

1 Timothy 1:12-17  
Second Sunday after Pentecost  
June 11, 2023

Do you like challenges? Some are physical like running a marathon—out of my league, for sure! Others are mental exercises. Our family has tried several Escape Rooms, where you have an hour to figure out the clues and the solution that gets you out. We've also done CluedUp competitions that are outdoors but have teams following directions around an area and answering riddles on your phone—one is happening Saturday in Milwaukee. Or perhaps you enjoy figuring out brain teasers and puzzles in the newspaper or online. Solving these challenges requires insight and perseverance. There's a feeling of satisfaction when you achieve success. Sometimes you can't figure out the solution or don't have the time and patience, so you give up.

There are more serious matters that provide challenges, such as achieving peace in Ukraine, producing cooperation in our polarized society, or maybe just getting your household to function effectively. As we turn our thought to the author of today's text, the Apostle Paul, we might consider him an impossible case, but we learn

**GOD'S GRACE CAN DO IT!**

Do what?

- I. Convert sinners
- II. Empower service
- III. Produce praise

Paul's past shows how vital it is for God's grace to act in converting sinners. He was a zealous and energetic man. He was well-educated, having a university education and instruction from a top religious leader. Yet he noted his ignorance, for his training was misdirected. He thought he was serving God but was in reality opposing him. He noted, "I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man." As evidence listen to his own summary: "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them." He was not content with opposing Christianity. He wanted to remove the name of Jesus from public proclamation. He persecuted believers and had them arrested, with many being put to death.

A Christian would want to stay away from Paul. Wouldn't God view him as a prime candidate for zapping with a lightning bolt? Destroy the enemy! End of story. But that wasn't God's plan.

We marvel at Paul's conversion. Because he was running low on believers to harm in Jerusalem he requested and received permission to leave town and hunt for more victims in Damascus, 150 miles away. He described it just like a hunter pursuing wild animals. During his trip the risen Jesus appeared in a bright light, striking him with blindness and shattering his worldview. Imagine if the one you considered an imposter, justly executed and in the grave, suddenly showed up alive and well. After getting past being flabbergasted, you would have to reverse direction. That's the miracle that took place as the Holy Spirit changed Paul from unbelief and hatred of Jesus to faith in him as the Savior of the world. Paul realized his guilt. He called himself the worst of sinners. He was filled with shame and humble repentance.

Although a guilty sinner, he was fully forgiven because that Jesus suffered, died and rose again. He paid the penalty of hell that Paul and you and I deserve. The price was complete if he was alive. Paul was baptized and his guilt was removed. He now had faith in his heart.

That was an example of what God's grace can do. Paul cited the Lord's unlimited patience. He waited until the right time, confronted Paul with his sin and entered his heart with the message of mercy. Let no one feel that it is too late or that they are too far gone. God's grace can do it! He converts sinners.

God's grace has performed that miracle in each one of us. Our history parallels that of the Apostle Paul—maybe not the details but the condition and the scope of his grace that reached us. We were born in unbelief, covered with guilt. For many of us it was baptism that brought forgiveness for all our sins as God's Spirit in his grace planted faith in our hearts. Others did not have that privilege when little so dealt for some years with the clutches of sin and its depravity. Either way we appreciate what God in his grace has done to convert us. Oh, you may object, "I was never so bad. I am a decent, law-abiding and upstanding citizen." Watch out! How easily we become like the Pharisee that Paul was, priding ourselves in our supposed goodness! But we still fall short of God's standard of perfection and are just as lost. Or if we haven't been very good, we may point to the fact that we weren't guilty of the fake piety we detect in others. That's still pride in ourselves. We need the humility that comes as God's law identifies the awfulness of our sin. It must be sincere.

Sometimes we hear people recount their past wickedness in a manner that seems like bragging about how terrible they were. Paul was in no way boasting when he referred to himself as the worst of sinners. He was confessing his guilt and rejoicing in the greatness of God's grace that had converted even him. May we each do likewise!

Conversion is not a mere change in mindset or philosophy or a switch of loyalty to a new team. It is a complete turnaround of your life and eternity. The burden of sin is

gone. Instead of being in slavery to sin the gospel has given you freedom. It impacts you today, providing meaning and purpose to your life. Instead of having your ticket punched for hell you have the promise of heaven. What can compare?

