

# **Living in God's Church Today**

**Christ Jesus Came to Save Sinners**

*1 Timothy 1:12-17*

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# Christ Jesus Came to Save Sinners

## Scripture

On one of his missionary journeys, Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to deal with problems in that church. He wrote his First Letter to Timothy and urged him to charge certain persons not to teach a false gospel (1:3-4). After Paul gave this charge, Paul expressed thanks to God for his call on his life.

Let us read about God's call on Paul's life in Timothy 1:12-17:

**<sup>12</sup> I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, <sup>13</sup> though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, <sup>14</sup> and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:12-17)**

## Introduction

In 1779, a British pastor published a hymnbook titled *Olney Hymns*. It became an immediate bestseller. The public largely ignored Hymn # 41 in the collection, titled "Faith's

Review and Expectations,” which was sung to illustrate a New Year’s Day sermon in 1773. The sermon focused on the necessity of expressing gratitude for God’s saving grace and guidance throughout life. The author of the hymn made no further mentions of it in his diaries during the remaining 34 years of his life. For the next 120 years the hymn never caught anyone’s attention. Hymn # 41 only made one appearance in all the other hymnbooks published in Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was a hymn without honor in its own country.

But when Hymn # 41 jumped over the shores to America, it quickly rose in popularity. After someone renamed it, a singing instructor from South Carolina set the lyrics to a new tune. During the 1850s, the hymn added some lyrics from Black Spiritual worship. On December 10, 1947, the famous singer Mahalia Jackson recorded a version of the hymn.

Eventually, this obscure hymn, which is known today as “Amazing Grace,” has become what one person has called “the spiritual national anthem of America.” It’s original author, pastor John Newton, would have been astonished by the universality of the hymn today that he wrote 250 years ago for his local congregation. What he composed to illustrate a village sermon has developed into a global anthem.<sup>1</sup>

“Amazing Grace” begins with these words: “Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, / That saved a wretch like me! / I once was lost, but now am found, / Was blind, but now I see.”<sup>2</sup> These words, though written by John Newton, could just as easily have been written by Paul. He knew that God’s amazing grace had saved him. And he also knew that God’s amazing grace had called him to service.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Aitken and Philip Yancey, *John Newton (foreword by Philip Yancey): From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 231-237.

<sup>2</sup> *Logos Hymnal*, 1st edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995).

## Lesson

1 Timothy 1:12-17 teaches us two aspects of God's call. Let's use the following outline:

1. God Calls Believers to Service (1:11-14)
2. God Calls Sinners to Salvation (1:15-17)

### I. God Calls Believers to Service (1:11-14)

First, God calls believers to service.

The custom for writing letters in ancient times was as follows: the sender's name, the recipient's name, a greeting, a thanksgiving, the body of the letter, and a conclusion. All Paul's letters follow this custom, except his letter to the Galatians and his First Letter to Timothy. In his First Letter to Timothy, Paul went immediately from the greeting to the body of the letter. He was very concerned about the false teaching that was taking root in the churches around Ephesus, and so he immediately got to the reason for writing his letter. However, after commanding Timothy to charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine (1:3), Paul got to the thanksgiving. He wrote in verse 12, **"I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service."**

When Paul expressed thanks in his letters, it was usually to God the Father. However, here in his First Letter to Timothy, Paul gave thanks to **Christ Jesus our Lord**. Most likely, it was because he was thinking of his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus at the time he was called to service. It was **Christ Jesus our Lord** who appointed Paul to service.

Paul continued in verse 13a, **"though formerly I was a**

**blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.”** Paul was a vehement opponent of Christianity. He sought to eradicate what he believed to be an unbiblical sect of Judaism. Before his conversion, Paul now saw himself as a **“blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent”** of Christ and of Christians. Each term is more severe than the previous term. The Greek word for **“blasphemer”** (*blasphemos*) is used 5 times in the New Testament and means “a person who defames someone or something.” Paul was defaming the name of Christ and his followers. The Greek word for **“persecutor”** (*dioktes*) occurs only here in the New Testament and means “a person who participates in the systemic hunting down of an adherent of a particular religion to inflict pain or death upon them.” That was Paul’s role before his conversion; he hunted down Christians and had them imprisoned and sentenced to death for their faith in Jesus. And the Greek word for **“insolent opponent”** (*hybristes*) occurs twice in the New Testament. Our English word “hubris” comes from this word, and it means “a person characterized by their offensive disrespectful acts or statements that are outrageously forward or bold.” Such was the character of Paul before his conversion to Christ.

