



*Rev. Ellen Dawson - 9.15.19*

*"A Bewildering Patience"*

**Jeremiah 4:1-2, 22-28; 1 Timothy 1:12-17 | "A Bewildering Patience"**

**Old Testament Reading -- Jeremiah 4:1-2, 22-28**

4 If you return, O Israel,  
says the Lord,  
if you return to me,  
if you remove your abominations from my  
presence,  
and do not waver,  
2 and if you swear, "As the Lord lives!"  
in truth, in justice, and in uprightness,  
then nations shall be blessed by him,  
and by him they shall boast.

22 "For my people are foolish,  
they do not know me;  
they are stupid children,  
they have no understanding.  
They are skilled in doing evil,  
but do not know how to do good."

23 I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste  
and void;  
and to the heavens, and they had no light.  
24 I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were  
quaking,  
and all the hills moved to and fro.  
25 I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,  
and all the birds of the air had fled.  
26 I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a  
desert,  
and all its cities were laid in ruins  
before the Lord, before his fierce anger.  
27 For thus says the Lord: The whole land shall  
be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.

28 Because of this the earth shall mourn,  
and the heavens above grow black;

for I have spoken, I have purposed;  
I have not relented nor will I turn back.

**New Testament Reading -- 1 Timothy 1:12-17**

**Gratitude for Mercy**

12 I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord,  
who has strengthened me, because he  
judged me faithful and appointed me to his  
service, 13 even though I was formerly a  
blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of  
violence. But I received mercy because I had  
acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the  
grace of our Lord overflowed for me with  
the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15  
The saying is sure and worthy of full  
acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the  
world to save sinners—of whom I am the  
foremost. 16 But for that very reason I  
received mercy, so that in me, as the  
foremost, Jesus Christ might display the  
utmost patience, making me an example to  
those who would come to believe in him for  
eternal life. 17 To the King of the ages,  
immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor  
and glory forever and ever. Amen.

If we had to make a list of the most violent, sacreligious, evil people in history, who would you include on that list? I have a few people who come to mind: Adolf Hitler, Charles Manson, or Columbian drug lord Griselda Blanco (known as the “La Madrina”).

Now, those are pretty extreme examples. But on a different level, when we think of evil people, we might think of cheaters, murderers, traffickers, or swindlers. We’ve all, on some level, heard about or encountered these kinds of people. We’ve watched the stories on Dateline NBC; we’ve seen photos of individuals being transported to jail in orange jumpsuits; some of us may even have known victims or have been victims of someone’s malicious and selfish actions.

I for one have had the experience where I’m watching the news and a mug shot comes on: My heart skips a beat as I see this person, holding up a placard with their name on it. It’s like I can sense the darkness just from that photo; I can see the darkness in their eyes.

Think of that woman arrested for neglecting her children; the man who conspired to kill his wife for insurance money; think of the manipulators...the liars...the bullies.

So as we make this list, I want us to add someone to it: the evangelist, saint, and martyr Paul. That’s right, the man who wrote today’s passage would himself, admittedly, stand alongside these criminals and con artists.

Paul writes: “I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.”

Here, he is writing to his apostle and co-worker Timothy a young man who first heard the Gospel from Paul in the town of Lystra. Paul, formerly known as Saul, grew up as a Roman citizen, and he studied in Jerusalem under the well-known Rabbi Gamaliel. But as the word of Jesus Christ began to spread and the disciples started preaching, teaching, and healing, in Jerusalem, Jews and Gentiles started to convert to this new religion.

What did Saul do? He locked down on the law. The book of Acts reveals Saul was dragging people off to prison. He was going into houses where Christians were gathering to persecute and arrest them. Saul was actually one of the people involved in arresting and stoning Stephen, known as the first martyr of our faith.

Saul was a bully. He was a manipulator. He was someone who would have been featured on an episode of 48 hours for the crimes he was committing against humanity.

But then grace appeared.

We read about Saul's conversion in Acts Chapter 9, "Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 5 He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'" Continue reading and you'll see he is healed of blindness, he is baptized, and he immediately begins preaching and telling his story. He passionately sets out to prove Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah, the resurrected Lord, the Son of God.

This blasphemer became a defender of the faith. This persecutor became one of the persecuted. This man of violence became a leader in the message of peace, love, and grace.

What we learn about Saul is this: it was the law that was ruling Saul's decisions, causing him to fear, to hate, to put people in jail, and yes, to even have people killed. However, his choices, teachings, and writings show us it's grace -- in and through Jesus Christ -- that changes his heart, puts him on a new path, and makes him new...so new that he eventually changes his name.

This change is what Paul wants to get across to Timothy and the readers of this letter. He wants to make it clear:

- (1) Jesus came into the world to save sinners;
- (2) Jesus came to save sinners even like himself, who he calls the foremost, which can also be translated as "the chief" or "the highest in rank" of sinners;
- (3) So, if he was given mercy by Jesus, there is mercy and grace for everyone who comes to Jesus;

- (4) Jesus therefore, makes Paul an example of what can happen to someone - how someone's life can change;
- (5) And Paul's changed life and work is only possible because God gives him the strength and grace to do it.

