

Magic Doesn'T Work (Part 2)

Grace Then Works

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If you will recall last week's sermon, it began with a long introduction about magic. And you all thought I was going to speak about magic for the whole sermon, but that was not the case.

I am going to give you another long introduction about magic again today because this is part two of my sermon series.

Last week I was particularly interested in what intrigues people about magic. What is so fascinating about it? Why do they want it? Most of us would really we would love to be able to flourish a wand, or speak a word, and something would happen—something that we want would happen. We want to be able to have and control such power, and to make things happen for ourselves.

So, such powers would essentially erase our fears, and fulfill our every need. We all have this yearning to have this kind of power—the power of a god, as it were—with all the benefits that such a power would bring us.

Besides providing for our every need, what would we do with our magical powers? I mean, after we did everything we wanted to do, what would we do with our powers then? Besides filling up our one hundred room mansion with possessions far beyond our dreams, we probably would begin to cast about and use our magic to effect changes in our environment in one way or another. Perhaps in our most altruistic moments we might solve some of the great problems of mankind. We would cure cancer. We would clean up the world's oceans with the wave of our hand. Or, we would stop the mouths of lying politicians for all time (and such a wonderful act would surely merit the sincere gratitude of the entire world)! By speaking the word to change them, we could then trust them!

Do not count on it.

But our environment does not just include these big altruistic things, but it also includes the people around us. It would not be long before we would start using our magic powers to change the annoying frustrating quirks of other peoples' personalities. And, it would start with those who are most dear to us. You know, they say that when you marry, you marry their warts and all. Generally speaking, we find fault with those we are

closest to. And if they showed no signs of improving after a short while, changing these aspects of them selves that so bothered us, we might then just help them along the path you want them to take.

But you know, people normally just resist change with all their might. Even church members, if we want to be honest with ourselves, normally do not change very much, and that is why we "harangue" you every week, "You gotta change!" That is why God has a Sabbath every seven days so that we can go over these principles and be reminded, and change.

But, we would, after a while, soon begin using our powers to fashion the world around us in our own image. Do you think that you could refrain from using your magical powers in this way? If we had the power of a god, and we could with a word, or whim, do something big or small, could we hold back, and not do it?

Hardly. It is a part of human nature to make use of every ounce of influence we have—every ounce of power. It does not remain idle. It is Lord Action's dictum, if you will remember, "Power corrupts, and absolute power, corrupts absolutely." We would use it.

(By the way, I just found this out while looking for the background of this quotation, he wrote this as an argument against papal infallibility. He was an English catholic, and when the current pope of his day began to make papal infallibility into canon law of the church, he dissented and wrote this.)

And so, because we are human, and are given the power of a god, we would not stop at just getting things. We would end up trying to change other people. Now, we would definitely try to change ourselves—gray hair? Gone! Extra weight? History! Wrinkles? What wrinkles? A nip here, a tuck there, with a little magic, and pretty soon, we are a perfect specimen of humanity.

Or, how about some spiritual attributes? How about that problem with lying? Poof! Our magical power would stop that, and we would never saying another lying word again, and then become like the actor Jim Carry in the movie **"Liar! Liar!"** and end up saying things we should certainly hold back. Not lying, but not saying either.

Or, how about the tendency to rage at the drop of a hat? Well, the sweetness and light charm will take care of that, right? Any kind of magic will do, because we just want to use it to effect change all around us.

Would not that be grand, though, to be able to just say a word, and something like that would be done? Instantaneous change! Certain change! Pain free change! Permanent change!

Do not be too sure that would be all that grand.

Now, we realize I have been talking about magic; something that really does not exist in the plan of God. We know that is not how it works. Ridding ourselves of faults and sins is not a matter of "hocus pocus," and then all is well. There is no magic formula for coming out of sin. It takes a lot of hard work.

Turn to Leviticus 23, and begin by refreshing ourselves on why we are here today. As we all know, today is the first Day of Unleavened Bread. And, here is the command in Leviticus for us to keep it:

Leviticus 23:6-8 And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LOORD; seven days you must eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no customary [occupational] work on it. But you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LOORD for seven days. The seventh day shall be a holy convocation; you shall do no customary [occupational] work on it.

