

IN CHRIST WE FIND OUR HOPE

Regardless of how long one has been a Christian, every person knows how deeply indebted they are to the Apostle Paul. If one spends much time at all reading this book [the Bible], really trying to understand God they too are going to realize what a role Paul played in giving them that book. Paul was the person who wrote thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Although he didn't write the book of Acts, much of it is devoted to telling about Paul and his work for the sake of the gospel of Christ. Jesus once said that man is supposed to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. That being the case, isn't it interesting that God used this humble, devoted man to write many of those words.

Do you remember Paul's story? Saul the Persecutor of Christians

He is introduced to us in the closing verses of **Acts, chapter 7**. It is in the context where we read about the killing of the first Christian martyr named Stephen. Beginning in **verse 58**, we read:

Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59) And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60) And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

That "*young man named Saul*," of course, was the person who becomes the apostle Paul, the foremost proclaimer of Christianity. At that point in his life, however, he was a devout Jew. He was extremely zealous for the Jewish faith. He had a burning hatred for everything and everyone associated with Jesus and the gospel. That was because he saw Jesus and His teachings as a corruption of the Law of Moses and an attack on his heritage.

A few verses later, at the beginning of **chapter 8**, we read:

And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the

*apostles. 2) Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3) **But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.***

In **Galatians 1**, Paul wrote about this particular time in his life. He said, *“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 14) And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.”* (verses 13,14).

In **Acts 22**, we find Paul having the opportunity to speak to the Jewish people in Jerusalem. Speaking in the Hebrew language he related some of his life, explaining how he had become a follower of Christ. Beginning in **verse 3**, we read:

*“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. 4) **I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women,** 5) as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.*

Two years after that occasion, Paul found himself as a prisoner standing before a ruler named king Agrippa. This would have been Agrippa II (Herod Agrippa I was the king who had the apostle James beheaded, Acts 12). In this case Paul was talking to the grandson of Herod the Great, so-called because of all of the building projects he undertook, including the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple. He was the same one responsible for killing of the deaths of the infant children in Bethlehem. These were not good people; they were cruel, conniving men. Even so, Paul knew this Agrippa had the power to set him free. He also knew that this king had a good knowledge of Judaism; he knew what had been happening in Judea. **Acts 26:1** says Agrippa said to Paul, *“you have permission to speak for yourself.”* Paul then responded, *“I consider myself fortunate that is before you King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today.”* He then went on to say,

“My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. 5) They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee.”

Dropping down to **verse 9**, Paul said,

“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10) And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. 11) And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”

Obviously Paul wasn't your typical “live and let live” person. Even though he was wrong, he was determined to stop Christianity in its tracks. All of that, of course, came before Paul was met by the Lord on the road to Damascus. Paul had been going there with authority from the High Priests and the Sanhedrin Council to arrest Jews who were confessing faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles

It was on that day that Paul's life took a sudden turn. In fact, his name was even changed, from Saul to Paul. The Lord made him a special apostle to the Gentiles. Think about that! What an incredible honor the Lord paid Paul. The twelve apostles, at least for a long period of time preached mostly to the Jews. That was twelve apostles to a much smaller number of people. On the other hand, Paul was tapped to lead the charge of taking the gospel to the rest of the world, and he did it! Twenty-five or thirty years later Paul could write in the Colossians letter that the gospel had been preached to every creature under heaven (1:23).

Beginning in Acts 11, you find Paul being sought out by a man named Barnabus to come help him in a city called Antioch, the one located in Syria, north of Judea.

The Bible says that for a whole year they worked together, and taught a great many people. That's where Christ's disciples are first called Christians (verse 26).

Beginning in chapter 13 (Acts) all the way through the first half of chapter 21, we read about Paul's three missionary journeys. In a day when there was nothing faster than a horse-drawn cart, Paul traveled most of the then known world, making disciples and planting churches all over the Roman Empire. Because of that work, it is no stretch of the facts to say, that aside from Jesus Christ himself, the apostle Paul did more to change the course of human history than any other man who ever lived!

Of course, he did so at a great price to himself. Everywhere he went he made converts, planted churches but he also aroused many enemies. He was persecuted tremendously and suffered greatly. He describes some of that suffering in his second letter to the Christians in Corinth. Beginning in **verse 23 of chapter 11 [thru 28]**, he wrote:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one--I am talking like a madman--with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24) Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25) Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26) on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27) in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28) And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

You can't read things like that without realizing that Paul was a true hero of the faith! Not only did he do so many great things, turning the world upside down as he was accused on one occasion, he did it while maintaining great humility and sweetness of spirit. Earlier in that same letter, in **chapter 6, beginning in verse 3 [thru 10]**, Paul said:

We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4) but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5) beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6) by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; 7) by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8) through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9) as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; 10) as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Still even earlier in that same epistle, in **chapter 4, beginning in verse 1 [thru 12]**, Paul expressed these thoughts on the ministry that God had given him. He said:

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. 2) But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. 3) And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. 4) In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5) For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6) For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 7) But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8) We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9) persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10) always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11) For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12) So death is at work in us, but life in you.

