scurrilous background. Still, he persisted in his desire to be a pastor and was eventually entrusted with the small parish church at Olney about 60 miles north of London.

The rest is, as they say, history.

Newton was immediately successful. He grew quickly in his ability to shepherd his flock. He grew quickly in his sanctification. He became an ardent promoter and fan of both Whitefield and Wesley. He was a passionate preacher. His preaching quickly filled the pews at Olney. He was a beloved pastor. He also became a sort of champion to the underprivileged and outcast. He was anti-slavery and pro-prison reform. He was a sort of patron saint to those things and people considered lost causes.

One practical example of what I mean about his being a patron saint of lost causes stems from the fact that he took in the manic depressive William Cowper. Cowper entered Newton's life at a time when he was real mess...overcome by depression to the point of being suicidal. Newton read and studied with Cowper; he even put him up for awhile in his own home. He encouraged Cowper in his poetry and writing and wound up over a period of year helping to redeem Cowper's chaotic life.

During the same period, Newton also began to mentor a young man named William Wilberforce...the man who was ultimately responsible for bringing about the abolition of the slave trade in England. Newton became something of a spiritual guide to Wilberforce and eventually even supported Wilberforce's cause by publishing a pamphlet in which he detailed his own horrendous involvement in the slave trade. His pamphlet is an extraordinary thing to read and is readily available on the internet. It is entitled, *Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade*. In it Newton freely discusses the horrors of the slave trade, how many slaves he transported, how they were treated, and how God great redeemed him from his life of sin.

Regarding the publication of the pamphlet, Newton wrote, "**here is my confession, which...comes too late...It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in the very business which now my heart shudders.**"

Before Newton died he gave specific instructions as to the wording of the inscription on his tombstone. This is what his tombstone says:

*John Newton, Clerk,
Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves 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.*

Shortly before he died at the age of 82, Newton who by then had gone completely blind told a friend, "**My memory is nearly gone, but I do remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.**"

You can see why it was no great leap for Newton to write:

*Amazing Grace (How sweet the sound)
That sav'd a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

You can also see that Newton never quite got over his redemption in Christ and the high privilege he enjoyed in being entrusted with the gospel. You can see that the idea behind the poem he wrote when he was forty-eight was still very much on his mind when he was eighty-two.

Now I wanted to use this particular story about Newton to direct our thinking this morning in our consideration of 1st Timothy 1:12-17.

I wanted to tell Newton's story because of how it relates in particular to one verse in this morning's section from 1st Timothy 1...verse 15.

ESV 1 Timothy 1:15...The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

You can see how in many ways, Newton's verses in *Amazing Grace* are really just an a meditation on Paul's thought here in 1st Timothy. You can see how in many ways it is the same old song, the same old tune the sinful heart of every believer sings at one time or another.

Still, before we look at these few verses and I don't think that will take us that very long this morning I ought to remind you of just where we have been so far in our study.

When we began our study I tried to impress upon your minds the similarity of the purpose of both 1st and 2nd Timothy. Both letters are written by the Apostle Paul to Timothy and both are very much concerned with the idea that Timothy guard the good deposit entrusted to his care. That **“good deposit”** is the gospel itself. You can tell that that is what is on Paul’s mind from the repetition of the words **“entrust,” “guard,”** and **“deposit”** that are woven throughout both letters.

Now after explaining all that, I went on to explain that even though the general purpose of the two letters is exactly the same...the specific occasion behind the two letters is a bit different.

1st Timothy was written to urge Timothy to stay in the city of Ephesus and to stand up to the false teachers that had entrenched themselves there. The occasion of the letter was the presence of false teachers in Ephesus. These false teachers were attempting to take over the ministry in Ephesus not because they loved the gospel or even the church but rather because they loved the preeminence they could derive from being the center of the teaching ministry in Ephesus. I mentioned last week that these false teachers were much less concerned with the Way of the Nazarene and much more concerned with the Way of Narcissus.

Anyway, Paul wanted Timothy to stay there in Ephesus and fight it out with these false teachers. Paul believed that the very existence of the gospel in Ephesus was at stake. Now as the letter to Timothy unfolds, Paul addresses a couple of other issues in the church there in Ephesus. He is very concerned, for example, about how the saints in Ephesus treat each other and how their life and worship are ordered in the church. But for Paul these concerns are not simply random musings regarding the proper ordering of Christians. His letter is not simply an instruction

manual for church leadership. No, it is more than that. Paul's concern is really a very passionate plea for the maintenance and continuation of the gospel itself.