Today is that day, the fifteenth of first month, Abib or Nisan. Now the feast, as its name suggests centers on unleavened bread. This is because the Israelites in their haste to leave Egypt did not have the time to let their bread rise. It says that in Exodus 12:31.

Exodus 12:31-34 Then he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, "Rise, go out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel. And go, serve the LOORD as you have said. Also take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone; and bless me also." And the Egyptians urged the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste. For they said, "We shall all be dead." [Get these people out of here.] So the people took their dough before it was leavened, having their kneading bowls bound up in their clothes on their shoulders.

And so, as we learned yesterday, here in this congregation, they did not eat the Passover in haste, they had plenty of time for that, and to contemplate was God was going to do, and in a certain amount of fear and trepidation. When they left, then they

did leave in haste. They got out there in the morning, as they could not leave their homes until the morning, and they had a lot to do until they left in the evening. And so, they had to get all their things together in much haste. And, at the same time, they were spoiling the Egyptians, and they had to walk a long distance just to get to Rameses. They did not all live in the city, but most lived in the region of Goshen scattered about. And so they had a lot to do in a short amount of time. So, they did not have the time to get their bread to rise (natural sourdough style takes quite a while to work). So, as it says here, they took their dough before it was leavened, because their kneading troughs, or bowls were already packed away.

Over time, leavening, because of the process of fermentation, and the dough rising, or "puffing-up" became a symbol of corruption—of pride—and of sin itself. And so each year, we commemorate their leaving from Egypt as a type of our fleeing from this world, and from the sin that so easily besets us, as Paul so eloquently states in Hebrews 12:1.

We are here at a time remembering what the Israelites had to go through, and applying this same lesson to ourselves in terms of unleavened bread—that we must become unleavened, we must get rid of the leaven that is in us. We must become unleavened as we leave this present evil world of sin behind.

Turn to the New Testament in Galatians. Paul greets them in the first two verses, and then he says:

Galatians 1:3-5 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

So, like the Israelites escape from Egypt, we Christians can only escape the nasty clutches of sin, and of this world through the redeeming power of God by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So we are finding a parallel here between what the Israelites went through in leaving Egypt, and what we go through in leaving this world behind. They left Egypt only because of what God did for them. And, if it had been left up to them, they would have stayed as slaves of the Egyptians forever, until they were integrated so totally into their society they would have ceased to be Israelites. They would have become Egyptians. They would have intermarried, and they would have ceased to exist as a separate people.

But God did not want that to happen. He had made a prophecy that it would be about

400 years from the time He told Abraham, and their covenant together. And so, when that time was finished, He released his children from slavery in Egypt, and brought them out as we were told, with a high hand. So, without Him, they could have done nothing. It was only the redeeming power of God that made it happen.

And so, we, too, are unleavened only because of what God does. We did not have a clue before our calling by God of what we should do. It is only through the mercy of God that He decided to choose us, give us understanding, help us to believe, then lead us out by the hand, and give us all the strength that we needed to do what we needed to do to please Him.

There is a very close correlation between what happened to them, and what happens to us. They are a type of what we go through in our calling and our early conversion. And it goes on in our wilderness walk, too, just like their wilderness walk.

Turn to the book of Romans where there is a fuller theological treatment of this idea.

Romans 5:6-11 For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

Like I said, this is a fuller treatment of this concept that Paul was getting to in Galatians 1. We were without strength. In Old Testament Israelite terms, we were slaves of sin. Slaves do not have any strength or power. They are powerless. They can do only what their master tells them to do. And so, like them, we were slaves of sin, our own sinful habits, Satan's influence, and this world's influence. We were totally under the power of sin—absolutely, and totally. And through God's calling, we were awakened to our plight. And it is a plight. It is a desperate plight. The people of this world do not realize the trouble they are in, and how hopeless it is for them without the work God does. But, He made us aware. And once we believed, and repented of our rebellion against God which is the cause of humanity's slavery in the first place—Adam and Eve rebelled against God, and every one of us in turn have done the same thing. And so, the automatic result

of rebellion against God is being cut off from Him. And while being cut off from Him, Satan fills the vacuum, and we become slaves to Satan, sin, and this world.

