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GOD'S MIGHTY POWER TO SAVE

Acts 22:1-22

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Acts Lesson 58

God's Mighty Power to Save Acts 22:1-22

Have you ever wished that you had a more dramatic testimony? Perhaps you've heard of someone who came to Christ from a life of terrible sin and you've thought, "If I just had a testimony like that, I could lead all sorts of people to Christ!" But, like me, you grew up in the church. Your testimony isn't all that dramatic.

Whenever I've heard instruction on how to prepare your personal testimony, it follows a three-point outline: Tell about your life before you came to Christ; how you met Christ; and your life since you met Christ. The problem is, I can't remember much before I met Christ. I must have been a rebel. Everyone goes through the terrible two's, and I'm sure that I threw my share of temper tantrums. I must have dirtied a lot of diapers, too. When I was three, I told my Mom one morning that I wanted to accept Jesus. We woke up my Dad, knelt beside their bed, and I prayed to receive Jesus Christ. Since that time, I grew up in the church. In elementary school, I renewed my commitment to Christ, "just to make sure." I was baptized at age 12. In spite of this good upbringing, I've had my share of sins, of course. Finally, in college I realized that it had to be *my* faith, not that of my parents. So I yielded myself to Christ as Lord and began to grow in my faith.

When did I get saved? I honestly don't know. Was it at three? In grade school? In college? Only the Lord knows! All I know is, it's not a very dramatic story. But the Lord has shown me over the years that my heart is just as corrupt as the hearts of the most wicked people on earth. I've also learned that it takes the same mighty power of God to save an outwardly good person as it does to save an outwardly evil person. And, that outwardly good person needs salvation every bit as much as the notorious sinner does.

Our text relates Paul's testimony to the angry mob of Jews in Jerusalem who were in the process of beating him to death, until he was rescued by the Roman soldiers. It is the second of three times that the story of Paul's conversion is told in Acts. Perhaps second only to the resurrection of Jesus, Paul's conversion stands as an

impressive testimony to the truth of the gospel. How else can you explain the sudden turnaround of this man who vehemently persecuted the church into the apostle who relentlessly preached what he had once despised, except for his meeting the risen Savior? The Spirit of God saw fit to include this testimony three times in Acts so that we could learn from it. Here,

Paul's testimony teaches us how God works mightily to save sinners.

If I had just gotten beaten up by an angry mob that was trying to kill me, but I got rescued, I don't think that the first thought on my mind would be to preach the gospel to them! I would have been thinking, "I'm safe! Get me out of here so I can recover from this traumatic experience!" But Paul had the presence of mind to ask permission from the Roman commander to address the mob that had just attacked him. Granted that permission, he addressed the crowd in their native Aramaic and identified himself with them as a Jew. His address falls into three parts: His life before his conversion (22:1-5); the experience of his conversion (22:6-14); and, his commission to preach the gospel to all men, including the Gentiles (22:15-21). But when he uttered that despised word, "Gentiles," the mob that had been listening went ballistic, calling for his death. He was not able to finish his message. Paul's testimony teaches us five things:

1. Paul's testimony teaches us that being zealously religious does not reconcile us to God.

From his youth, Paul had been zealous for God (22:3). He had a Jewish pedigree that few could rival. Although he was born in Tarsus, in southern Asia Minor, he grew up in Jerusalem where he was tutored by the famous and highly respected rabbi, Gamaliel. As a Pharisee, Paul was trained according to the strictest law of the Jewish fathers. His zeal to preserve the ancient traditions led him to persecute to the death this new sect, known as the Way, going so far as to imprison not only men, but also women. He was heartless, even if it meant taking mothers away from their children. He did not restrict his zeal to those in Jerusalem, but was on his way to Damascus to round up the Christians there, when God struck him down with a blinding light from heaven.

Paul attributes the mob's beating him to their zeal for God (22:3). They thought that they were defending the Jewish temple against defilement from the Gentiles, and defending the Jewish people and their sacred laws from this renegade who taught the Jews to set aside their heritage (21:28). But all of this religious zeal on the part of Paul and his audience had not reconciled either of them to the God of Israel. In fact, it was this very zeal that had led the nation to kill her Messiah! Here, religious zeal was motivating these same Jews to attempt to kill the messenger that Messiah had sent to tell them the way of salvation.

Down through the centuries to the present day, religious zeal is behind much of the violence in the world. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Muslim wars to conquer North Africa and their incursions into Europe, modern Islamic terrorism, and the terrorism in Northern Ireland, all stem from religious zeal. But Paul's testimony makes it plain that you can be zealous for God and yet be horribly mistaken. You can be zealous for God and actually be fighting against Him! All of the religious zeal in the world will not reconcile a soul to God. Usually, as in the case of Paul and these Jews, our religious zeal is just a cover-up for our pride and prejudice, which are sin. No amount of religious zeal can atone for sin!

