

"The grace of our Lord... poured out on me" – Paul's point is that no one could have been less deserving, and have less merit in the eyes of the Lord. The false teachers also in view here were trying to impose Judaic legalism, rather than teaching the gospel – new life through faith and grace.

15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst.

"A trustworthy saying" – a phrase used only in the letters to Timothy and Titus, to emphasise key teachings, like this memorable saying about grace.

• **For further study**, see 1 Timothy 3:1, 4:8-9; 2 Tim. 2:11-13; Titus 3:4-8.

IN PRACTICE Scripture has reminded us about the judgment of God, which stems from the absolute holiness of God: rebellion and sin must result in judgment, and ultimately wrath. Yet we know that God's underlying and prevailing nature is merciful, forgiving love. On the next occasion when Moses met with God on the mountain, God told him His name, and explained its meaning: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin," Exodus 34:6-7. As we journey through Scripture, we find that God reveals Himself progressively – that's why this Bible study follows the order found in the Bible. We see this progression continue to unfold with Jesus' priority on helping the last, the least, the lost, find their way into the kingdom. And then we come to the transformation of the blaspheming and cruel persecutor of those who dared to follow the Way of Jesus. If ever there was an undeserving case, Paul was it. If earning merit had anything to do with it, Paul had earned the worst punishment instead! And in telling this story of God's grace against himself, he confronts the early church's self-appointed and false teachers and their legalism. They sought to bring back the religious rules and restrictions of the old, obsolete priesthood rather than celebrating the truth of new life and freedom in Christ that is His wonderful and undeserved gift when we turn to Him. Paul's story, and the part of the revelation of God He was sent to bring, is God's generosity and grace when we turn from ourselves to Him – and discover what His love is really like.

QUESTION *Why do we jib at receiving what is freely given but undeserved? Why would we rather earn God's love, as if that were possible?*

PRAYER Lord, You are good beyond any human idea of goodness and yet we can come to know You in a close and intimate relationship through Jesus which conquers our old selfish nature. We were as lost as the sheep in the story that needed to be carried – and You went out of Your way to find us and bring us back. Grow in us Your heart of love, especially for those we might otherwise judge not worth going out to. Amen.

16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in Him and receive eternal life.

"Believe in Him and receive eternal life" – Paul emphasises his experience of the only condition for salvation, stated more than 185 times in the NT, that of believing and trusting in Jesus Christ.

17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

"Now to the King eternal..." – Paul is probably quoting an early Christian praise song.

The Living Word

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Bible readings for Sunday, September 15, 2019, with commentary notes

A Bible study on Revised Common Lectionary passages for **Sunday, Sept 15**
Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: Rebellion brings judgment but God seeks grounds for mercy

Exodus 32:7-14 – Moses intercedes for God to relent on His anger
with Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

Luke 15:1-10 – Heaven's joy in bringing in people who were lost

1 Timothy 1:12-17 – God relents and we find grace when we turn to Christ

Also read: Psalm 14, Psalm 51:1-10

Exodus 32:7-14 – Moses intercedes for God's mercy to prevail

Israelites worship a calf idol while their leader meets with God

7 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.

"Go down, because your people..." – hear the irony in the Lord's phrase "your people... whom you brought out..." as He warns Moses of the trouble that has arisen in the camp.

8 They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'

9-10 "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave Me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

Stiff-necked people" – the first use of this phrase describing Israel's arrogant refusal to defer to God.

• **For further study**, see Deut. 10:16, 31:27; Neh. 9:16; Jer. 19:15.

"Now leave me alone" – a test: would Moses still stand before Him as an intercessor, leaving the way open for him to plead for the Lord to relent?

11 But Moses sought the favour of the LORD His God. "LORD," he said, "why

should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?

12 Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from Your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on Your people.

"Turn from Your fierce anger" – while accepting the Lord's verdict on the people, Moses appeals to the Lord's reputation and intention of blessing the Gentile nations through Israel.

13 Remember Your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by Your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'

"Remember" – in this great intercessory prayer, Moses reasons with the Lord that His work of deliverance from Egypt should not be abandoned, the Egyptians should not find delayed triumph in this incident, and above all, the covenant established long before should be upheld.

14 Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster He had threatened.

"The Lord relented" – because He had threatened, rather than decreed, punitive action, so leaving Moses room to call on God's mercy to overrule.