But, once we believed, and repented of this rebellion, Christ's sacrifice, made a long time ago in anticipation of our calling, was applied to us.

The way Paul writes this in verse 6, it is almost as if Christ's sacrifice waited for the time of our calling. It is not quite the way it is, but it was done at the perfect time in history—the proper time for it. But, its application to us is at the perfect time because God calls us when it pleases Him—at the proper time. Then it applies to us. But this sacrifice that applies to us was done way before our calling while we were yet sinners. It says—while we were still in our sins. And God did this in anticipation of giving us grace—unmerited forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation with Him.

God was looking way into the future because Jesus Christ was slain from the foundation of the world. And He knew that He would want a people, so He planned all of this. And then, He set His plan into motion, and at the perfect time, Jesus Christ was sacrificed for us. And then, at the perfect time, we, too, were called into that plan, and that sacrifice was applied to us.

But, notice what Paul writes in Rom.5:10, "...Much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." He makes a distinction here between the reconciliation and the saving. He says that the reconciliation was done by His death, but the saving is done by His life.

Now, this has ramifications that many nominal Christians never seem to realize. Such people go on and on about how wonderful it is that Christ died for us, and it truly is a wonderful thing. It is absolutely amazing that He died for us. But they always seem to forget that He did not remain in the grave. I mean, even though they celebrate His resurrection, they know about it intellectually, they never seem to make all the connections regarding what that means to all of us. Sure, He died for us, and we are reconciled to God, but now He lives!

They understand that because He lives—He was raised from the dead, we like Him can be given eternal life, because He was the Forerunner. He opened the way, and we can follow Him. Sure, they understand all that. God raised Him from the dead, and we too shall be raised immortal, and incorruptible as it says in I Corinthians 15. That is a very clear understanding of the scripture. And that is a wonderful thing also!

But the point they so frequently fail to consider is what He is doing now that He has

been raised. What has Jesus Christ been doing between His resurrection and ours? I alluded to this the other day when I said, "Do God and Jesus Christ just sit around on their thrones in heaven, kicked back, and watch our activities like a television show? Is that all He is doing? Is He up there on a cloud strumming a harp? Is He making His list and checking it twice? What is He doing?"

People do not see beyond the end of their noses. They do not think about what God is doing, and what Christ is doing. We are saved by His life that He is living now. It is not just the fact that He lives, but also that He is the Mediator of the New Covenant, and our High Priest.

So, beyond the fact that He lives, there is this fact that He is the Mediator of the New Covenant, and our High Priest. Are these just titles? Or, do they come with the job? Obviously, they come with the job that Jesus Christ is doing now. God does not give titles just to give titles. He is a Boss who expects those He gives titles to, to live their titles—even His own Son.

Of course, that goes without saying, that Jesus Christ would do what God told Him to do, because He says only what His Father tells Him to do—and He always does His Father's will.

Did you notice how many times I used the word "do," or "does"? He is at work for us, with us, and in us all the time, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. He is always at work. He is fulfilling His job as Mediator and High Priest. We are saved because He lives.

We are going to enter the middle of an argument Paul is making, but this is the section that we need to dwell on for a bit.

Romans 8:23-37 Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit [that is us], groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself [I say that with a reason] makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to

those who are ***the called*** according to His purpose.

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. [All the way through the process. It is as good as done in God's mind.] What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [This is quite encouraging.] He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen [He is alive], who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us [that is why I said Him, and Himself above, because the Spirit is Jesus Christ as our Mediator and High Priest]. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? [Paul knew all about this as we shall see.] As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

So, it is a certain thing that we are saved in the hope of the resurrection from the dead. And we eagerly await it. Most of us cannot wait. We have been around long enough, and groan, "Oh how long, O Lord," so many times that we have gotten to the point that we just cannot wait any longer. That is why Paul says that we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. We have had to learn to endure, and that will last all the way until the end.

But in the mean time, the Spirit, which as we found above, is Jesus Christ Himself, in this case making intercession for us, helping us, Paul says, in our weaknesses. So, what does He do? He intercedes before God for us as our Mediator and High Priest.

Why?

It is amazing the answers you can sometimes find when you ask that question, and start digging through, or deeply thinking about the cause of things.