This was the man who literally left it all on the field! He gave and gave and went and went, and preached and preached, suffering and then suffering some more. He never once complained about how hard it was, or how badly he had been mistreated. It is true that he talked about some of those things, but not by way of complaining, but in an effort to encourage others, that if he could do that, they could also.

To the **Philippians (3:4-14)** Paul wrote these words:

...though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5) circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6) as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 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-- 10) that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11) that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12) Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13) Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14) I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

It is no wonder then, that when Paul came near to the end of his work and his life, that he was overwhelmed by the opportunity God had given him in Christ. In **1 Timothy 1:12-17** he said,

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. 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. 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. 17) To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

A few chapters over, Paul says to Timothy, *“The saying is trustworthy and deserving full acceptance. For this end we toil and strive, **because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.**”* Did you notice that? Paul said his hope was on the living God, the Savior of all men. He knew with every passing day it would not be long until he would be with that living God, Savior of all. In fact, in **2 Timothy 4:6-8**, he says,

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8) Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Paul, at the End of the Journey

That was Paul’s hope, and it was a hope that was firmly placed in the Lord. Even so, I wonder if you noticed what I did this past week in our reading from 2nd Timothy? That letter is believed to have been the last letter Paul wrote before he was put to death. Here we have a glimpse into the heart and thinking of a man who knows that his end is near.

Did you notice there at the end that things didn’t seem to be working out very well? He seems to have felt along, really, abandoned! In 4:9, he says to Timothy, “Do your best to come to me soon.” A little later, verse 21, he says, *“Do your best to come before winter.”* We wonder if Timothy made it in time? We don’t know

of course, but we do know this much, as brother John reminded us last week, Paul's final days were spent as a prisoner in the infamous Mamertine Prison in Rome. It was a miserable place, and from all we can read, it appears that except for other prisoners and guards, he was pretty much all alone.

You have to read with a discerning spirit, but it isn't hard to see that this was a pretty tough time for Paul. In **chapter 1, verse 8**, he implores Timothy to not be ashamed of me, nor of the testimony about our Lord. He goes on to say that the Lord

*saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, 10) and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, 11) for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, 12) **which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.***

A few verses later (**verse 15**), Paul says, "*You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me.*" Imagine that! "All who are in Asia"—which is where churches like Ephesus, and Troas were located; also Timothy's hometown, Derbe and Lystra. They had all turned away from Paul!

What must have been going through Paul's mind at that time? After all of those years, after all of that suffering, after all of that preaching and teaching, after all of those people he had baptized, after all of those churches he had planted and encouraged; and now they had all turned away from him.

There at the end, Paul was almost completely alone, feeling abandoned, at least by everyone except the Lord. He mentions some people by name, a Phygelus and Hermogenes, and another man named Onesiphorus. This last man had apparently made some effort to help Paul, but perhaps later he too was too ashamed and turned away from Paul. I say that because usually that kind of expression—May God have mercy on him—is used for someone who is in deep trouble.

So, when you think about how things were for Paul, how he must have been feeling at the time, listen again to the familiar words of Paul found in chapter 4:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: 2) preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. 3) For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, 4) and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. 5) As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

So it is in that context that Paul then says to Timothy:

9) Do your best to come to me soon. 10) For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. 11) Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. 12) Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. 13) When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.

Look at **verse 16**. Paul says, “**At my first defense *no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them!***”

Now notice **verse 17**: “**But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. TO HIM BE THE GLORY FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN!**”

Verse 22, the last thing we have from Paul’s pen and mind, and heart: “**The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.**”

I am sure that I do not know what your hopes are. I don’t know what your dreams and goals and ambitions are; where you see yourself a year from now, or

five, or fifty, but I do know this much: Christ is the one One in whom we can place our hope that is absolutely sure. Our youth and strength will someday begin to leave us. Our minds and hearts will begin to fail. That grand home we always wanted will become some other's. Friends and acquaintances will slip away over time. Even loved ones can disappoint us. Time and technology will pass us by. Someday, the money we have worked so hard to have will be absolutely useless to us. What a difference it will make if when that time comes we have placed all of our trust in God, and if we placed all of our hope in Christ!

Have you done that? Are you doing that at this time?

- Is your trust in God, or are you still trying to run the show?
- Are you seeking God, really seeking him, or is He just a nice idea?
- Have you put your hope in Christ, and have you been honoring Him and obeying Him as Lord?

We are now going to sing a song that is often called "an invitation song." What we mean by that is that while we sing this song together, if you feel a special need to respond to the Lord, if you want to answer his invitation, we encourage you to come to the front. One of the elders will meet you and we will help you in every way we can.

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