

Incredible, Merciful Patience

9/11/22

SJN

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Epistle lesson where we hear these words once more: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me... as the foremost... Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." (1 Timothy 1:16) This is the Word of the Lord.

21 years ago today at 8:46am AA Flt 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. 17 minutes later, UA Flt 175 slammed into the South Tower. In less than 2 hours the Twin Towers had collapsed. At 9:37 AA Flt77 crashed into the Pentagon. Finally - in less than 30 minutes from the last crash - a 4th plane, UA Flt 93 – heading toward Washington – crashed into a field in PA, brought down following and onboard fight by rebelling passengers, taking the lives of everyone on board... but saving those in harm's way... likely at the US Capitol or perhaps the White House.

And so the name Osama bin Laden was heard around the world. That may still be the most reviled name in America today. That name arouses anger... it incites rage in many American hearts. For many Americans that name represents the physical manifestation of evil. Most, if not all Americans... wanted him dead!

Why? ... Because many Americans wanted revenge! Many people wanted America to reign down the same kind of terror on him that he had reigned down on us. With vindictive anger others took matters to the ultimate extreme... wishing that bin Laden would forever burn in hell... because of what he masterminded.

I don't know how each of you reacted to the events of September 11, 2001 and the weeks and months and now years that have followed... but I'm pretty certain that these things have challenged us all. They've challenged our national confidence... that's built on the strength of our intelligence efforts and economic prosperity. They've challenged us in matters of faith... as we heard how the assassins carried out their dastardly deeds with the conviction... that they were doing God's will. They've challenged us to better understand the mind of God. They've challenged us in our walk of faith as we struggled to respond to these unprovoked attacks in a truly God-pleasing way.

Through the Spirit- inspired pen of the Apostle Paul God reveals his will to us... to help us overcome even these challenges. As we meditate on the words of the text God gives us a glimpse into his mind and his actions. And as we catch that glimpse and the activity of the true God we - together with the Apostle Paul - are led to give: Honor and glory to our incredible, merciful, patient King! ... Because of his patience with Paul... and because of his pattern of patience through Paul.

What comes to mind when you hear the name: the Apostle Paul. I'm fairly confident that Christians the world over have a soft spot in their hearts for that name. In our text Paul confesses that it wasn't always that way. Before he became a Christian his name actually raised terror in the hearts of Christians. Paul confesses in his letter to the Galatians, "For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently... and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers." (Galatians 1:13,14).

In the text Paul admits that he was passionate for what he thought... was God's will. As he looks back on that life he realizes that in his zeal... he was actually a blasphemer... a persecutor... a violent man. He confesses that despite his religious fervor... it was all a product of his ignorance... and his unbelief.

So, why then, did God let Paul get away with all of this... for so long? Why didn't God send the fire of heaven down on Paul to give him what he deserved for his sins? Jesus Christ - the exalted King of heaven and earth – did not bring his wrath on Paul... because Jesus had another purpose... a higher purpose in mind. Jesus Christ our glorious King wanted to deal patiently with Paul.

Instead of punishing him... Jesus filled Paul's heart with his undeserved love that overcame Paul's hatred. Jesus dealt patiently with Paul by overcoming his heart of unbelief and replacing it... with a heart of faith. In incredible, merciful patience... Jesus changed Paul from a persecutor of his church. Patiently... Jesus filled Paul with strength and faithfulness to zealously carry out the public work of the ministry of the gospel to which Jesus called him.

Perhaps many Christians of the first century also questioned why God would allow Paul to terrorize people, especially Christians... just as we wonder why God allows people like Osama bin Laden to terrorize the people of the world today, including Christians. Why was God "slow" to take action with Paul? Because the true God is not a God who wanted to give Paul exactly what he deserved. The true God is the one who wanted to save Paul from hell... by bringing him to know his Savior! Our God - who is the same yesterday, today, and forever - wants that for all people - that they would find salvation in knowing Jesus Christ as their personal Savior from sin.

