

“I Was Formerly...”

By Paul R. Blake

“This a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1Tim. 1:15). What joy it gives to the penitent believer to know that upon baptism into Christ his sins are all forgiven! From the beginning, humankind has sought to return to fellowship with God after losing that blessed Garden of Eden relationship with Him (Acts 17:26-28). Now in Jesus Christ, one can be free from that which separates him from God... sin.

The apostle Paul describes himself as the former chief of sinners. Before he obeyed the gospel, he was a persecutor of Christians. In Galatians 1:13, he describes his activities: *“...I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.”* In Acts 9, he sought a commission from the high priest to arrest Christians in Damascus and bring them to Jerusalem for trial. So eager was he to hinder the work of the Lord that he traveled in the middle of the day, refusing to seek shelter from the hot sun until the temperature became more suitable for journeying. Jesus characterizes Saul's zealous anti-Christian fervor as self-destructive. He said that Saul was kicking against the goads (Acts 9:5). An ox goad was designed to prod the animal in the direction desired by the master. For the ox to kick back into the point of the goad was to risk impalement on the goad. Saul was kicking against Christ to his self-injury. Jewish historian and secretary to Golda Meir wrote that the two things that did the most damage to first century Judaism were the fall of Jerusalem to Titus in 70 AD and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. That Saul was an enemy of Christ is beyond dispute.

However, Paul praised God for the forgiveness of these sins. Though he was an insolent man, he obtained mercy; though he was a blasphemer, he became the beneficiary of God's grace; though he was a persecutor, he was treated patiently by the Lord (1Tim. 1:13-16). In addition, Paul expressed wonder that Jesus would put him into the ministry that he might preach the gospel he once tried to destroy.

Paul was blessed. Even though he was a sinner, he was forgiven of those sins. In spite of the fact that he once hated Christians, he was now permitted to convert others to Christ. End of story? Other than having obeyed the gospel, what significant change made it possible for Paul to rejoice in his saved state? He abhorred and forsook the sins he once committed.

It is not insignificant that Paul said: *“...I was FORMERLY (emphasis mine - prb) a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man...”* (1Tim. 1:13). Paul was not a blasphemer, persecutor, nor an insolent man any longer. He had given these things up. He told the Philippians: *“...concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. But indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ”* (Phil. 3:6-8). Paul gave up those things from his past that he might grow in Christ.

Had Paul chosen to hold on to those things that gave him glory and pleasure as one who rebelled against the Lord, he would not have been able to remain in Christ. His former life of sin was not compatible with his present life in Jesus. Therefore, he had to abandon all sinful practices to stay in a saved state.

Because Paul rid himself of all ties to his former insolent life, he was able to labor more freely for the Lord. He found freedom from sin to be enabling, making him a more effective servant of the Lord. He wrote: *“For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me”* (1Cor. 15:9-10).

Paul ensured that the grace of God given to him would not be in vain by means of completely giving his own life over to the Lord's direction and guidance. Paul chose to be led by faith in the word of God rather than by his own worldly impulses and whims. *“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”* (Gal. 2:20). It is only fitting for one who has

received forgiveness of sins by the giving of Christ's life to give his own life back to the Lord in return.

How then is it that so many who obey the gospel later fall from grace and return to the worldliness they once left? It is because after they were baptized, they did not become former sinners, but remained current sinners. They did not give up the sins that originally brought them under condemnation; and therefore, continue on beset by weakness and sin.

The drunkard who obeys the gospel must cease ALL drinking of alcohol, or else he will not enjoy the ongoing blessings in Christ for the faithful. The penitent liar must ALWAYS tell the truth, or the blood of Christ will do him no lasting good. The lazy must work, the thief must not steal, the gossip must remain silent, the contentious man must control his urges, if any of them are to stay in Christ. The believer who repents of his sins before being baptized should not merely be disgusted with his sins, he must also resolve to forsake his sins to the uttermost and determine never to return to them.

If one believes in God and His word as authoritative, repents of his sins, publicly confesses his faith in Jesus Christ, and is baptized, and then returns to the sins he repented of, he cannot enjoy salvation. He has lost his fellowship with God (1John 1:6). In fact, his condition is worse than it was before he obeyed the gospel. *"For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning"* (2Peter 2:20).

Gentle Reader, if you call yourself a Christian, cease from sin and serve the Lord faithfully. Misery is the fate of those who try to live in the world and in Christ at the same time. Joy is the lot of one who is loyal to the Lord.

The Day I Had a Stroke

The day it happened there was a good deal of stress in my life. Things were beginning to pile up. I was far behind in my work. This day, which needed to go just right, started out poorly and got worse. Four phone calls tore up my morning schedule. Car trouble used up the lunch hour, leaving me in no mood to handle the afternoon. Two salesmen called, and I was primed for it to happen. I had no warning or idea that a stroke was on the way. The phone rang again and it happened! The caller said, "I just wanted to tell you how much my family and I love you and appreciate what you do." There it was! A stroke of love and encouragement... and, O, how I needed it! "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works" (Heb. 10:24). "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently" (1Peter 1:22).

Wanted

- People who are as interested in the church on Sunday and Wednesday night as they are on Sunday morning.
 - People who are as liberal with their money as with their advice and criticism.
 - People who love God more than good times.
 - People who are willing to let church work interfere with their jobs and recreation.
 - People who are willing to spend at least half as much time studying the Bible as they do online.
 - People who can be half as enthusiastic about a gospel meeting as about the Super Bowl.
 - People who are willing to practice in their lives what they say they believe in their hearts.
- (via The Key Word; Memphis, TN)