That is why Paul wants Timothy to stay in Ephesus and guard the gospel entrusted to his care. Paul wants Timothy to guard the gospel in a particular place...both because Timothy knows the situation in Ephesus and because Paul had invested a significant portion of his life there in the formation and building up of the church.

2nd Timothy, on the other hand, is a bit different. It was written three or four years after 1st Timothy very near the end of Paul's life. Tradition says Paul wrote the letter while he was locked away in the infamous Mamertine Prison in Rome. The occasion then of 2nd Timothy is Paul's impending martyrdom. You see, 2nd Timothy was written by Paul to Timothy because Paul wanted very much to hand off his ministry to Timothy. Paul wanted Timothy, his true child in the faith, to step into the void that was going to be left by his martyrdom.

I explained the difference between the two letters by saying that 1st Timothy was written to charge Timothy to guard the gospel entrusted to him in Ephesus while 2nd Timothy was written to charge Timothy to guard the gospel entrusted to him in Paul's place.

And then last week, in our second lesson, we spent some time looking at the first eleven verses of 1st Timothy. In those first eleven verses, we saw Paul's concern over what the false teachers in Ephesus were doing. Apparently, they were using the Old Testament in some sort of perverted way. Rather than letting the biblical text say what it said...rather than use the law lawfully...they were perverting the text to make it say something it did not say. Their innovation apparently involved

some sort of speculative philosophy and included mythological stories reinterpreted using Old Testament genealogies. It probably centered on some sort of fanciful allegorical interpretation. The one thing that is crystal clear in the text is that they were using the law of God in a manner that it was never intended to be used. They were using it to line their pockets, and to advance their own standing in Ephesus. They were seeking preeminence as masters of innovation.

And then we saw Paul add a dreadful vice-list which seemed to implicitly make a connection between the immorality condemned by the law and the perverted speculations of these false teachers. His point, I think, was to make the connection that a perversion of the Scripture and its doctrines almost always leads to a kind of inevitable lawlessness.

Paul then wrapped up his description of the false teacher's error by describing their folly and trying to use the law in a way that was exactly contrary to the **"gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted."**

Now in verse twelve, where we are putting in this morning, Paul turns from his concern over the false teachers to reflect on his own gratitude to God for entrusting him with the high privilege of preaching the gospel.

I think it might be easiest to divide the verses up by thinking of them as something like a sandwich.

1. The outer portion of the sandwich...verses 12 and 17 both contain parallel statements expressing Paul's gratitude for having been called to Christ's service. Verse twelve and thirteen contain a prayer of gratitude for Christ's kindness in appointing him to his service while verse 17 is a sort of majestic

outburst of praise for the mercy of God. Verse seventeen seems to stem from Paul being overcome by the kindness of God in Christ. Verse seventeen seems to spring from Paul's inability to contain his praise.

You see, Paul's starts and ends verses twelve through eighteen with both gratitude and praise for the mercy and grace of God extended to him in his calling and equipping for his ministry in the gospel.

2. The next two sections, the ones contained in verses 13 and 14 and then down in verse 16 continue Paul's literary sandwich by explaining the extraordinary nature of Christ's grace in extending kindness to Paul when Paul was an enemy of Christ's kingdom. You can see what I mean if you look to the end of verse thirteen and the phrase, "**But I received mercy...**"

Verse 16 picks back up the idea of mercy by giving the reason for Christ's mercy being extended to him while he was such a notorious sinner. You can see what I mean by looking to the beginning of verse sixteen in the phrase, "**But I received mercy for this reason.**" It is a repetition of Paul's point in verse thirteen. Paul goes on to explain that he was shown mercy in order that he might become an example, a poster boy to all, of Christ's enduring patience.

3. The middle section and center of the literary sandwich is Paul's inevitable, relentless conclusion regarding his own sinfulness and the kindness and mercy of God.

Alright that having been said, let's look at verses twelve through fourteen.

