

Paul: Chief of Sinners?

¹² I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, ¹³ even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. ¹⁶ Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. ¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1.12-17)

Introduction

The passage above has been greatly misunderstood. Most teach the point of the passage is Paul's admission that he was the "chief of sinners," that is, the greatest sinner who ever lived. In the translation above (NASB), the translators have added "of all" to ensure this point (verse 15). Even more egregious is the NET Bible translation, which adds, "and I am the worst of them!" Such "helps" add to the confusion.

Paul was a great sinner. He knew it. He never got over the fact that he persecuted those who had believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah (1 Corinthians 15.9). How many times must he have asked himself, "How could I, a Pharisee, schooled in the Law and prophets, have been so blind as not to recognize the Messiah?" "How could I, a beneficiary of the best education, taught by the most brilliant rabbi, have missed the

One to Whom all the prophets pointed?" All that was true. But Paul's sinfulness was *not* the main point of this passage.

The Word "πρῶτος"

The word in verses 15 and 16 translated "foremost" is [πρῶτος](#). Its primary meaning is "first in time, place, in any succession of things or of persons." It is found 156 times in the New Testament with Paul using the term 29 times: Romans 1.8, 16, 2.9-10, 3.2, 10.19, 15.24; 1 Corinthians 11.18, 12.28, 14.30, 15.3, 15.45-47; 2 Corinthians 8.5; Ephesians 6.2; Philippians 1.5; 1 Thessalonians 4.16; 2 Thessalonians 2.3; 1 Timothy 1.15-16, 2.1, 2.13, 3.10, 5.4, 5.12; 2 Timothy 1.5, 2.6, 4.16. If one examines Paul's use of πρῶτος one will discover that in each case he used the term in its primary meaning, i.e., "first in time, place, etc."¹ This is weighty evidence to support our case.

Almost all translators have translated πρῶτος as "foremost" (NASB) or "chief" (KJV) or "worst" (NIV). Exegetically, such a sense is unlikely since Paul *always* used the word πρῶτος in its primary meaning. Second, do translators really expect us to believe Paul thought he was the "worst" sinner who ever lived? Did Paul believe he was worse than Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero? Did he think he was worse than Haman who tried to kill all the Jews? What about Ahab, Jezebel, the wicked kings of Israel, not the mention the evil kings who ruled Gentile nations? Such a conclusion should be highly suspicious to one who reads history, works with the Greek text, considers the context of a passage, or thinks critically. Paul as "worst of sinners" certainly does not agree with what he wrote elsewhere (cf. Philippians 3.4-6) and what he wrote a couple of verses before (1 Timothy 1.12-13).

Taken straightforwardly, verse 15 reads, "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am first." As noted above, almost all translations have translated

πρῶτος as “foremost” by which they mean “worst.”² The reason translators have made this translation is not because of grammatical or exegetical support, for, as we have seen, it is *extremely* weak. The reason translators have rendered the verse as they have is *they have no idea* what Paul meant by his declaration that he was the “first of sinners.” Since Paul referred to his sinfulness in verse 13, they seize the first part of the verse (without examining the full passage) and use it as a springboard to support the idea that Paul thought he was the “foremost,” i.e., “worst” of sinners. If one examines the verse in context, this translation becomes even more suspect and exegetically effete.

1 Timothy 1.16

What *did* Paul mean by “first of sinners” if he did not mean “worst,” “foremost,” or “chief” of sinners? To shed light on this, let us examine the context of Paul’s thought by looking at the next verse. In verse 16, Paul declared,

“Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.”

The Greek text reads:

ἀλλὰ διὰ τοῦτο ἠλεήθην, ἵνα ἐν ἐμοὶ πρώτῳ ἐνδείξῃται Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς τὴν ἅπασαν μακροθυμίαν, πρὸς ὑποτύπωσιν τῶν μελλόντων πιστεύειν ἐπ’ αὐτῷ εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

A more accurate rendering is the following:

“But on account of this I received mercy, in order that by me first, Jesus Christ might demonstrate all patience, as a pattern to those who would thereafter believe upon Him for eternal life.”

Let us examine the verse to understand its meaning:

Verse 16a: But on account of this I received mercy, in order that by me first (πρῶτος)

Why did Paul receive God's mercy? Paul argued that despite his sinfulness, God showed him mercy because he acted ignorantly in unbelief (1 Timothy 1.13). Elsewhere, Paul declared God's grace was greater than sin (Romans 5.20). God's faithfulness and love trumped Paul's sinfulness. In verse 16, Paul again (as in verse 15) used the word πρῶτος. What did Paul mean by claiming to be the first? This is a key question with which we will deal shortly.