Paul then wrote in verse 13b, **“But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.”** Paul became the recipient of leniency and compassion from God. Paul said that he **“had acted ignorantly in unbelief.”** Paul knew about Christ and Christianity. After all, he was seeking to get rid of Christians as he considered Christianity to be a sect incompatible with Judaism. In other words, Paul was zealous for God but his zeal was misguided. He thought that he was serving God when in fact he did not yet understand what God had done in Christ. He was shown mercy on the road to Damascus when he encountered the risen Jesus Christ, was saved, and

then sent into service for Christ Jesus.

Nabeel Qureshi wrote a book titled *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* in which he details the story of his conversion from Allah to Jesus. He was a brilliant young man and he fervently believed that Islam was the correct religion and Christianity was wrong. Unlike Paul, he did not persecute Christians, but he did debate and discuss with them the merits of Islam in opposition to Christianity. Eventually, however, Jesus brought Nabeel to faith in himself. This story occurs all over the world daily as opponents of Christ and Christianity have their eyes and hearts opened to the truth of the gospel and they embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Paul had vehemently persecuted Christians. But Jesus encountered him on the road to Damascus, and he was gloriously saved, as he said in verse 14, **“and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”** The Greek word for **“grace”** (*charis*) occurs 160 times in the New Testament and refers to God’s undeserved love and favor toward guilty sinners. There was nothing in Paul deserving of God’s favor. Because of his violent persecution of Christians, one can imagine that he was the last one who might have received favor from God. But God is God and he delights to choose whomever he wills to extend his grace. Moreover, the grace of our Lord **“overflowed”** (*hyperperisseuo*) occurs only here in the New Testament. It has the idea of “super-abundant.” Paul was very conscious that God’s grace was even greater than his former sin.

Paul stated that he was given **“faith and love.”** The object of his **faith** was God and the object of his **love** was other people. God acted in grace to give Paul the gift of faith in Jesus to counter Paul’s lack of faith, and God also gave Paul the gift of love so that he could love those very Christians he had been

persecuting. Paul's transformation was so complete that he gave his entire life to proclaiming the good news of the gospel. Moreover, he was eventually martyred for his faith and love.

God constantly transforms sinners into his service. Many of us were converted when we were young and did not have time to commit great sins. But sometimes God takes hardened sinners and opponents of Christianity and transforms them into a recipient of his grace. In *101 Hymn Stories*, Kenneth Osbeck writes about a small cemetery of a parish churchyard in Olney, England, where stands a granite tombstone with the following inscription: "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine, a servant of slavers 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." This fitting testimonial, written by Newton himself prior to his death, describes aptly the unusual and colorful life of this man, one of the great evangelical preachers of the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

All Christians are saved to serve. When God calls us to himself in salvation, he also calls us to serve him. He equips and enables us to serve him in ways that glorify him and build up the body of Christ. Far too many professing Christians are not actively involved in serving Christ. They attend worship services but that is as far as their participation in the body of Christ extends. They are too busy to serve as an usher or greeter or in the Sunday school or with youth or hospitality or whatever. People may look at Paul and think that his call was unique. And they are right. It was unique. But what is not unique is that all Christians are saved to serve. God wants all

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1982), 28.

his children to be active in the household of faith. When I was a child, I had chores to do around the house. I did not like doing them but my parents were teaching me how to be responsible. (And it did help that my weekly allowance was tied to the completion of those chores!) We need to commit ourselves to serve in the church even though we may not feel like doing so.

So, first, God calls believers to service.

## II. God Calls Sinners to Salvation (1:15-17)

And second, God calls sinners to salvation.

One of Paul's best-known statements is found in verse 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."** The expression **"The saying is trustworthy"** is found only in the Pastoral Letters and is used five times (1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:11; Titus 3:8). It is an announcement of an important point or key doctrine.

Here in verse 15 Paul adds the phrase **"and deserving of full acceptance,"** which gives the statement added emphasis. Apparently, these sayings were well known in the churches and they gave concise expression to gospel truths.