ESV 1 Timothy 1:12...I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service,¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Paul directs his gratitude toward the Lord Jesus Christ himself. He does so by arguing that Christ himself has given him strength. The question is strength for what? Paul has already told us that in the previous verse, verse eleven, as he transitioned away from the false teachers of the law to his own marvelous service in the gospel. In verse eleven he says...**“in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.”**

Christ has strengthened him in his stewardship of the gospel. Christ strengthened him because he had entrusted him with the gospel. And Paul is grateful that Christ has empowered him in his stewardship of the gospel with which he has been entrusted. Now why has Christ strengthened him? The mysterious answer is, **“That Christ Jesus has judged him faithful.”** This, phrase cannot mean, of course, that Jesus saw some sort of inner strength in Paul that especially equipped him for service. At the time Christ drew Paul to himself and charged him to proclaim the gospel, Paul was a vile human toad who lived for no other purpose than to destroy the church of God. I think John Stott is right in saying the faithfulness that Jesus saw in Paul had to have been the faithfulness he granted to him by through his own mercy and grace.¹

Calvin was concerned enough about this passage to write this:

Paul seems to be saying that his faithfulness, by which he had been previously distinguished, was the cause of his calling. If that were really so, his thanksgiving

would be hypocritical; for he wouldn't simply owe his apostleship and faithfulness to God, but to his own merit. Why thank God for what you already have and are? I deny, therefore, that the meaning is that he was admitted to the rank of an apostle, because Christ foresaw his faith; for Christ could not foresee in him anything good but unless the Father had bestowed it on him.²

I think Calvin is right. Paul is not judged to be faithful because of anything God saw in him but because God has strengthened him and prepared him in such way that he would be faithful in the execution of his ministry. Why was that important? It was important because there were a number of false teachers in Ephesus that were arguing Paul had gotten the gospel and the law all wrong.

Now the remarkable thing about Christ strengthening Paul in his stewardship of the gospel with which he had been entrusted was that Christ called Paul to himself on the Road to Damascus while he was still a wicked man. That, of course, is not my own personal assessment of things; rather, that is Paul's own assessment of things. Look at verse 13:

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 1:13**...though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Paul's point goes something like this, **"The Lord Jesus Christ called me and has strengthened me in order to make me faithful in the ministry to which he has called me and he did that in spite of the fact that I persecuted his own church. I was a blasphemer which means I treated with contempt the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. I persecuted his church, and I didn't just do that verbally. No, I was violent man. But I received mercy...because I acted in stupid unbelief...and the grace or kindness of God washed over me like waves on the**

seashore one after another until I came to understand the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

You know I’ve thought about those three days in which Paul languished in darkness after being blinded by the glory of Jesus on the Road to Damascus. Imagine how he must have played over in his mind...each lash he doled out...imagine how he replayed in his mind each terrified face that came under his persecuting wrath. Imagine how his whole world... his every thought had to be realigned. You can imagine Paul asking himself, **“How could I have ever gotten things so wrong?”**

Now there is, I think, one additional implication in what Paul is saying here. That one implication is this...that he was shown mercy because he persecuted the church out of ignorant unbelief. Those men troubling the church at Ephesus...those men that Timothy is going to have to confront...were not in quite the same boat. That is, they were not doing what they were doing out of ignorance but rather out of a willful desire to gain preeminence there in Ephesus. They are willing to do that even though they had heard and once believed the truth regarding the gospel of the glorious, blessed God. That is why Paul is so harsh with them. They are not acting in accordance with the truth of the gospel they have been taught. Instead they are perverting that gospel. That is what Paul deems it necessary down in verse 20 to hand two of their number over to Satan for judgment.

Now I want to skip verse fifteen for a moment and continue the Paul’s thought down in verse sixteen. There Paul writes:

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 1:16**...But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

Paul's argument is that he received mercy for a particular reason. He received the mercy of God as a blasphemer, as a persecutor of the church, as a violent man...in order that Christ's extraordinary and perfect patience might be placarded...might be spelled out in neon letters ten feet high...for everyone to see that has believed in Christ for salvation.

Paul's conversion was extraordinary. It was something no one saw coming...and especially not Paul himself. It was less like the slow incremental march of St. Augustine's conversion and a lot more like the healing and conversion of the Gadarene demoniac. It was one of those things that when people heard about it thought to themselves, **"I don't believe it. That can't possibly be true. I mean how could that happen?"**

Paul, of course, doesn't answer the how...the how concerning how he was converted...but he does answer the why. The why was in order to demonstrate the perfect patience of Christ to all who believed or were yet to believe. His conversion occurred as an ongoing encouragement to those who were in danger of giving up on ever seeing their loved ones come to faith...or to those who were giving up on ever seeing any progress in their struggle with sin or addiction...it was given to those who were in danger of just throwing it in. It was given in order to give believers hope...to give you and me hope...hope based on the limitless, perfect patience of Christ.