Here is an expansion on that question—if we are completely saved by grace through justification at baptism, what need do we have of mediation? Have you ever thought

about it in that way? If we are perfectly reconciled with God at all times, forever, no matter what we do, why do we need a Mediator? Why do we need an Advocate before God? Why do we need Someone to stand between us and God?

It is a fair question!

Not only that, we have such a strong Advocate before God that He says He will never leave us nor forsake us. He has a lot of business lined up! We are going to really need His help. And nothing will separate us from Christ and the work of love He does for us. That is very encouraging, because we all need it so much.

So, as the passage winds down, Paul says, "Yeah, we suffer all the time in this life of hardship, toil, weakness and want." But through Jesus Christ we are, in his famous phrase, "More than conquerors." We are such victors as this world has never seen.

Have you ever asked a question about that? What are we victorious over? If Christ conquered all, and He overcame the world, as is spoken about in the book of John, what do we need to be victorious over? What do we triumph over? All of you know that question. That is why we are here! That is why we are sitting here on this high Holy Day. We must overcome and be victorious over sin, society, and Satan; and ultimately we need to be victorious over death itself.

So, far from pushing a message of grace alone, Paul is teaching justification by grace through faith, followed by a lifetime of overcoming sin, and growing into Christ's image. That is precisely what he told us in Ephesians 2:8-10. We know these verses by heart, but it is good to see them again.

Many nominal Christians like to read only so far, and then lest the rest go. But what we did there in Romans 8 was to read the rest of the story. Paul is very enthused about what Christ did for him, but then he added at the end that we need to be more than conquerors ourselves. Now, we will do the same thing here in Ephesians 2.

Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God

Period. End of story. Right? I do not think so. That is what Protestant America does. They do not read the next sentence:

Ephesians 2:9-10 ...not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His

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workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for [the reason of, to do] good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Verse 10 is the key to this for us. We all agree that only by God's grace is justification and salvation possible. But verse 10 tacks on the ensuing relationship between God and us. And that relationship is the primary reason for God's offering the New Covenant to us in the first place. He wants a relationship with us! And so, He makes an agreement with us. "I will be your God, and you shall be My people!" This is probably the simplest way of stating the covenant, both Old Covenant, and New Covenant. "You shall be My people, I shall be your God."

Now, this is a contract, and agreement—it is something that we shake our hands on, as it were, which means that we both have jobs to do. We have responsibilities within the covenant. And so, the covenant requires God to work in us, because we are His workmanship. It requires God to work in us to create us by His workmanship into His Son's image. That is what He takes on Himself. And that covers all the theology of our salvation.

Additionally this covenant requires us to do the good works that He foreordained us to do.

So, both God and we are contractually required to work in this relationship to bring it to pass. He does His part, while we do our part. And in the end, He is satisfied, and we are satisfied. We both get out of the contract what we want, and we are both happy.

Okay. So, what do we have to do? It says we are to do the good works, and then it says that we should walk in them. So we walk according to His preset standards doing the things that He has foreordained for us to do. So, we must walk, we must live according to His way of life. And if we cannot do that right away, and we truly cannot do it—none of us can—we have, by hard work, to overcome, to succeed in the places where we fail (which is most places).

We are not going to, by fiat, have the character of Jesus Christ. That is one thing that God will not, and cannot do. It is a long process. Character must be built over time. And it has to be inculcated into our minds. It cannot be just a one-off kind of thing. It has to be something that we habitually do. Otherwise, it is not character. It is just a quirk—a happenstance that we actually did something right. It takes a long time of living and walking with God before we can do these things almost without thinking, because it has become ingrained in us.

To see this in a bit of a nutshell, turn to II Timothy 2. Here Paul is instructing Timothy on how to be a good minister. Because Paul knew that his own life was about to end so he is imparting final instructions to Timothy.

II Timothy 2:3-4 You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.

This is another contractual agreement here. Soldiers sign up for duty, and then they are required to do certain duties for the army, and the army has to do certain things for them.

II Timothy 2:5-6 And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules [another type of contractual agreement]. The hard-working farmer must be first to partake of the crops.

Yet another kind of agreement we have—a farmer first feeds his family, and then what is left over is sold.

II Timothy 2:7 Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things.

