

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (Part One)

Reflection 27 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

“Here is,” Paul once wrote to Timothy, “a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save – to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:12-17). It’s a great text. Let’s take it in. It rises from what comes just before. In verse 11 Paul has mentioned “the glorious gospel of the blessed God,” and this leads to our text which is a spontaneous outburst of thanksgiving, and confession, and praise. Paul writes in an explosion of faith:

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord
who has given me strength,
that he considered me trustworthy,
appointing me to his service.
Even though I was once a blasphemer
and a persecutor
and a violent man,
I was shown mercy
because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.
The grace of our Lord was poured out on me
abundantly,
along with the faith and love
that are in Christ Jesus.

Here is a trustworthy saying
that deserves full acceptance
[you can absolutely count on this]:
Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners
– of whom I am the worst!
But for that very reason
I was shown mercy
so that in me,
the worst of sinners,
Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience
as an example
for those who would believe in him
and receive eternal life.

Now to the King eternal,
immortal,
invisible,
the only God,
be honor and glory for ever and ever.

Amen.”

This, if you maybe missed it, is a resurrection text. Many, many texts in Scripture are. But this text in particular is Paul’s reflection on resurrection thirty years later.

Now, to catch the power in this text, here’s what we need to see first – how Paul sees himself. In verse 15, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.” I would expect, “I was,” but no, “I am the worst.” Paul does not dissociate himself from sinners. And herein, in this understanding of himself, was his strength, and the reason sinners could hear him. He still thought of himself as one of them, in fact, as Public Sinner, No. 1. Elsewhere he wrote, “I do not understand my own actions. What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.” Again we are struck by the present tense. We even try to clean it up. Surely not, Paul! You must mean past tense.

And Paul certainly never forgets who he once was. In verse 13, I was once a blasphemer, so given to criticizing, and judging, and figuring everything out, or thinking I had, so given to vigilance, and moralizing, and condemning that I found myself lined up against God! I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor, he says, throwing men and women into prison. What happened to the children? I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, given to rage, explosive anger, moral indignation, furious about this, outraged by that, driven by an inner core of fury. Not so very different from some of us.

I remember back in my college days. On Saturday afternoons in winter and early spring, a bunch of us would play two-hand-touch football out on the varsity field. I had come of age late and had a lot to prove, I guess. But now I was pretty good in 3-on-3, or 4-on-4. The side I was on often won, until one day one of my friends (we’d been roommates on and off since Grade 9) said to me, “Do you have any idea of the look in your eyes when you’re carrying the ball? It’s scary. I mean, it’s just a game.” I really disliked my friend in that moment. But I’ve never entirely forgotten what he said. And I’ve given a lot of thought to why this sudden, explosive, when-you-least-expect-it rage. Why this grounding in anger? Each person, I suppose, must seek out answers to those kinds of questions for themselves.

But for Paul, the turning point came with (now in verse 13b), “I was shown mercy. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” What is in Christ Jesus? Paul is saying: My whole world began to change when I saw that it is trust and love. And I saw that on the Damascus Road when I saw the resurrected Christ. And from that moment I, Paul, intense, adversarial, angry, law-and-order all the way, learned grace. I, the worst of sinners, 180° off, getting everything dead wrong, had been chosen. It had to be by grace that we’re saved, not from my own doing. It had to be free – the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). And from that moment, the moment I really saw the resurrected Christ, I began to understand the love of God. Obviously nothing could separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. If after all the destructive, hateful, despicable things I had done, if God would

still reach out to me, it had to be love. And from that moment, Paul began to change. Resurrection power flowed into his life from the Resurrected One.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week