

Armagh Baptist Church – 14th March 2010
The Life and Times of Timothy 3
'Paul's Conversion Story'
1Timothy 1:12-17

Introduction

Timothy, a young man of 36 or so, is now in Ephesus on his own (v.3). Paul his fellow-missionary (his boss) left him there for a reason (v.3). He was there to do a very difficult job: to sort out a church that had gone off the rails spiritually, because of false teaching. Especially to stop those who were teaching it – The sad thing was that these were probably men who had been appointed as elders by the Apostle Paul himself only a few years earlier!

Timothy feels like leaving and giving up in the face of the difficulties & pressures he is facing over this (v.3). (*'I urged you to stay in Ephesus'*).

Timothy had grown up in a godly home - We have already seen that his mother & grandmother were godly Jews who became Christians – (See 2 Tim 1:5). But his father was a pagan - a gentile who never trusted in Christ (Acts 16:2).

Maybe, like many young people, Timothy had just sort of 'grown into' his faith in Jesus at 16. And then he had started out as a missionary with Paul around 18 years of age. But, as some people might say, "Timothy had never been *really* bad – He'd always been *good living!*"

But now he's up against it in Ephesus – and his faith is under pressure. Does he really believe in the truth of this Gospel now, or is he losing his confidence in the power of this message to totally transform lives?

Sometimes the more dramatic your own conversion is; the greater confidence you will have in the power of the Gospel to change lives, because you never forget your own experience. You know what God was able to do in your own life, from personal experience, so you never doubt what he can do for others.

For example, compare Addison Clingen and me – Addison and I were involved in planting a church in Cavan together, but we had very different testimonies. I was a bit like Timothy. I grew up in a Christian home – both of my parents were Christians. I knew the Gospel for as long as I can possibly remember. I always knew I needed to be saved. My older brother got saved a year before me. I was just 7 years old when I trusted in Christ as my Saviour, in my own bedroom on 1st January 1974, after I'd asked my mother and brother how to be saved. I never back-slid, I kept going on with Christ, so I never really knew what it was to get involved 'in the world' as they say.

Addison's experience was almost the opposite. Addison had never heard the Gospel until he was about 25 yrs old. He lived life to the full up until that time. He came from a family who ran a pub in Enniskillen. He smoked in those days, and he had a petrol cigarette lighter. One day he was trying to refill it with petrol, and he spilt some of the petrol over his clothes. He was walking down the yard to go to change his clothes, with the lighter still in his hands. By mistake he flicked the lighter and because his clothes were drenched with petrol, he went up in flames! The next thing he knew he was drifting in and out of consciousness in a bed in the old County Hospital in Enniskillen. Over two thirds of the exposed part of his body had been very severely burned, and he was fighting for his life. It was then that he had an experience of dying. He felt his soul going down out of his body. As his soul went down, he could see a screen with everything he had ever done wrong, all his sins, coming up in a long list before him. He knew he was dying. He says he felt the gates opening beneath him to receive his soul, but at that moment he cried out, *'Oh God, save me!'* And at that moment he felt arms coming underneath him, and his soul coming back into his body, and shortly after that he began to come round. He says he can still see his mother and other family members around his bed. They thought he was delirious. He could see that his mother was crying. But he said, *'Don't worry mother, God has saved me, I'm going to be alright.'* He can still remember them all pointing at the side of their heads, as if to say, he was away with it. He was out of his mind. But some time later he did recover, and a Christian nurse witnessed to him and explained the Gospel to him more fully, and he was sure he was saved. He was telling everybody. So they sent for his minister. He told him that God had saved him, and do you know what the minister said? *'You didn't need to be saved! You come from a good family. You don't need to be saved!'* But Addison knew that he did need to be saved, and that God had saved him. God had spared his life. That was around 1952, and Addison, although he is in his 80s now, still has a tremendous passion for sharing the Gospel and for seeing people saved. So you can see that Addison and I had very different conversion experiences. Addison had a dramatic one like Saul of Tarsus. I had a quiet conversion experience, simply trusting in Christ as my Saviour – led to the Lord by my mother in my own home. If you've had a dramatic conversion experience, you will probably never doubt the power of the Gospel. If you've had a quieter experience of coming to Christ, there are times you might doubt its power to save the worst of sinners.

Well Paul, writing this letter to Timothy in Ephesus, seems to suspect that this is what Timothy is going through. So in these verses he tells Timothy his own conversion story. The dramatic account of how Saul of Tarsus was transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ into Paul the Apostle.

Why does Paul do this? – Well he does it to remind Timothy, that if God could reach and save Saul of Tarsus, bearing in mind all the terrible things he had done, then there was hope for absolutely anybody else.

As he tells us in vs.15 & 16 he considered himself to be “the *worst of sinners*.” I don’t think that’s just a turn of phrase that Paul uses. I think he really felt it and meant it. He regarded himself as the worst of sinners!

