

The sermon

Intro

What we think about God has major repercussions.

If we view God like a deist (God created the world, set everything in place, and let it go wherever it might), we won't expect much from God in terms of personal involvement in our lives. We might live by the motto "God helps those who help themselves."

If we view God like an angry, impatient boss who's looking over our back hoping to find fault so he can zap us, we might not be inclined to confess our sins to him or pray for his help in fighting temptation.

How we perceive God affects how we relate to him.

This morning we'll see Paul's understanding of God. I'm praying that as we see who God is, we'll adore him more. And depend on him more.

READ PASSAGE

Body

Passage Focus

Paul says a lot about God. We'll consider how God acted for Paul. The truths we uncover should stimulate our love for God and increase our confidence in him.

Point 1: God strengthens (1:12)

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, – 1:12

The story of the apostle Paul isn't the story of the man with the greatest willpower in the world. It's the story of a God who strengthens his people.

Jesus strengthened Paul. How did Jesus strengthen Paul? By indwelling Paul and supplying strength to the weak apostle.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. – Galatians 2:20

Divine strengthening is a theme in Paul's life. One I've latched onto in my own life.

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. – 2

Corinthians 12:9-10

I can do all things through him who strengthens me. – Philippians 4:13

That's strengthened in times of being brought low: hunger, need, etc.

At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! ¹⁷ But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. – 2 Timothy 4:16-17

The truth that God is present with us and strengthens us is one of the truths of Scripture I cling most tightly to. A truth to remember and remind ourselves of.

Application

This is how I apply this truth of divine strengthening to myself. Life is hard. We are finite beings, unlike our infinite God. We wear out. We fatigue. Pressures weigh us down. Sadness and loss weigh us down. We aren't invincible. We can reach a breaking point. Life is particularly harder in some seasons of life.

For me it's been having to make it through Greek and Hebrew classes. Having to wake up in the morning and dreading to go to a job that my God-given abilities just aren't suited for. A job I have no passion for. For 12 years and three months. Chest pains because a good number left the church during COVID. A hard conversation that has to be had that I'm just not looking forward to. A life schedule that is too overbooked and just wearing me out.

How do I endure? In part trusting that God will strengthen me for the day at hand. In part pouring my heart out to God for strength to endure and honor him. And later thanking him for carrying me through.

This is where God wants us. Dependent on him.

What about you? What are you dealing with that is beyond your capacity? What are you dreading right now? Turn to Jesus for strengthening. Jesus is able!

Point 2: God appoints to service (1:12)

because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. – 1:12-13

Note Paul views service as a good thing. He's happy about it. Service is a blessing from God.

Jesus appointed Paul to serve him. Despite his wretched track record. Meaning appointed to be an apostle. Serving Jesus by evangelizing where the gospel's never been, establishing local churches from converts, appointing elders in those churches, moving on to another place where the gospel hasn't yet been preached, keeping tabs on the churches already founded. That's Paul's service.

blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.

We'll let *Acts* describe Paul's behavior. Note Saul is Paul.

And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. – **Acts 8:1-3**

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. – **Acts 9:1-2**

I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, – **Acts 22:4**

"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities. – **Acts 26:9-11**

Paul's aim was to capture every single Christian and end the church. He approved of executing believers because they believed Jesus was God the Son incarnate, the Jewish Messiah. He punished believers. Likely meaning flogging meaning he tortured believers to get them to deny Christ. When believers fled Jerusalem for their lives, he hunted them down in the neighboring towns. Damascus was 150 miles away. About a week's journey.

Note that Paul imprisoned both men and women. That meant Paul's mission was separating mothers from their children. Imagine the horror of a mother being bound and taken and her children left to fend for themselves. Who will watch them? Will I ever see them again? It's possible women were among those executed.

Execution occurred when Rome gave Jewish authorities the okay or when Rome carried it out, like Jesus' crucifixion. Women were crucified by the Roman Empire per Jewish historian Josephus (*The Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.3.4).

This was the man appointed by God to evangelize and establish and oversee churches! So how was Paul judged to be faithful?

Now as he went on his way, he [Paul] approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." – Acts 9:3-6

Paul's intent was to separate mothers from their children. Jesus had a different agenda. Paul received Jesus' instructions and believed. After believing, Paul "*proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues...and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ*" (Acts 9:20, 22). Paul was found faithful shortly after his conversion.

Application

This is how I apply this to myself. Each of us are appointed to specific callings (or areas of service) by God. How do I define a faithful Christian? What's maturity? One who is faithful in their God-given callings. My callings would include husband, father, son, pastor, church member, evangelist/witness, neighbor/townsperson, etc.

These areas of service are from God. What areas of service has God appointed you to? Be faithful in these.

This calls for self-examination. To look at our life and say, "What has God assigned to me?" To look at these assignments and say, "How am I doing in this area? What improvements are needed? Where do I need God's wisdom? Where do I need God's help?"