II Timothy 2:19-21 Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity." But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. [That last line sounds a lot like Ephesians 2:10.]

So, here it is in a nutshell: We have been called by God to a new life—a Christian soldier's new life—meaning, like a soldier, we repudiate everything else, so that we can focus on the mission we have been given. We must repudiate this world's way of life, so that we can walk according to God's standards. We have to live according to certain rules and principles—God's standards, which have been written for all time in God's law. We all know what they are. And if we work hard, like the farmer does, we will reap and

enjoy a great blessing and reward.

So I went over all three things there in verses 3 through 6 above. We have been called to a Christian soldier's life, which means that we must repudiate this world's way of life as Paul says there in verse 4. But we must also compete according to the rules—we must live according to the standards that God has set down, as he said in verse 5. And then, as it states in verse 6 using the metaphor of the hardworking farmer, if we do the hard work, then we will reap the blessings and the rewards, which come from that hard work.

And so, Paul sets it all up. He changes his metaphor a little bit in order to get all those thoughts across, but he does it beautifully in the end, giving us the understanding through those metaphors.

So, to put it plainly, as Paul goes down to verse 19, he says that God is quite aware of us. The Lord knows those who are His. Never forget that. It is a great boost and encouragement to know that God knows you, and knows who you are, knowing you inside and out, knowing your strengths and weaknesses. And so He can fashion the way He works with you with a master-craftsman's ability and skill.

So, God is quite aware of us, aiding us in this endeavor, and He says that if we are truly among His elect, then our job is to depart from iniquity. "Let everyone who names the name of Christ, depart from iniquity." And we can do that because God knows those who are His. Right?

This is the only way that it can happen.

And then, in II Timothy 2:20, it says we all start at different places, some with more advantages, abilities, dispositions, and knowledge than some others. Some are already vessels of gold, you might say just because of the natural abilities and talents God has given, or the knowledge that they might have, or what not. It does not matter. Maybe God prepared them before their calling for this, and then finally when God calls them, they are ready to do His work pretty quickly, because they are already vessels of gold.

But there are vessels of clay also at the other end of the spectrum that are going to need a long time, and a lot of work and refinement before they can really be ready for God to use them.

So, we are at this point where we are either vessels of gold and silver, or wood and clay. Some of us have had honorable lives, while some have not. But, God calls us into

the church of God, and He gives us an opportunity.

II Timothy 2:20 Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from these dishonorable things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.

So, God calls us, we are at a certain point—good or bad—honorable or dishonorable—but we all start out fresh. And then, what do we have to do? We have to work to clean ourselves up, because if you will recall, when you were baptized, the minister said, "This baptism is for the remission of sins, which are past." And we come up out of the water into newness of life, we are all clean, and about three seconds later, we have probably had some sinful idea in our mind, and—oops—we are constantly repenting, because we are fleshly human beings with all these drives, and desires. And a lot of them are against what God wants because they influence us to turn from Him.

And so, even though we have been cleaned up, and we are immaculate at that point, it is very soon that we need to be cleaned up again—and again—and again—and again, etc.

It never stops. It never ends while we are in this flesh. And so what do we have to do? We have to cleanse ourselves from the dishonor, so we become useful to God, so we become holy and able to be used by Him in whatever work He has given us to do.

So, here again in II Timothy, Paul outlines the whole plan for us. He gives us the principles early on in the chapter, and then he tells us how it all works. God does a great deal of work for us, but we have to get down and dirty cleaning ourselves up.

Now, consider the apostle Paul. He may be the prime example of what he was actually speaking about here. And I am sure that Timothy, himself, was thinking about Paul, his life and what he had to do. He knew Paul intimately. I am sure that Timothy knew the whole story. Paul had probably told it many times. We know Paul in the Bible had told the story three or four times that made it into scripture. There are at least three tellings of it just in the book of Acts.

So, obviously when God puts things into the Bible, He intends that we think about them frequently.

Indeed, turn to the book of Acts chapter 7 and we will add a human illustration to this to get an idea of how this works. This is the speech of Stephen before the Jews, near the end when he looked up and saw Christ standing at the right side of God the Father,

Acts 7:57-8:3 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

Here is our first sight of the apostle Paul. Paul persecuted the fledgling members of the church of God. He had a fiery zeal for God. But as he later described his own countrymen, they had a zeal for God but not according to knowledge. He was doing all of this in ignorance of what God really wanted. He raged against the church of God and the membership to such an extent that he was not only willing to put them into prison for their repudiation of Judaism, but to condemn them and stone them to death.