In other words, if God can use Paul, he can use anybody.

Do you really believe this? That God can use the man who has been repeatedly arrested for drunk driving? That God can use the woman who spends money on a hit of heroin instead of food for her 3 year old? That God can use the people who are plotting war, the people who are oppressing their citizens, the people who are focused on power, greed, lust, pride, revenge and hate? Do you believe that God can use sinners? Even the foremost - the worst sinners? Paul shows us here that the grace of God overflows. God has so much patience. Even for him. Even for them. Even for you and for me.

But I'm not talking about us, right? We aren't criminals. We aren't murderers. Some of you may be thinking, "Pastor Ellen, 'I don't even swear;' 'I live a good life;' 'I help people;' 'but 'I'm a nice person,' 'I come to church,' or 'I wouldn't hurt a fly!'"

But we are sinners. Period. We are in need of this reminder. Period.

If anything, this passage says, Guess what? We are all on the same playing field. We are right there in the same category. We have all fallen short of the glory of God. We are people who are in need of grace, mercy, and love. We are people who have no right to pass judgment. We are people in need of Jesus.

Pastor Joe Focht (Fah-cht) of Calvary Chapel Philadelphia speaks about this passage in 1st Timothy, explaining that we can point ourselves back to Timothy here. After all, the name Timothy means, "one who honors God." He argues that we, as God's beloved, we all should be striving to live a life that honors God. But this prompts us to ask: how do we do that?

Well, when we want to know how to do something, naturally, we google it! Consider what we see online, in bookstores, in the headlines. There is a vast amount of seminars and methodologies

of “How To’s” out there that seem to actually make us a part of what some are calling a “How To” generation. We can read or learn about ‘How to influence people.’ ‘How to become a millionaire.’ How to tidy up or the best example I saw recently. A book titled, *Adulting: How to Become a Grown-up in 468 Easy(ish) Steps*.

The Church has also bought into the “How To” “Self-Help” and “Motivational” categories of life. There are classes on ‘How to have a better marriage,’ and workbooks on ‘How to parent your kids from a Christian perspective.’ There’s advice for individuals like the book: ‘How to Recognize When God Speaks;’ and seminars for churches like “How to create a mission-focused church,” or “8 ways to attract and keep your Easter visitors.”

The point Pastor Joe argues is this: If we want to live a life that honors God, we have to consider not the how, but the who.

What we are in need of is the person of Jesus Christ. The same Jesus Christ Paul writes about. We need Jesus more and more. We need to know him, to call upon him, to return to him.

I actually recently purchased a devotional journal that a friend recommended -- it’s called “100 days of Less Hustle and More Jesus.” And brothers and sisters, it’s exactly what I needed because HE is WHO I needed. I need more Jesus. Don’t you?

In the 4 Gospels, which are the revelations and teachings of Jesus, we are introduced to the Who - the Messiah. In the Women of the Word Bible Study last week, we started with John chapter one. The beginning of this book talks about WHO JESUS IS - He is the Word, who existed before the world was created; He is God; He is the light; He is the Word who became flesh to dwell among us. Jesus is God’s divine communication to us.

This is the person of Jesus Christ who, as Paul reminds us, is the person who forgives, who saves, who loves; Jesus is who gives us all we need to live lives that reflect his grace.

Brothers and sisters, Paul invites Timothy and the readers of this letter to be grateful to Jesus and to express that gratitude day in and day out. He invites us to live a life that reflects the love and grace and patience of our God. Paul urges us to know Jesus.

And, in a way, so does the prophet Jeremiah. Consider what he writes:

“For my people are foolish,

they do not know me;

they are stupid children,

they have no understanding.

They are skilled in doing evil,

but do not know how to do good.”

Even then, sin prevailed in society. There were people who lied, cheated, blasphemed, manipulated and killed. Again and again God gave forgave them, showed them mercy, and loved them despite their foolishness.

But this prophecy is for us a reminder to truly know and understand our Creator, Sustainer, our Redeemer and our Friend.

It's also a reminder that we are not any better than the people who live lives full of lies, hate, deceit, and brutality. The Israelites have no understanding according to the prophet - but we, we have Jesus. We have his teachings. We have his grace through his sacrifice.

So, think back to that list of people. That list of sinners. Let's pretend that we can line them up here...let's line up the liars, the cheaters, the drug dealers, the pimps, the white collar criminals, the terrorists and the mass shooters. Let's put them side-by-side in their suit jackets, and sweatpants, slinky dresses and coveralls. Then take a step. Take a step into the line alongside them. Alongside Saul.

And then, remembering the forgiveness you have received, the grace that has been given to you, and the unexplainable bewildering patience of our Savior, step forward, into a life that is full of freedom, humility, and love. Step away from sin and from evil. And remember who you are and whose you are.

Isn't that what this is all about? This passage from Paul is a reminder that we are renewed and reborn, we are redefined. We are the light of the world - and the light shall always....always overcome the darkness. That is his prayer - and that is our prayer today. That all may know the love of God that surpasses all understanding. That all may know Jesus. And because of that knowledge, love and light will overcome all evil, all darkness.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.