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

11-12 At that time this people and Jerusalem will be told, "A scorching wind from the barren heights in the desert blows toward My people, but not to winnow or cleanse; a wind too strong for that comes from Me. Now I pronounce My judgments against them."

"A scorching wind" – not the beneficial cleansing wind that helps winnow grain, but a hot desert sirocco with its sand and dust; a sandblast judgment.

22 "My people are fools; they do not know Me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good."

"Fools... senseless..." – Judah was wise in the ways of evil but ignorant about right living: strong language to bring repentance.

23 I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone.

"I looked... I looked" – repetition that emphasises the vision of a judgment so severe, like as if creation itself has been undone: "formless and

IN PRACTICE Two accounts of how the independent and self-sufficient Israelites angered God, who nevertheless looked for reasons to relent from His judgment. Moses gave us a model of intercessory "reasoning with God" (as in Isaiah 1:18) on the basis of His nature, His mission in the wider world and His faithfulness in upholding His covenant. God is holy, and cannot accommodate rebellious sin that flies in the face of all His values. In tension with this, His nature is the unconditional and undeserved love we call mercy. However far we have strayed from His way, God is love, and we find forgiveness whenever we turn to Him.

PRAYER *Lord, in our selfish and politically unstable world, help us as believers to exercise our own priesthood and bring intercession to you, as Moses did, seeking to avoid what is due to us and bring people into relationship with You again. Amen.*

Luke 15:1-10 – Heaven's joy in bringing in people who were lost

Jesus' parables of finding the lost sheep and the lost coin

1-2 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

"Tax collectors" – detested and treated as outcasts for serving the pagan emperor, treated as notorious

empty... their light... gone", echoing Genesis 1:1-2.

24 I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking; all the hills were swaying.

25 I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away.

"No people" – as Gen. 2:5, "no one to work the ground".

26 I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the LORD, before His fierce anger.

"Fruitful land" – or Carmel, rich with vineyards and olive groves which turn to desert.

27 This is what the LORD says: "The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely.

"Not...completely" – introducing a ray of hope.

28 Therefore the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark, because I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back."

"Will not relent" – and in parallel, "will not turn back" unless there is repentance, e.g. Jer. 18:7-10 where God relents if the nation heeds the warning and repents.

sinners such as robbers. These marginalised people showed that they had "ears to hear", Luke 14:35.

3-4 Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?"

"Jesus told them" – three stories confronting the gossip of those who judged themselves righteous.

"A hundred... leave the ninety-nine" – many flocks were about that size and shepherds often watched over each others' animals, allowing a shepherd to go on a search.

5-6 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'

"Found my lost sheep" – the gathering of the flock was familiar as a picture of God delivering His own people at the end time.

• **For further study**, see Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10–11; Ezekiel 34:11–12.

7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

"Rejoicing... over one sinner who repents" – God wants to reach every individual. The Pharisees and scribes should have rejoiced at lost sheep of Israel entering the kingdom, rather than judging them.

IN PRACTICE We wonder if the hard-hearted and self-righteous religious leaders hearing this could have failed to be moved by these graphic illustrations of God's heart for the lost ones. Of course we think that God's love is for those of us who are in church and doing the 'right' things. But Jesus would apparently put us all on 'hold' to find someone not at all like us and show them how much they matter to Him. And that is a priority that brings much joy to Him, a joy that should propel us out of our apathy. When was the last time the church bells rung a peal because someone in the community has turned to Christ and found new life, and forgiveness for the old?

QUESTION *We may not all be gifted to be street pastors or evangelists, but how much of a priority do we make of seeing the needs of those around us without faith and without hope?*

1 Timothy 1:12-17 – We turn to Christ, God relents and we find grace

Paul the persecutor becomes an example of God's undeserved mercy

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me trustworthy, appointing me to His service.

"He has given me strength" – meaning the insight and endurance empowered by the Spirit of Jesus.

13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a

"Do not need to repent" – ironic: those considering themselves righteous and not needing to repent.

8-9 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?"

"Search... until she finds it" – because of the sentimental as well as monetary value. Brides received a head-dress of 10 silver coins as a wedding gift. A loose coin that fell between the flat stones of a dirt floor might be heard if swept, in a windowless poorly-lit house.

9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'

10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

"Rejoicing" – joy in heaven over one precious individual turning to God, confronting the solemn religiosity of the Pharisees.

violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.

"I was once" – Paul came from profound sinfulness in persecuting God's people, and was met by God's mercy in encountering Christ and receiving forgiveness and new life.

14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.