2. Paul's testimony teaches us that salvation is by God's grace and power, not by our merit or will power.

Paul was not considering the claims of Christ as he marched toward Damascus that day. He had not been re-reading his Bible in light of the life, death, and claimed resurrection of Jesus, to see if the ancient prophecies pointed to Jesus as Israel's Messiah. He was not unhappy with his life in Judaism, searching for another way. Rather, he was militantly defending the Jewish faith, seeking to rid it of the blight of these heretics who claimed that Jesus was the Christ. It was as he pursued this course of action with a vengeance that God literally stopped Paul in his tracks. His power knocked Paul to the ground and blinded him. Then God gave very specific orders about what Paul had to do next.

Everything about Paul's conversion came from God. *Nothing* about his conversion stemmed from Paul. God didn't look down and see some merit in Paul that qualified him to come to salvation. Quite to the contrary, he confesses that he was "a blasphemer, a

persecutor, and a violent aggressor" (1 Tim. 1:13). Twice Jesus emphasizes that by persecuting the church, Paul was persecuting Jesus Himself (Acts 22:7, 8). For this, he deserved God's judgment, but he was shown God's mercy. God didn't say, "Oh Paul, I'd really like you to be My apostle, but I'm not going to force your will. You have to exercise your free will to choose Me!"

There are many who say that the reason that God chose Paul, or that He chooses anyone, is that He foresees that the person will one day choose to follow Him. But to say this is to base God's sovereign election on the fallen will of man, ignoring the plain biblical truth that unless God *first* does a work of grace in our hearts, no one would ever choose Him. No one comes to Jesus unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). No one is able to come to Jesus unless it has been granted him from the Father (John 6:65). No one knows who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him (Luke 10:22).

In several places, Paul attributes the first cause of our salvation to God's choice of us, not to our choice of Him. In Galatians 1:15, he says that God set him apart from his mother's womb and called him through His grace. In Ephesians 1:4-6, he says, "Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." In 2 Timothy 1:9, he says that God "has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity." There are many more such verses.

If we deny God's sovereign election, we rob Him of glory and attribute at least part of the cause of our salvation to something in us. If God's choice of us depends on what He foresaw that we would do, then we have grounds for boasting, either in our will, in our brilliant minds that caused us to see the truth, or in our faith, which God saw that we would exercise. But if our salvation rests not on our will or our effort, but only on God who shows mercy (Rom. 9:16), then He gets all the praise and glory!

If God's grace and power are mighty to save a sinner such as Paul, then He is able to save any sinner, and to do it instantly and

totally. His light can blind and knock down the most insolent, proud, powerful persecutor of the church. You may have some terrible sins in your past. You may even be militantly opposed to Christianity, convinced by all of your arguments that it is just a myth. But the risen Lord Jesus is mighty to save even you. He can open your eyes to get a glimpse of His glory and grace, and you will never be the same.

Paul's testimony teaches us that being zealously religious does not reconcile us to God. Rather, salvation is totally by God's grace and power, not by anything in us.

3. Paul's testimony teaches us that God often must humble us before He extends His mercy toward us.

Moments before this happened, Paul was picturing himself striding confidently into Damascus, his henchmen around him, waving to his admirers, while Christians fled in terror. Instead, he is blindly led into Damascus by the hand, completely submissive to God's command. As a Pharisee, Paul was proud of his spiritual sight. God had to blind him so that he could begin to see rightly (see John 9:39-41). Before the Damascus Road, Paul would have said, "I see! I know the truth!" But now, blind and led by the hand, he had to admit that what he thought he saw before he no longer saw. And what he had never seen before, the glory of the risen Lord Jesus, now he saw.

God does not always humble us to the degree that He humbled Paul before we are converted. But if at some time we have not been humbled before God's majesty, it shows that we barely know Him. Of the hundreds of books that I have read besides the Bible, by far the most profound is John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster Press]. The reason that that book is so profound is that Calvin exalts God and humbles us all before Him. Consider his words in the second section of the opening chapter:

Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy—this pride is innate in all of us—unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness,

foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured [1.1.2].

He goes on to point out how Scripture often shows men as stricken and overcome when they felt God's presence. Even though these men were normally stable, let them get just a glimpse of God's glory and they are laid low and almost annihilated. Then he says, "As a consequence, we must infer that man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty" [1/1/3].

When much later Calvin develops the doctrine that he is most famous for, predestination, he emphasizes that the ignorance of it detracts from God's glory and takes away from true humility. Those who oppose the doctrine of election, he says, "tear humility up by the very roots." He states, "For neither will anything else suffice to make us humble as we ought to be nor shall we otherwise sincerely feel how much we are obliged to God" [3.21.1]. Throughout his treatment of predestination, Calvin keeps coming back to this practical application, "that, humbled and cast down, we may learn to tremble at his judgment and esteem his mercy" [3.23.12].

Such humble submission to God is a mark of true conversion. Paul's two questions that he asks God here are good ones to ask every time you approach Him through His Word: "Who are You, Lord?" and, "What shall I do, Lord?" To say, as some do, "I believe in Jesus as my Savior, but I haven't yielded to Him as Lord," is nonsense! If He gives you even a brief glimpse of His power and glory, you will be laying prostrate with Paul, asking, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

4. Paul's testimony teaches us that baptism is an important confession of our faith in Christ.

No sooner did Paul receive his sight through Ananias' ministry than he exhorted him, "And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name" (22:16). Some interpret this verse to mean that water baptism washes away our sins. But if it is teaching that, then the dozens of other verses

that state that our sins are forgiven by grace through faith in Christ alone must be lacking something essential. In other words, it is far easier and makes more sense to harmonize this verse with the predominant teaching of Scripture, that salvation is through faith in Christ alone, than vice versa.