Now, the language that Luke intentionally uses is brutal. He made havoc of the church of God. The Greek word means to destroy. He was in the process of destroying this young church. He was dragging off men and women to prison. The line, "committing them to prison," is tantamount to what we would say as, "hand over for punishment." It is a very active word. You get the idea of Saul being actively persecuting them, not just holding their jackets, but that he was dragging people into prison, actively destroying the church of God.

So, before his conversion, Paul's sins were focused against God, God's work, and God's people just like a laser. To put it bluntly, he was anti-Christ. He was not *the anti-Christ*, but he just was anti-Christ—he was against God, and His Christ.

Galatians 1:13-16b For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and (tried to) destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me that I might preach Him among the Gentiles.

So, from his own pen, here, we have his assessment of his pre-conversion state of mind. He was exceeding zealous for Judaism, not for God, but for Judaism, and the traditions of his fathers. And this he took to the point of persecution to destroy God's church. At that time, he was indeed the chief adversary of God's church—Saul of Tarsus.

Also mentioned in Acts 8 is that his actions were in Judea, and Samaria, and I would imagine throughout Galilee, too, because when he was called by God, he was headed for Damascus. He was expanding his own frontiers. He was trying to put this little church to a quick death.

When Christ revealed Himself to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, He called him from being a persecutor to being an apostle. And Paul himself says in I Corinthians 15,

I Corinthians 15:7-10 After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. 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.

So when God called Saul of Tarsus, there on the road, He forgave him of his sins by grace. Paul makes no bones about it that it was completely by grace. If there was a man who was 180 degrees out of sync with what Christ was doing, it was Saul of Tarsus. But God by His grace, struck him down, turned him around, and made him a vessel for honor—Paul the apostle.

But notice what he says here, though. He said in verse 10 essentially that to make sure that God's grace was not in vain (meaning that God's grace had not been given uselessly, or futilely, or ineffectively, to make sure that God's calling of him made a difference). Paul labored—he worked—he toiled harder than anyone, even the other apostles, in gratitude to God, to please Him who called Him out of this life of anti-Christ.

II Corinthians 11:22-23 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes

above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.

I would like to know how many times Paul actually died, and was brought back to life. There was at least one time, maybe in Lystra, or Derbe, where he was left for dead, but then suddenly appears in the next city, and everybody said, "Oh Paul, you were dead!" Perhaps he was, and he was resurrected.

II Corinthians 11:24-28 From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

This gives you an idea of the labors, the hardships, and the toils Paul did and went through in order to please God, in order to thank Him for the calling, and to make sure His calling was effective, that the grace of God was not in vain. Yet even all this labor, he says, was through God's grace. He said that back there in I Corinthians 15.

The abilities and strengths used to do all these things to endure so much came from God. Paul certainly went through it. He had a part to play, but he would not have gotten through it at all without what all God gave. So, it was a cooperative effort between Paul and God.

Philippians 2:12-13 Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works within you. [It is a cooperative effort. You work out, He works in.]

Now we hold Paul up as a paragon of overcoming; turning his zeal against God into a zeal for God; turning his murderous hunting of true Christians into actually helping them seek eternal life; turning his imprisoning of them into helping them on their way to true freedom.

But then, we have Romans chapter 7, written about the same time he wrote to the Corinthians, generally. And here, this paragon of overcoming—Saul of Tarsus who became the apostle Paul—he admits that after over twenty years of overcoming, he was

still struggling against sin.

Romans 7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.[It is as if he was still a slave of it.]

Romans 7:15-25 For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

Now, we see in this section that he desired to do good, and he tried to do good. But sin kept returning. He describes it as a fierce battle against two laws—but *laws* is not really a good description here. People think of it in terms of God's law. That is not what he means at all.

Paul is talking about an influence, a power, almost like a spirit. And these two things are at war with one another within each one of us. There is first the law of his carnal flesh. And then on the other side, there is the law of his mind. There was the law of his humanity, you might say, and the law of the Spirit within his mind.