Verse 16b: Jesus Christ might show all patience as a pattern ([ὑποτύπωσις](#)) to the ones about to believe upon Him for eternal life.

Paul recognized and emphasized God's forbearance, patience, and grace towards him. This is especially important in light of the fact that the ascended Lord commissioned him to be the apostle of grace who proclaimed the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24). The word "grace" ([χάρις](#)) is used by Paul far more than anyone or anywhere in the Bible.

The words πρῶτος and ὑποτύπωσις are inseparable to understanding Paul's meaning. Paul declared he was "first" as a "pattern" (ὑποτύπωσις) for those who would believe on Christ for eternal life. Elsewhere, Paul emphasized he was a "pattern" by his commands for believers to imitate or copy him. No one else did this. Peter didn't. James didn't. John didn't. Jude didn't. It is highly significant Paul did. Paul used the nouns [μιμητής](#), [συμμιμητής](#) and the verb [μιμέομαι](#) to this purpose (1 Corinthians 4.16, 11.1; Galatians 4.12; Philippians 3.17; 1 Thessalonians 1.6; 2 Thessalonians 3.7, 9). In Philippians 3.17 and 2 Thessalonians 3.9 we have the "μιμ*" words coupled with [τύπος](#), which means an "example" or a "pattern." A pattern is a blueprint for something new,

i.e., a prototype. What did Paul mean? The answer to that question requires that we understand God's revealed plan prior to Paul.

God's Revealed Plan

The plan God revealed to Abraham began with his call (about 2,000 B.C.). God promised Abraham that He would establish a special relationship with him and that from him He would create a new race of people (Jews). Through this people, God would give covenants and promises. The covenants revealed God would establish His kingdom on earth (cf. Isaiah 2, Isaiah 11) in which the Messiah would reign (Zechariah 14.9). In this kingdom, Israel would be supreme among the nations (Deuteronomy 28.1, 13). As for Gentiles, they would be blessed through Israel (Isaiah 49.5-7; 60.1-3; Zechariah 8.20-23). These blessings had a condition. God's blessings to Gentiles required Israel to become a nation of priests (Exodus 19.4-6). To achieve this, the nation had to accept their Messiah. When Israel's Messiah arrived and presented Himself as King, instead of recognizing Him, the Jews instigated His crucifixion. In Acts, we read that while thousands of Jews believed Jesus was their Messiah, the overwhelming majority rejected Him—especially the nation's rulers. This rejection reached a climax with Stephen's stoning (Acts 7). Saul of Tarsus was an eyewitness of his execution; he held the clothes of the those who hurled the stones (Acts 7.58-60).

Since Israel rejected their Messiah, how could God's promise to bless Gentiles come to pass? The short answer is: it couldn't. God had revealed no plan to effect this. Gentile blessing depended wholly upon Jewish acceptance of their Messiah. This was an essential fact from God's establishment of the Abrahamic Covenant. All Gentile blessing from that time forward had to come through Israel.

God's revelation in the Old Testament through the covenants and His prophets consisted of the revelation of a Messiah,

rejection of the Messiah, God's judgment, and the establishment of His kingdom. God summarized these events in Psalm 2. God's judgment was known as the Day of the Lord (Zephaniah 1.14-18) and Peter expected to occur soon (Acts 2.14-21 cf. Joel 2.28-32).

But God did an astonishing thing. He halted His revealed, prophetic plan. In mercy, He delayed His judgment—the Day of the Lord. Instead, He did something entirely unforeseen and unprophesied. God initiated and revealed a new plan—a plan of grace. Saul of Tarsus became God's key to this new plan.

Paul the First

Saul of Tarsus had nothing to commend himself to God. He was a religious fanatic. To arrest, persecute, torture, and kill Jews who believed Jesus was the promised Messiah consumed him. From a perspective of divine justice, he deserved death. But God did not kill him; He saved him. And in saving him God commissioned him to be "the apostle to the Gentiles" (Romans 11.13) to preach the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24; 1 Corinthians 15.1-4) in which one is saved by faith alone apart from the Law of Moses. In addition to revealing this gospel by faith alone, God revealed several other doctrines to Paul He had kept hidden. Paul called these doctrines "secrets" ([μυστήριον](#)).