And what was Paul's response that his thinking once again about his own conversion. It was an outburst of praise and benediction toward God. Look at verse 17.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 1:17**...To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

You can see Paul's response to simply thinking about the gospel and Christ's kindness in applying it to forgiveness of his sin and the redemption of his soul caused Paul to almost burst at the seams. Paul simply cannot do anything else but break forth in praise. And isn't that the way it ought to be in each of our souls. Shouldn't a proper reflection on what Christ has accomplished on our behalf move our hearts to some sort of contentment? Shouldn't the contemplation of how he has redeemed us from the pit cause strengthen us to endure the times when others don't give us what we think we deserve? Shouldn't it strengthen us to lessen our expectation that others always meet our needs? Shouldn't it do that simply because it addresses our one great need?

A.W. Tozer once wrote this:

The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems, for he sees at once that these have to do with matters which at the most cannot concern him for very long; but even if the multiple burdens of time may be lifted from him, the one mighty single burden of eternity begins to press down upon him with a weight more crushing than all the woes of the world piled one upon another. That mighty burden is his obligation to God. It includes an instant and lifelong duty to love God with every power of mind and soul, to obey Him perfectly, and to worship Him acceptably. And when the man's laboring conscience tells him that he has done none of these things, but has from childhood been guilty of foul revolt against the Majesty in the heavens, the inner pressure of self-accusation may become too heavy to bear.

The gospel can lift this destroying burden from the mind, give beauty for ashes, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. But unless the weight of the burden is felt the gospel can mean nothing to the man; and until he sees a vision of God high and lifted up, there will be no woe and no burden. Low views of God destroy the gospel for all who hold them.

I wanted to read that to you because it parallels almost exactly how Paul has constructed his thought here in these few verses in 1st Timothy. You see the linchpin of Paul's argument is Paul's proper understanding of his own inherent sinfulness. It is the thing that makes the gospel precious and sweet to him. Turn back and look at verse 15.

ESV 1 Timothy 1:15...The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

I think Paul's point is that the ability to guard the treasure of the gospel that is entrusted to us is contingent on our seeing the treasure of the gospel as an actual treasure. The reason our salvation fails to seem great to us is because our sin no longer seems great to us. The good news is not quite so good any more primarily because the bad news was never really all that bad.

That was not the way Paul saw things.

His sin was ever present before his eyes. He saw the depths of his failure and it bore down on his conscience in such a way that the mercy of God was simply overwhelming to him.

Was Paul really the worst of all sinners? Probably not.

Did Paul feel the weight of his sin to such a degree that he felt himself to be the worst of all sinners? I don't think there is any doubt that is true. Paul, in fact, argues that it is a trustworthy statement...worthy of all acceptance...something that can be taken to the bank...that I am of all sinners the foremost.

Imagine how seeing our sin rightly might help us to see our salvation rightly. I so struggle with that. On the one hand, I freely acknowledge that I am totally depraved...that every faculty of my being...my mind, will, and emotions are tainted by sin...on the other hand I get in a tizzie when someone questions my motives.

On the one hand, I freely admit that my sin has alienated me from God...on the other hand I get quite put out when someone fails to be properly attentive to my feelings.

But a proper comprehension of our sin changes all that. The depth our sin should overwhelm us. One thing is sure, it is only when the depth of our sin overwhelms us that the depth of the gospel will overwhelm us. The proper contemplation of our salvation must always follow the same old pattern: guilt, grace, and gratitude.

Let me close with this.

The first martyr of the Reformation in England was a little man named Thomas Bilney. He is often referred to as Little Bilney...he was only 4'11" or so. Anyway, Bilney came to an understanding of the gospel by reading Erasmus' Greek New Testament. In fact, he came to faith by reading this passage from 1st Timothy we've been studying this morning. This is what he wrote:

I chanced upon this sentence of St. Paul (O most sweet and comfortable sentence to my soul!) in 1 Timothy 1. "It is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the worst." This one sentence, through God's instruction and inward working. . . did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that even immediately I seemed unto myself inwardly to feel a marvelous comfort and quietness, insomuch that "my bruised bones leaped for joy" (Psalm 51). After this, the Scripture began to be more pleasant unto me than the honey or the honey-comb.³

I think that was Bilney's way of saying what all of our hearts should be saying this morning...

*Amazing Grace (How sweet the sound)
That sav'd a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.
Let's pray.*

¹ John R.W. Stott, *1 Timothy & Titus* (BST). (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 51.

² John Calvin, *Commentary on 1st Timothy 1:12*

³ R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1-2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit* (PTW) (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 41.