Now we can call them carnality, on the one hand, and spirituality on the other. Or we can call it like Paul does in the next chapter (Romans 8) the flesh against the spirit.

The only cure, as he concludes at the end of Romans 7 is deliverance from sin through Jesus Christ, and His atoning blood. That is the only way we are going to be rid of this law of sin and death. We cannot truly overcome it ourselves. It is a struggle he, and we always have. We always depend on Jesus Christ and His blood to cover our sins, and to ultimately save us in the end. We are saved by His Life—He is alive now. We always rely on that sacrifice to keep bringing us into reconciliation with God.

But even after all that work of his overcoming, Paul said he was still sinful. That war was still within him, and he had to rely on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Romans 8:1-2 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.

Romans 8:12-14 Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

What is Paul saying here? I know we skipped over a bit, but what we read is enough to get the gist of things. This failing of our human flesh and carnality is overcome by God's gracious mercy and forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ. That is what he says in verse 1. There is now no condemnation. But notice carefully that he makes two stipulations nominal Christians do not seem to understand. Two stipulations for this no condemnation promise: (1) There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, and (2) who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the spirit. Two stipulations for not being condemned. You must be called as the elect of God, and chosen, and you have to be living the life of Christ here and now.

It is not forever, unless you keep it up. God is willing to make it forever. He wants to make it forever. It is eternal life that He gives us. But if we do not hold up our end of the bargain, we have broken the contract, and there is a penalty.

So this grace applies to God's elect who are actively living God's way of life. This promise of no condemnation is not only to those who have been granted repentance, but also to those who are working. Walking according to the spirit is an active and very difficult Christian work.

Tie this back into Egypt, and the children of Israel. What did the Israelites have to do upon God's deliverance of them? When He passed over them on the Passover, and spared them from the death angel, and redeemed them from Egypt, a great wind came down, and whooshed them over into the Promised Land, right? NO! A great fiery chariot came down and swooped them up and laid them into the Promised Land, right? NO!

They walked. And they walked. And they walked. And they walked. For forty years they

walked through a desert in which God had to supply the very water and food that they ate. Even the shade they walked under was provided by God. But they still had to walk every step of the way themselves.

So indeed, our two stipulations from Romans 8:1 applied to them as well. What did they have to do? They had to be Israelites, ones who had come under the blood. And also, they had to walk. They had to live the life. They had to follow the Cloud, and the Pillar of Fire. These are the very same two stipulations for the Israelites, and for Abraham's seed.

God does not change, does He? The pattern holds true for both covenants. But, Israel failed. Are we going to fail?

Paul says that this grace in Romans 8:12 makes us debtors. We have been given a great gift by God. And we have, then, an obligation to respond to God in a certain way, and that obligation is to put to death the deeds of the body. And what do we call that? Getting rid of sin. Putting out the leaven. Overcoming. That is what we have to do. For what He did, that is our response. Get rid of the flesh. Walk in the spirit.

We will conclude in Hebrews 4 and tie in Israel once more,

Hebrews 4:1-3 Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them [another pattern that has held true]; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: "So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest,'"

Hebrews 4:6-11 Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, again He designates a certain day, saying in David, "Today," after such a long time, as it has been said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.

Now this is a very theologically rich passage, but the essential truth, here, is that God's

rest—the Kingdom of God—is still before us. We have not entered it yet. The only One who has entered God's rest is Jesus Christ. And it is kind of interesting that He has not stopped working because we have not entered that rest yet.

However, Paul gives a very stern warning here. He says that what befell the Israelites in the wilderness (and they fell by the tens of thousands, through sins of various sorts through their wilderness trek) that same fate could befall us also. The lesson here is that if we want to enter God's rest, of which the Sabbath is a type, of which the Promised Land was a type, we have to continue walking, and we have to continue working to overcome sin. We have not yet entered God's rest. Have you noticed?

So our work, as verse 10 says, has not yet ceased. The work is not over until we enter the rest. God worked six days, and He rested on the seventh, and hallowed it for us, to give us right there in the second chapter of the Bible what He wants us to do.

So Paul's advice, keep up the good work all the way into the Kingdom of God.