## II.

Your changed status and future will impact what you do today and tomorrow. God's marvelous grace will empower service. Again the Apostle sets an example for us. As he had been rescued by God's grace, he knew others were in the same boat, plummeting deeper into sin and finally to hell.

He would have a role in doing something about it. When the Savior appeared to him on that trip to Damascus he had plans for Paul. He was to serve as a missionary, especially to the Gentiles. Paul still had some learning to do and it took a while before people were ready to accept him as an ally on the Lord's side, not setting a trap for them. He followed the Lord's call, for he shared concern for the lost. He traveled about the Mediterranean region, establishing congregations, writing to and revisiting them to strengthen their faith. He declined to receive a salary so it would be clear that he hadn't switched sides for the money. He encountered hardships and often had to flee for his life as opponents tried to silence the message of the gospel. He was arrested, whipped, beaten and more. Once he was stoned and left for dead. His life likely later ended by execution.

The Apostle was writing to Timothy, who had become a colleague in ministry, to encourage him to faithfulness of service in the face of opposition. We read these words as more than history about some Bible heroes. Our thoughts may go to those serving in the public ministry, especially as we await the arrival of our new pastor. That is appropriate, but Paul's message is more personal. As each of us was called to faith we were also called to service wherever God has placed us in life. In your family you can support and encourage your spouse and teach and model Christian faith for your children and grandchildren. If you have none, you can influence your siblings or nieces and nephews or your parents. Many students have built the faith of their families as they go home and share the lessons they have learned. You can exert a positive influence for Christ in your workplace. You don't have to be an annoying pest, buttonholing each coworker and quizzing, "Are you saved?" Encourage those experiencing difficult times with the comfort of God's Word. Your willingness to help and share with others as you live your faith provides a positive witness. Model ethical and upright behavior and offer faithful labor. The same holds true in your neighborhood. Be friendly and kind. Lend a helping hand.

Service opportunities exist in the congregation. We don't have a lot of groups but there are always tasks in maintaining property and holding services, assisting those who can't be here or those who could be but aren't. Service starts with growing in faith through study of God's Word. Make it a priority. Respond by using your talents

to serve as you thank the one who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light by his grace and the power of the gospel.

### III.

God's grace is not done operating. It will also produce praise. As he considered the activity of God's grace and its effects on his life, Paul couldn't keep it inside. He burst forth in a doxology, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." We praise God for his person. He is eternal. He has always existed and always will be there for us. He is immortal, not dying but constantly the essence of life and the source of ours. He is invisible, dwelling in a sphere we can't see now (and that's good because we sinners couldn't tolerate the sight of a holy being). He is the only true God, supreme over all, with no real rival. He is in a class by himself.

We praise God for his work. We noted it briefly before, but it is worth repeating. Jesus took on our humanity in order to take our place. As our substitute he lived in obedience to God's holy law, achieving the righteousness it demanded and giving us the credit for it. He died in payment for all the many sins we have committed and continue to fall into each day, even as Christians. He sent his Spirit into our hearts to produce personal faith so you and I know the joy of that forgiveness and the blessings he provides during our lives now and forever in heaven.

We also praise God for the privilege to serve him. We do not view it as a burden or drudgery. Think of it: we have the thrill of bringing to others the life-giving gospel that saves their souls eternally. It is a precious task that he allows to us weak sinners. Sometimes we are hesitant or scared about serving him. Always remember that as he calls us to a role in his kingdom he also empowers us. Paul was keenly aware that his success did not come from himself but from the Lord. God's grace was the source of his faithfulness and ours. Motivated by that grace we will continue joyful service around his heavenly throne.

Our praise will resound now in our worship and in our work, with our lips and in our lives. That's a change also produced by God's grace, for complaint about our lot in life and criticism of God's ways come easily by nature. Take in his gracious gospel and experience the transformation. Come gladly and regularly to his house. Live each day to his glory, striving to honor your Savior in all you think, say and do.

God's grace not only can do it. It has done it. You have been brought to faith. You are his child. Live in that faith and serve and praise your gracious Lord daily.