1 Peter 3:21 states that baptism saves you, but then Peter clarifies what he means: “not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Quite often Scripture does what Peter does there: it closely associates the act of baptism with what that act symbolizes. Baptism in water pictures what God has already done in a person’s heart through faith, that He has washed away our sins. In Acts 22:16, Paul had already called upon the name of the Lord, at which point God washed away his sins. The act of baptism, in obedience to the Lord’s command, would be a graphic picture and source of assurance to Paul of the cleansing that had come to him the moment he trusted in Christ.

But don’t miss the application: if God has cleansed your sins by faith, then why delay confessing that truth by being baptized? The idea of an unbaptized believer would have been foreign to the apostles. It should be foreign to us as well. We will have a baptism on April 28th. Make sure that you’re included if you have never confessed your faith through baptism.

Thus Paul’s testimony teaches us that being zealously religious does not reconcile us to God, but that salvation is by God’s grace and power, not by our merit or will power. It teaches us that God often humbles us before He extends mercy to us. It teaches us that baptism is an important confession of our faith in Christ. Finally,

5. Paul’s testimony teaches us that God saves us for His purpose, not for our agendas.

This lesson is repeated twice so that we won’t miss it. First, the Lord tells Paul that in Damascus he would be told “all that has been appointed for you to do” (22:10). Then, Ananias tells Paul, “The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will, and to see the Righteous One [a Messianic term], and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard” (22:14-15). The first word

translated “appointed” is a military word meaning, “to give orders or a command.” The second word that Ananias uses means “to take into one’s hand,” and thus to determine or choose. Neither word leaves a lot of “free will” to Paul concerning his future! God had determined how Paul would serve Him. He had an agenda for Paul, and that agenda did not coincide with what Paul initially wanted to do!

Paul wanted to stay in Jerusalem and be a witness to his fellow Jews. But when he returned to Jerusalem after his three years in Arabia, he was in the temple praying when he saw a vision of Jesus telling him to get out of Jerusalem quickly, because the Jews would not accept his testimony about Christ. Paul protested that his background would make him an excellent witness to the Jews, but the Lord overruled and sent him to the Gentiles. When Paul mentions this, his Jewish audience went into a frenzy.

Note two things: First, Paul’s audience reacted emotionally to his message. They were not thinking rationally at this point. Any time people react emotionally to the gospel, they should calm down and ask themselves why. Paul didn’t get a chance here to get them to do this. But if you’re witnessing to someone who reacts emotionally, don’t get drawn into his response by getting emotional yourself. Rather, try to get him calmed down enough to examine his reaction. In this case, it was pride and prejudice that blinded these people from calmly thinking through what Paul was saying.

Second, God’s will for us does not always coincide with our will for ourselves. He wants the message of His salvation to go to all the nations on earth. While we aren’t all called to be missionaries, as Paul was, neither are we called to live selfishly for ourselves while the nations perish in darkness. If, like the Jews of Paul’s day, we begin to grow comfortable about being God’s chosen people and ignore His purpose of reaching the lost, then we’re missing God’s purpose for our lives. Every Christian should ask himself, “How does God want me to fit into His purpose of being glorified among the nations?”

Conclusion

Some years ago in a church in England, the pastor noticed that a former burglar was kneeling at the communion rail beside a

judge of the Supreme Court of England, the very judge who, years before, had sentenced the burglar to seven years in prison. After his release the burglar had been converted to Christ and had become a Christian worker.

After the service, as the judge and the pastor walked home together, the judge asked, "Did you see who was kneeling beside me at the communion rail?" "Yes," replied the pastor, "but I didn't know that you noticed." The two men walked on in silence for a few moments, and then the judge said, "What a miracle of grace!" The pastor nodded in agreement, "Yes, what a marvelous miracle of grace!"

Then the judge said, "But to whom do you refer?" The pastor replied, "Why to the conversion of that convict." The judge said, "But I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself." "What do you mean?" the pastor asked.

The judge replied, "That burglar knew how much he needed Christ to save him from his sins. But look at me. I was taught from childhood to live as a gentleman, to keep my word, to say my prayers, to go to church. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge. Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on a level with that burglar. It took much more grace to forgive me for all my pride and self-righteousness, to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God than that convict whom I had sent to prison."

Do you have a testimony of how God's mighty power has saved you? Share it!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the idea that God elected us because He foresaw that we would choose Him opposed to Scripture?
2. What are some practical applications of the doctrine of election? Are there any dangers in believing this doctrine?
3. Some churches teach that baptism is essential for salvation. Is this a denial of the gospel? Why/why not?
4. God's purpose involves His being glorified among the nations. How can a Christian determine how he fits into this purpose?

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