That is always God's desire... even for those who were responsible for masterminding the murderous attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and in rural Pennsylvania 21 years ago... It is always His desire.

That truth moved the Apostle Paul to give honor and glory to our incredible, merciful, patient King! So, beloved... does it do the same... for you? Or do you find that truth... to be repulsing? After all, that just doesn't seem fair! And you would be absolutely right! It isn't fair. And that is what gives us every reason to give honor and glory to our King – because he doesn't treat us fairly... as our sins deserve – rather, he treats us patiently. That is God's pattern... one that was demonstrated through the life of the Apostle Paul.

And that pattern begins with the patient way that our King confronts sinners with the verdict of his law. That verdict is heard through a guilty conscience. Its truthfulness is supported as witnessed by the effects of sin throughout the world. Its verdict is felt when fear strikes our hearts... because the earthly props of national security and economic prosperity come tumbling down. Its verdict is real... as human lives come to an end in death. That verdict is pronounced most clearly and accurately from the mouth of our King.

Those words were spoken directly to Paul when he was still known as Saul as he was making his way to Damascus to persecute more Christians. And while on that road Jesus spoke to him saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). Through his law our King knocked Paul from his self-righteous religion... a religion that saw the bad in everyone else... and failed to see the evil inside himself. Through his law our King brought Paul to see that he too was a sinner – and in fact... not just any sinner – but the chief of sinners... who himself rightfully deserved everlasting punishment in the ravages of hell.

Friends... our King uses that same pattern of patience as he deals with us. Perhaps we've been tempted to think that those responsible for those terrorist acts of 21 years ago - or terrorist acts of today - aren't worthy of God's forgiveness? Have we been tempted to wish the torment of hell upon them? As our self-righteous pride carries us away to our own damnation... our King patiently opens our eyes to reality. He reminds us that in God's eyes... we are no better than those terrorists... or any terrorist. We aren't any less sinful than they are. Can we say that we have never acted out of ignorance and unbelief? Have we never used God's name to support misguided zeal... or just used it in vain? Have we never hated someone so much ... that we wished they were dead?

Have we never been plagued by the same problem of seeing everybody else's sinfulness and apparent hypocrisy...but missing the reality of our own? Truth be told – we too must admit, brothers and sisters... that we deserve to be listed among the world's worst sinners. We rightfully deserve God's eternal wrath... just as much as anybody else. It is good that our King leads us to recognize this fact... because if we don't... we will remain in the damnable spiritual ignorance... that thinks we deserve heaven because of something good we've done... or the bad that we haven't done.

Yes... Jesus used that patient pattern to humble Paul so that he might see his own sinfulness. Jesus purpose in doing this was to prepare Paul to hear - and accept by faith - the most trustworthy saying ever: that the reason Jesus Christ came into the world... was to save... sinners. Now that Paul realized that he was counted among the sinners of this world... he would be comforted by the good news that Jesus Christ came into the world... to save him too! And that is exactly what happened! That's why Paul's lips are filled with honor and glory for his King!

And that's the same way in which our King touches our hearts still today. He crushes the ignorance of unbelief that controls us by nature... and illuminates our hearts with faith in him. He conquers our natural hostility toward him as he patiently works on our hearts with his selfless, self-sacrificing love. He makes us aware of our spiritually starved condition by nature... so that he might fill us with the rich food of the gospel found in his body and blood sacrificed for us. We are comforted to know that we are counted among the sinners of this world... because that means that we are also considered as saints... since Jesus came into this world to save us too.

It is that incredible, merciful patience that our King has shown us that moves us to give him honor and glory. He has made us - the "worst" of sinners - into people who are not only capable of truly loving and serving him – but also capable of truly loving and serving one another.

So in any horrendous act carried out in the ignorance of unbelief – may our prayer be... that our King... would lead those responsible to repentance and faith... just as he has so mercifully done for us, beloved. May our King use any and all horrific events that we may experience... to give us an opportunity... to share this life-saving message... with those around us... who may still be buried under the rubble... of their sin. This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.