Have courage. Don't fear. God strengthens you for the task he assigns you to. Have confidence in the God who appointed and strengthened Paul. Some callings are harder than others. Some callings are hard for a season. God's strength is sufficient. God confidence. Not self-confidence.

Point 3: God gives mercy (1:13-14)

But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, – 1:13

mercy

Mercy mean having pity, having compassion on someone in a needy, desperate condition, and acting for that person, providing the help required.

Paul truly wanted to honor God. It was his burning passion. But he didn't see. So God had mercy on mistaken and malicious Paul. Jesus died for his sins. Jesus appeared to him. Jesus appointed him to apostleship.

God acted for blind, sinful Paul.

ignorance

Paul didn't see. His conscience was clear in doing these things to the church. He truly believed he was serving God well by separating mothers from their children. Wrong beliefs can lead to a conscience okay with horrific sin.

Today people can zealously fight for abortion rights with a clean conscience because they think they're doing good. They truly believe they're serving the best interests of women. Wrong beliefs can lead to a conscience okay with horrific sin.

God is merciful to those who turn to him. If God forgave Paul, he can forgive those engage in abortion.

Paul may be hinting at the difference between intentional and unintentional sin. Paul was wrong to do what he did, but he was ignorant. Paul's sin would have been worse if he was flagrantly rebelling against God's commands.

Are some sins worse than others? Absolutely. It would be worse for me to commit adultery (defiance of an actual command) than it would for me to selfishly race to the table to take the last piece of pizza at a potluck (forgetting to love my neighbor; ignorant of my selfishness). In terms of relationship with God, intentional sins are worse than unintentional sins.

"If one person sins unintentionally, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering. ²⁸ And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who makes a mistake, when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven. ²⁹ You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the people of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them. ³⁰ But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. ³¹ Because he has despised the word of the LORD and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be on him." – Numbers 15:27-31

But in terms of guilt, every sin is equal. Murder will earn you hell. So will lying or coveting or hating or lusting after a woman. Any violation of God's law merits hell.

Back to Paul. Paul didn't read his Old Testament and say I don't care what God says. I'm going to do whatever I want. Paul read his Old Testament and concluded Jesus was a blasphemer. So he did everything he could to oppose the Christian church. He thought he was obeying God. He didn't see that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world. He knew what his Old Testament said. But he was blind to the fact that God's promises were being fulfilled in Jesus.

***and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.* – 1:14**

Mercy was followed by abundant, abounding, overflowing grace. God poured so much grace on Paul that it's like pouring a glass of water to the point where it starts to spill out of the glass. This was mercy.

The basic meaning of grace is unmerited favor, a gift. Something unearned. Something underserved. Grace has a number of effects in Scripture. Here grace results in faith and love. When grace was poured out on Paul, faith and love followed.

I take this to mean that God's grace produced Paul's faith and love. Faith and love were the direct results of grace.

Before God poured out his grace on Paul, Paul was blind and chased down Christians, even separating mothers from their children. After being showered with grace, Paul saw and believed and loved those whom he tried to put to death.

If you find yourself a believer today, it's because God first poured out his grace on you. At a certain point in time, he gave you eyes to see the beauty of salvation in Christ. God worked faith and love in your heart. In salvation, all the glory and all the praise goes to God.

So faith and love followed grace. That's "*the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*"

"in Christ"

“in Christ” is hard to pin down. At the very least, Christ is the location in which faith and love are found. By dying on the cross, Jesus gives us a person in which to place our faith. Our love for others flows from faith in Jesus (Gal 5:6). We looked at Galatians 2:20 where Jesus lives inside of believers. Meaning the indwelling Christ enables us to walk by faith and love God and neighbor. Whereas Paul once blasphemed Jesus and hunted down Christians, he now adores Jesus and loves his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Application

This is how I apply this to myself.

God looked at my desperate state. A 24 year old with no direction in life. A troubled, joyless individual who didn't know how to do life. A self-centered prideful yet insecure individual who didn't know how disordered his heart was. A person who treated God like a curse word and a joke.

God had pity on me. Jesus died to secure my pardon. God changed my heart, working faith and love inside me. God gave me direction, wisdom, and changed my heart over time. God didn't leave me in my sins.

God didn't treat me as I deserve. I received forgiveness and eternal life. I was loved by the one I despised. So I thank God. Remember God's mercy to you.

Non-Christian

If we learned anything today, we learned that God is merciful to sinners. And God changes the hearts of sinners. Perhaps the strongest opponent of the church was forgiven by God. The malicious, hateful Paul became a lover of Christians.

Jesus died on the cross so that whoever believes can be forgiven of sins and have eternal life. Believe.

Jesus died on the cross so that people enslaved to sin become new creations.

Trust in Christ and your life will radically change. You'll be a new person with new desires. Do you know you're broken? Do you know you're a sinner? Jesus can change you. Trust in him.

Conclusion

God strengthens. You may not be able. God is. He'll sustain you. Turn to him.

God appoints to service. He gives our lives direction. He enables us to do what he appoints.

God gives mercy. He has compassion. He acts for us. He doesn't give us what we deserve.