

Acts 22:3-21

The Testimony of Paul: God's Grace

By Pastor Eric Sung

In chapter 22 of the book of Acts, Paul is sharing his testimony:

“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished. – Acts 22:3-5

The first thing to note here is that Paul is saying that before he became a Christian, he was a somebody. He grew up in the large and important ancient Roman city of Tarsus. It's like telling someone, “I'm from LA or I'm from the Bay area. Or I'm from Houston. I'm from Boston. Everyone knows the city.”

Paul is also (by today's standard) at least upper middle class background. His family was prestigious. They were Roman citizens. These days US citizenship is mostly by birth. Back in those days it was very, very difficult for a Jew to become a Roman citizen. You had to be very, very rich. Or, you had to do something important for the Roman Empire.

And his father had enough money to send Paul all the way to study under a religious teacher by the name of Gamaliel. Now Gamaliel was the most famous religious teacher in Paul's time. And these famous teachers would have a bunch of disciples following them around,

learning from them. So Paul was telling them his family was rich and privileged enough to somehow have connections with the famous teacher Gamaliel, and to be able to get him to study under Gamaliel. You have to be brilliant to study under Gamaliel, by the way. It's a little bit like if a brilliant American physics student came from a rich family that was connected enough to be able to get him to be able to do his doctorate (PhD) with Albert Einstein, the most famous professor in American history.

Furthermore, Paul was way more religious than almost anyone else. He was religious to the point of being zealous. He did this in the hope of being able to make it to heaven through his own efforts.

Then Paul says something very interesting. He says: *“I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison”*

When Paul said “followers of this Way”, he was referring to Christians. In other words, this Paul hated Christians. And he hated Jesus. To Paul, Christians were heretics who were calling a dead man (Jesus) their Lord, Savior and God! These Christians had to be taught a lesson! They had to have their mouths shut so that others won't become Christians! And so that's what Paul did.

Paul would help to arrest Christians and have them thrown in jail, where they will be tortured. He also participated in the murder of these Christians (e.g. Acts 7).

In other words, Paul was saying to his audience: “Never once in my life did I think that I will ever become a Christian! Not once!... But then something happened to me.” Something that I wasn't looking for, something I cannot explain to you, except that it is the mercy and grace of God. This is what happens:

⁶ “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

⁸ “‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.

“ ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied...

¹⁰ “‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.

“ ‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do’ ...

¹² “A man named Ananias came to see me. He...

said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. ¹⁵ You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.’

This is truly the mercy and grace of God.

By the way, what is mercy and grace? Here’s an easy explanation: mercy is God not giving us what we deserve. Grace is God giving us what we don’t deserve. Paul did not deserve to be saved by Jesus. But Jesus in his mercy and grace saves Paul. This is what happens:

So Paul is on his way to a city called Damascus (in modern day Syria), and he’s been given the authority to arrest Christians and throw them into jail. But suddenly, on the road, he encounters the living Jesus!

‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

⁸ “‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.

“ ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’

Paul is then blinded and goes into the city to wait for a man named Ananias to come and help him. Ananias comes, shares the good news of Jesus with Paul; and Paul accepts Jesus into his life and straight away

gets baptized. He wanted to declare to the world that he is now a follower of Jesus... Why?... Because Jesus saved him!

Paul did not deserve to be saved. He was not looking for Jesus. It was Jesus who found Paul. This is God's grace. God is giving us what we do not deserve.

Paul deserved punishment. What he was doing to the Church of Jesus was unthinkable. But God in His mercy forgave Paul. He did not give Paul the punishment that he deserved.

Christians believe that everyone (except Jesus) has sinned.

And God is just. Where there is sin, He will punish. But God in His mercy and grace provided a way out through Jesus Christ. Jesus died on the cross as punishment for your sins so that if you believe in him, you will not be punished for those sins but will be with him forever in heaven. For the Bible says in Romans 10:9

“if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

And Paul became a very different person after he converted. Verse 15 says:

for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.

And in verse 21 it says:

And he (Jesus) said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

These verses are very interesting because they tell you that Paul became a very different person. First of all, instead of persecuting people who talked about Jesus, he became one of them! And he became the loudest

of them all! *“for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard”* (Acts 22:15)

In Acts 9:20 it says that after this, Paul immediately goes around proclaiming that Jesus is God:

And immediately he (Paul) proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

The very thing that one week before, he had counted as blasphemy, he is now proclaiming: “Jesus is Lord!”

Acts 22:21 says *And he (Jesus) said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”*

Paul would end up taking the good news of Jesus to the ends of the Roman Empire, to the Gentiles, Non-Jews. From not caring about Gentiles to having a heart for reaching out to Gentiles. Paul was a completely changed man. Jesus has a gift for doing that: changing people.

Here was Paul, a man who had everything: a privileged background, from a rich family, the best education, a bright future as a religious teacher of Israel. And he gives it all up when Jesus appears to him. “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.”

Later on in his life, this is what Paul would say as he reflected upon the turn of events in his life:

⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes

from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— Philippians 3:7-9

Paul is saying that everything— absolutely everything— is a loss compared to knowing Jesus.

When Jesus comes into our lives, he changes us.