After his conversion on the Damascus Road, Paul came to realize the truth that **"Christ Jesus came into to the world to save sinners."** He came to believe that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Moreover, Paul notes that he is the **"foremost"** of sinners. The Greek word for **"foremost"** (*protos*) is an adjective that means "first, ranking above all others." Paul believed himself to be the highest-ranking sinner.

Some have said that Paul was speaking hyperbolically



when he asserted that he was the “**foremost**” of sinners. After all, he had been a violent persecutor of Christ and Christians. But, it seems to me that Paul was also acutely aware of his current sin against God. When a person becomes a Christian, one thing that happens is that he becomes keenly aware of his sin and also of his need for a Savior. Jesus is the only one who can and does save sinners. However, as a Christian grows in his faith, instead of becoming aware of fewer sins in his life, he actually becomes aware of *more* sins in his life. He is now far more attentive to his attitudes than to his actions. And he realizes more and more just how sinful is his heart. Thus, a growing, maturing Christian sees increasing sin in his life rather than less sin. That is why Paul can say without speaking hyperbolically that he is the “**foremost**” of sinners.

Having just stated that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom he was the foremost, Paul wrote in verse 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 was saved so that Christ could display his grace and his mercy to the most heinous of sinners. Christ’s perfect patience with so great a sinner as Paul eventually brought him to salvation. Paul was living proof that Christ could save any sinner, no matter how great his sin may be. Paul’s conversion is recounted 6 other times in the New Testament (Acts 9, 22, 26; Galatians 1, 2; Philippians 3).

Having considered God’s grace and mercy shown to such a sinner as himself, Paul burst into a doxology of praise in verse 17, “**To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.**” This is one of several doxologies that Paul wrote. He was constantly amazed by the grace and mercy shown to him. He often burst

out in praise to God for his salvation.

Christians should never lose sight of the mercy and grace that has been shown to us. Not one of us deserved God's grace. Not one of us earned his favor. And yet, God showered us with his grace and mercy. Moreover, we sometimes begin to think of God as someone less than he is. We lose the awe and reverence for him that we should have. We forget that he is supremely holy and we are not.

I came across this advice of a man named Paternus to his son:

First of all, my child, think magnificently of God. Magnify His providence; adore His power, pray to Him frequently and incessantly. Bear Him always in your mind. Teach your thoughts to reverence Him in every place for there is no place where He is not. Therefore, my child, fear and worship and love God; first and last, think magnificently of Him!<sup>4</sup>

So, first, God calls believers to service. And second, God calls sinners to salvation.

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the concept of calling in 1 Timothy 1:12-17, let us make sure that we are saved and, if we are saved, that we serving Christ.

Do know for sure that you, like Paul, have received God's mercy? If you were to die today, are you sure that you will go to heaven? If you are not sure, I urge you to repent of your sins and trust in Jesus alone for the gift of eternal life. Do it now!

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), 272.

And if you are saved, are you serving Christ? I am not talking about only attending worship services. I am talking about serving in some ministry in the church.

C. T. (Charles Thomas) Studd (1862-1931) was the son of a wealthy British plantation owner. He was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge. He became one of England's best cricket players. And then God called him to salvation under the ministry of D. L. Moody. Then, under the influence of his father, God called C. T. Studd to service. He joined a group of others that became famous as the "Cambridge Seven." Studd helped to lay the foundation for the Student Volunteer Movement, with its special interest in recruiting college students for foreign missions. In 1885, Studd sailed for China under the auspices of the China Inland Mission. Giving away the fortune he had inherited, he sought to live in native Chinese fashion. In 1900 he went to India, where he served as minister of the Union Church of Ootacamund in southern India. In 1912 he founded the Heart of Africa Mission, which later became the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, taking as its watchword "the evangelization of every part of the unevangelized world in the shortest possible time."<sup>5</sup>

Studd wrote a poem that began with these words, "Two little lines I heard one day, Traveling along life's busy way; / Bringing conviction to my heart, And from my mind would not depart; / Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last."

Oh dear ones, if God has called you to salvation, he has also called you to service. How are you serving him?

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<sup>5</sup> N.V. Hope, "Studd, Charles Thomas," ed. J.D. Douglas and Philip W. Comfort, *Who's Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 645.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can  
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1. <https://tampabaypresbyterian.org/SermonAudio>.
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