Paul's salvation and the revelations he received from the risen Lord were what Paul had reference to when he spoke of himself as πρῶτος "first." Paul was the "first of sinners" in the sense that God saved him to inaugurate a whole new program. As the "first," Paul was God's prototype. To Paul, God revealed the "gospel of the grace of God" in which one is saved by faith alone—simply by believing that Christ died for one's sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). This gospel was entirely different from the "gospel of the kingdom" inaugurated by John the Baptist and Jesus (cf. Matthew 3.1-2, 4.17, 9.35). Consider the following: how was Peter saved? Was

it by believing Christ died for his sins and rose from the dead? No, Peter was saved by believing Jesus was the promised Messiah (Matthew 16.16-17). Peter knew nothing of Jesus' death and resurrection (Luke 18.31-34; John 20.8-9) with respect to its salvific significance. Martha was saved the same way, believing Jesus was the promised Messiah (John 11.25-27). How is one saved today? Is it by believing Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God? No, one is saved today by believing Paul's gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4).³

The gospel Peter proclaimed for salvation on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2.38) was not Paul's gospel. Peter did not tell Jews on the day of Pentecost to believe Christ died for their sins and rose from the dead to be saved. Peter had no knowledge of this gospel until much later—until Paul revealed it. The gospel Peter proclaimed at Pentecost was the gospel of the kingdom which required repentance and baptism. A vast difference exists between this gospel and Paul's gospel.

To understand better the change God initiated with Paul, consider Peter's experience with the Roman centurion. God commanded Peter to go to Cornelius' house. Peter went but went reluctantly. He shuffled his feet the entire way. Why? Cornelius was a Gentile. Prophetically, Gentile blessing was to come *after* Israel accepted her Messiah. Despite his unhappiness, Peter obeyed God. Notice how Cornelius was saved (Acts 10.34-48). How different was his salvation than what happened at Pentecost! At Pentecost, the order of salvation was: 1) Repentance 2) Baptism 3) Receipt of the Holy Spirit. With Cornelius it was 1) Belief (implied) 2) Receipt of the Holy Spirit 3) Baptism. Why the difference? Acts 10 comes after Acts 9. Cornelius was saved *after* God saved Paul. Cornelius, by the preaching of Peter, was saved in an entirely different way than what Peter had proclaimed at Pentecost. Peter had just begun to warm up in his message to Cornelius when suddenly, Cornelius was saved. Peter did not utter a single word about repentance or baptism. Cornelius just

believed and received the Holy Spirit. Peter and the Jews with him were stunned ([ἐξίστημι](#)). It wasn't supposed to happen that way! Why had it? Because Paul was "first." Paul's salvation and commission opened up a whole new plan of salvation. Did Peter understand this? Not at all. It would take many years for Peter to understand the significance of this event (Acts 15.11). Even at the end of his life, Peter did not understand some of what Paul taught (2 Peter 3.14-16).

After Cornelius' salvation, Peter went his way and continued to preach the gospel of the kingdom. In the meantime, God gave Paul the revelations to lay the foundation for an entirely new program in which sinners were saved by faith alone apart from the Law of Moses. The ascended Lord revealed to Paul the Church, the body of Christ, in which Jews and Gentiles were equal "in Christ."⁴ But why had God commanded Peter to go to the Gentile Cornelius' house if Peter did not understand what had happened? God always has a plan. He would use Peter's experience many years in the future to help Paul at the Council of Jerusalem. But that is another story⁵.

Paul: Founder of the Church, the Body of Christ

Paul wrote the believers in Corinth:

¹⁰ *According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid the foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it.* ¹¹ *For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3.10-11).*

The above passage is a parallel passage to what Paul had written to Timothy.

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| Parallel Accounts: Paul "First" (πρῶτος) and "Architect" (ἀρχιτέκτων) |
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Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting (1 Timothy 1.16 DARBY).

According to the grace of God which has been given to me, as a wise architect, I have laid the foundation, but another builds upon it. But let each see how he builds upon it. (1 Corinthians 3.10 DARBY).

In verse 9, Paul wrote, “For we are laborers together with God: you are God’s husbandry, you are God’s building.” The words, “husbandry” and “building” are metaphors that equal to the Church, the body of Christ. Paul was not speaking of the local church at Corinth but of the whole new creation of the Church which is Christ’s body. Paul laid the foundation of the building (the Church) but the foundation itself was Christ as he wrote in verse 11.

In both passages, Paul acknowledged God’s mercy and grace to him. As noted above, Paul, in his letter to Timothy, declared he was the “first” and a “pattern” for those who would soon be saved. We find a similar, parallel text, in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. He wrote the Corinthians that he was the “architect” ([ἀρχιτέκτων](#)) who laid the foundation ([θεμέλιος](#)). What does an architect do? He designs the building and lays its foundation. The foundation is the first part of the building. One cannot start a structure without a foundation. It constitutes a new beginning. What was that foundation? The foundation of the building was Christ and the truths He revealed to Paul. Paul called these truths “[secrets](#)” ([μυστήριον](#)). Paul used the word [μυστήριον](#) because the truths he received from the risen Christ were just that—“secrets”—information God had kept hidden until He revealed them to Paul. These “secrets” form the content of the revelation the risen Lord gave to Paul as the “first.” After Paul learned these truths, he communicated them to others so “another” ([ἄλλος](#)) could build on the new foundation

established by these truths. Paul issued a warning in the latter part of the verse: "But each man must be careful how he builds on it." Since Paul's teaching came directly from the Lord, those who build on Paul's foundation (1 Corinthians 3.11), must be careful to follow his teaching.