Look at all the people Paul has just mentioned in vs.8-11. Did Timothy really still believe that those sorts of people could get saved, that their lives could be totally transformed by the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Let me bring it home to you - Do you believe that those kinds of people can still get saved by the power of the Gospel that we preach in our day? Or have we just contented ourselves to try to reach *the good-living people*? It’s the mention of “the Gospel” in v.11 that prompts Paul to tell his own life story...

1. What was Paul like before his Conversion? (v.13)

* **A Blasphemer** - In other words, he had refused to acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as God come in the flesh – In fact he had probably cursed him.

* **A Persecutor** - Saul of Tarsus had been infamous for his zealous persecution of Christians - hounding them to their death in many cases.

* **A Violent Man** - He had travelled everywhere breathing out threats & killing these Christians. He was like a lion tearing its prey limb from limb!

* **But he says he had acted in ignorance & unbelief** - Paul was an educated man - but he was absolutely blinded by his previous religion!

* **So now he regarded himself as ‘the worst of sinners’** - Looking back, how he as a Christian now had put Christians to death then, must have always troubled his conscience – It was something he regretted all of his days. So it was in that sense that he regarded himself as *‘the worst of sinners.’*

That’s what Paul was like before his conversion to Christ. He wasn’t a nice man at all!

2. What did Paul believe God had done for him? (v.14)

Look at the phrases Paul uses in these verses to describe what God had done in his life. Here we get to the heart of the Gospel:

* **God had shown him Mercy (v.13, 16)** - Paul deserved to lose his life for the lives he had taken. He deserved capital punishment if anyone did! But God showed him mercy by withholding from him the punishment that he justly deserved. Instead...

* **God’s Grace was poured into his life abundantly (v.14)** – **Mercy** is God withholding from us, what we do deserve – wrath & punishment **Grace** is God freely giving us something we don’t deserve – His forgiveness, His cleansing, peace, eternal life, salvation – All of this comes as a Free Gift!

* **Along with Faith... (v.14)** – In fact faith itself is a gift from God according to Ephesians 2:8-9 and Romans 6:23. So he received: Mercy, Grace, Faith...

* **...and Love from Jesus Christ (v.14)** - Why does God do all of this for us? Because of His great love! Simply because he loves us – even as sinners!

* **Jesus showed Paul unlimited patience (v.16)**
What Paul deserved was for his life to be snuffed out. But God not only spare his life, he gave him time to come to faith in Christ and be saved instead. God’s Spirit continued to strive with Saul of Tarsus, until he bowed the knee to Christ as Lord and Saviour of his life. God was incredibly patient with him!

* **So now what did Paul think of Jesus? (v.17)**
Well he’s no longer blaspheming Him! That’s for sure. Blasphemous words were now the furthest words from his lips. Now, as a believer, he can only fall down before Jesus and cry out:
“My God and King!” “You are worthy of glory forever!”

What an amazing change had come over Paul’s life! All because of the Gospel of God’s Grace revealed to him on the Damascus Road!

3. Why had God done all of this in Paul’s life? (v.15-16)

Well Paul believed what had happened in his life had happened...

* **As an example** to those who would believe in Jesus later and receive eternal life (17). It’s as if Paul’s experience was the prototype for others.

* **As a demonstration** to show that *“Christ Jesus (did indeed) come into the world to save sinners”*
- even the very worst of sinners! (v.15)
- not just the good-living ones! *‘Christ Jesus came...to save sinners!’*

So anyone can be saved! Including all the people mentioned in vs.8-11.

* In other words, if God could save Saul of Tarsus, the arch persecutor of Christians, and transform him into Paul the preacher of the Christian Gospel, then he would certainly have no problem changing your life! (v.12)

Conclusion

So if Timothy has been doubting the power of the Gospel he was called to preach, then Paul has reminded him of the incredible power of that very Gospel to change lives.

He has done so, by reminding Timothy of how God had saved him, the very worst of sinners. He simply shared his testimony with him: a testimony to the Grace of God to change the life of a hardened sinner.

It's important that we don't doubt the power of the Gospel today!

Timothy had maybe become disillusioned as he dealt with these false teachers who had once been the obvious candidates for eldership as far as the Apostle Paul had been concerned when he was starting this church.

It is possible to become very disillusioned if we have our eyes fixed only on other Christians around us. It is possible for any Christian to let you down. It's possible for those you look up to most, to let you down the most, and when they do you begin to wonder if this Gospel is true at all, or am I just kidding myself?

At times like that, we need to get our eyes off men, and back onto the Lord. We need to get our attention back onto the power of the Gospel to totally transform lives, and be reminded once again of the Grace of God, and the Power of God to save to the uttermost **all** who come to him through Christ.

*If you have already trusted in Jesus as your Saviour, I want you to think this morning for a moment of where you would be if you hadn't done so. And begin to imagine what God has saved you from.

*If you have never trusted in Jesus as your Saviour, then stop for a moment and realise today that God has already saved the worst of sinners – Saul of Tarsus - so he'll have absolutely no problem with you! You can trust Him too.

I invite you to Trust Him now! Get your eyes off men, and Trust Jesus today!

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