

THE APOSTLE PAUL: CHIEF SINNER OR SAINT?

GRACE NOTEBOOK

The Apostle Paul: Chief Sinner or Saint?

By John Woodward

"This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15).

Have you ever wondered what Paul meant by this instance where he refers to himself as the *chief of sinners*? We would have expected him to use the *past tense*: I *was* chief (of sinners).

Since he used the present tense, was Paul considering himself to be characterized by intentional sin? ... Even more than others?

Certainly not; this interpretation would contradict what the rest of what Scripture says about the apostle Paul's character. Paul said "I am the chief of sinners" in the sense of being a *record holder*. His pre-conversion, grievous behavior was considered unparalleled.[1]

Imagine an interview with demolition derby driver, Ryan Songalewski: "Ryan, how many times have you been national champion of the demolition derby?" Ryan could reply, "*I am the chief* of demolition derby. I've won the national title three years in a row, and five times in a decade." And you'd be impressed (unless he was your taxi driver!).

The following points support this interpretation.

1. Consider the context of the "chief of sinners" reference in 1 Timothy. This self-description points to his pre-conversion unbelief, blasphemy (denying the Lord Jesus), and persecution of Christ's people. "...*although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man...*"(1 Tim. 1:13).

In his testimony elsewhere he brings out his deep regret for this infamous behavior.

"I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women ... And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities" Acts 22:4;26:11).

"For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor. 15:9).

As a believer, Paul's behavior is quite the opposite! Instead of being a persecutor, *he was severely persecuted* due to his loyalty to Jesus Christ. "And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure." "...persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed (1 Cor. 4:12; 2 Cor. 4:9).

He *used to be* insolent (defined as "one who, uplifted with pride, either heaps insulting language upon others or does them some shameful act of wrong"). Such ungodly behavior characterizes unbelievers. "Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful [insolent], proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents..." (Rom 1:30).

2. Consider the wider biblical context where Paul refers to his own exemplary behavior.

He invited those whom he discipled to follow his example.

"Therefore I urge you, imitate me"..."Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1).

He kept a sensitive, clean conscience.

"Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, 'Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.'..."This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men" (Acts 23:1; 24:16).

"I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did, as without ceasing I remember you in my prayers night and day" (2 Tim. 1:3).

He modeled integrity in ministry.

"For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you."..."But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commanding ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 1:12;4:2).

3. What about the struggle of Romans chapter 7?

Doesn't Romans 7:14-24 indicate that Paul was constantly frustrated with a sinful tug-of-war?

Consider the context of Romans chapters 6-8. Although the Sin principle will be a nemesis until we finish this spiritual race, Paul taught and modeled the victorious Christian life. In Romans chapter 6 reveals that the believer is identified with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection and is free from sin's authority (Rom. 6:3-6a,6b-23).

The reason Paul uses the present tense in Romans chapter 7 is to convey that anyone who tries to live righteously by external standards (law) by relying on his own resources (flesh) will eventually give up in exasperation ("o wretched man that I am...") (Rom. 7:14-23). The way to freedom is through Christ's victory (Rom. 7:24). The struggle of Romans chapter 7 seems to be autobiographical. It most likely reflects Paul's three years of spiritual formation in Arabia after his salvation, but prior to greater degrees of revelation and grace living (Gal. 1:17,18; 2 Cor. 2:14).

Romans chapter 8 describes the way to victory by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:1-11).

4. The apostle Paul repeatedly highlighted the positive revelation that the believer's essential identity is spiritual and holy.

Although children of God still sometimes sin (1 John 1:8,10; Rom. 2:23) they are now considered "saints" (holy ones / set apart from sin unto God) Acts 9:13,32,41;26:10; Rom. 1:7;8:27;12:13;15:26; 15:31; 16:2, etc.[2]

But how can believers who are still threatened by the flesh (1 Pet. 2:11) the world (1 John 2:15) and the

devil (Eph. 6:10-17) considered *holy ones*? The reason is that God identifies us by our spiritual *birth*. Since true believers are spiritually reborn, they are children of God (1 John 3:1-3). Ultimate identity is based on birth, not behavior (John 1:12). Your essential identity is not based on your ethnicity, gender, nationality, job, marital status or behavior. Your essential identity-as a true believer-is based on your spiritual union with Christ!

Why is the believer's identity in Christ important? To overlook or deny the believer's new identity is to denigrate the greatness of God's redemptive work in His people. Peter declared, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy" (1 Peter 2:9,10).

We tend to live in a way that corresponds to our essential identity. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

Conclusion

In light of his persecution of Christ's church, pressuring people to renounce Christ, and holding the coats of those who stoned to death deacon Stephen, Paul considered himself a sin "record holder"--the most unworthy candidate for redemption. "However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life" (1 Tim. 1:16).

The points listed above indicate that after his radical conversion to faith in Messiah Jesus, Paul was actually one of the *chief saints*.

Therefore, God receives all the glory for rescuing His people: "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim.1:17). So, give thanks to God for His redemption and live out your true identity by grace!

[1] I first heard this view from Neil Anderson, author of *Victory Over the Darkness*.

[2] To further substantiate the believer's new identity, search the words such as "saint" in a concordance, Bible software, Blueletterbible.org. or YouVersion app.

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Grace Fellowship International News - February 27, 2015

Looking for practical entry-level booklet to disciple new believers and church visitors? Check out the

T.E.L.L. Teacher's Kit at GFI store, featuring a leader's guide and 10 audio messages by the author, Dr. Phil Jones.

We give thanks for God's blessing on the workshop in Edina, MN Feb. 19,20 and the seminar on Saturday, Feb. 21 hosted by Grace Church in Eden Prairie, MN. Photos of these events are at gfiworld.shutterfly.com

Two new audio messages have been added to our sermon.net channel: *Complete in Christ* (by Dale Ellenburg) and *How to Give a Three Cross Testimony* (by John Woodward).

The next Exchanged Life Conference and Workshop **March 6,7, 9-12, 2015** in Pigeon Forge, TN **are only ONE week away!** For details and registration, please see the Grace Fellowship Events page or call GFI.

The Feb. 2015 prayer letter of John and Linda Woodward is available [here](#).

The purpose of Grace Notes is to highlight the dynamics of abundant living as summarized in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (NKJV). Hundreds of articles are available online to freely use for personal ministry, newsletters, etc. To find an article by topic, author, or key word, click "Grace Notes"/search at www.GraceNotebook.com. Please pray for God's blessing on this internet ministry.

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yearn for the abundant life that Christ promised: 'I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly' (John 10:10).

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