Conclusion

Saul of Tarsus was a religious fanatic and a great sinner. He recognized this fact after God saved and commissioned him as Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.13). The point Paul wished to make in 1 Timothy 1.15-16 was not to reveal the degree of his sinfulness but to communicate a much more important truth: that he was the one the ascended Lord chose to reveal doctrines He had kept hidden and to commission him to minister to Gentiles. Paul was the "first" in that sense. Paul's new foundation is what we call Christianity. It was something new and different from the ministry of the Twelve and Judaism. This foundation was vastly different from the program Christ operated under in His earthly ministry (Romans 15.8) which Peter followed (cf. Matthew 28.19-20; Acts 2, Acts 3). In the divinely revealed program God gave Paul, Gentiles would receive God's favor and blessing apart from Israel and apart from the Mosaic Law. This was *new*. God had revealed none of these doctrines through Moses and the prophets. God revealed nothing in the Old Testament of a joint body composed of Jew and Gentile equal in Christ. Jesus never revealed this in His earthly ministry. On the contrary, Jesus went to Jew only and commanded his disciples to do the same (Matthew 10.5-6; 15.22-24). Equality of Jew and Gentile as the Church, the body of Christ, was a (μυστήριον), a "secret" God kept hidden until He revealed it to Paul.⁶

As the receiver of God's secrets Paul magnified his ministry to Gentiles (Romans 11.13). But he also taught God had not abandoned or forgotten His promises to national Israel. The ascended Lord had revealed to Paul the "secret" (μυστήριον) of

Israel's partial blindness (Romans 11.25) and that "all Israel would be saved" (Romans 11.26). This verse means exactly what it says. Every single Jew living on the earth when the Lord returns will experience salvation (cf. Matthew 23.37-39). Until God removes the Church (Romans 11.25) God's favor is directed primarily towards Gentiles, and especially the Church, the body of Christ, composed of Jew and Gentile who are equal in Christ. To Paul and Paul alone God revealed this great truth. To learn more of the other "secrets" God revealed to Paul, see the article [Paul's "Mystery"](#).

¹ One *possible* though doubtful exception may be 1 Corinthians 15.3. The NASB has taken this view. On the other hand, the KJV has translated πρῶτος in its primary sense. The weight of the textual evidence from Paul's other uses strongly favors the primary sense.

² A notable and happy exception is Darby's translation, who translates πρῶτος as "first" or "the first."

³ The doctrine of salvation by faith alone, *sola fide*, was unknown before Paul. This is discussed in the article, [Faith and Works in James: Resolving the Problem](#).

⁴ These changes took time. It was not like an electric light being turned on. Rather, it was like a sunrise in which night gradually turns to day. Even 11 years after Paul began his missionary journeys both the "gospel of the kingdom" and the "gospel of the grace of God" were in play. This led to the great Council of Jerusalem in 51 A.D. Believers who were in the Jerusalem church declared Gentiles could not be saved apart from circumcision and keeping of the Mosaic Law (Acts 15.1, 5). Paul opposed them and said Gentiles were saved by faith alone (1 Corinthians 15.1-4), apart from circumcision and the Law. Peter, as a result of his experience at Cornelius' house and the prompting of the Holy Spirit, declared Paul was right and they were wrong. In addition, Peter stated that from that point forward, Jews had to be saved the same way as Paul's Gentiles (Acts 15.11). This was a

watershed event. It was the official and Scriptural end of the “gospel of the kingdom.” The gospel of the grace of God, Paul’s gospel, will continue until Christ removes the Church, the body of Christ. After that, the gospel of the kingdom will be reinstated and Jesus’ prophecy of the end will be fulfilled (Matthew 24.14). Paul could not have written the strong words of Galatians 1.6-9 until *after* the events and decision of the Jerusalem Council.

⁵ See the author’s article, [The Great Hinge](#).

⁶ Some commentators have discussed the word μυστήριον in terms of the mystery religions. Such explanations are far-fetched. Paul was a Pharisaic Jew, not a Platonist. His world view was Judaism, not Greek philosophy or mystery religions. When Paul used the word μυστήριον, he used it in its basic sense: a secret, something unrevealed. Why complicate the straightforward and simple?

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