St. Paul’s Experience of God’s Mercy and His Call to Holiness

Foundational Commands of the Hebrew-Christian Bible:
- Deut 6:4 – “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!”
  - “You shall not have other gods beside me.” (Exod 20:3; also Deut 5:7)
  - Penalty for idolatry (worshipping other gods) is being stoned to death (Lev 17:2-7)
- Lev 19:2b – “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” (also Lev 11:44-45; 20:26; 21:28)
  - “…for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (1 Peter 1:16)
  - “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt 5:48)
  - “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:36)

Biblical Vocabulary:
- Heb. qadosh / Gk. hagios – “holy, sacred, special, set apart” (closely related to “pure, blameless, unblemished”)
  - “holy/sacred” can apply to times, places, objects, foods, buildings, people, etc.
- Heb. hesed / Gk. eleios – “merciful; compassionate” (closely related to “loving kindness; steadfast love; forgiveness”)
  - opposites: “judgmental, harsh, vengeful, vindictive, punishing”
- Heb. tamim / Gk. teleios – “perfect; whole, entire. complete, mature, adult” (but not modern “perfectionism!”)
  - opposites: “partial, incomplete, immature, childish”

Paul’s Early Life: “Torah-Obsvant” and “Zealous” and “Blameless” – and a Persecutor of Christians!
- Phil 3:5-6 – “Circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, in observance of the law a Pharisee, 6 in zeal I persecuted the church, in righteousness based on the law I was blameless.”
- Acts 22:3-4 – “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city [Jerusalem]. At the feet of Gamaliel I was educated strictly in our ancestral law and was zealous for God, just as all of you are today. 4 I persecuted this Way to death, binding both men and women and delivering them to prison.”

Paul’s “Conversion” on the Road to Damascus:
- Acts 26:12-18 – Paul’s Self-Defense before King Agrippa

The “Revelation” of Jesus as God’s Son (in Paul’s Own Words):
- Gal 1:11-17 – “For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me…”
- 1 Cor 15:8-10 – “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he [Jesus] appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them…”
- Eph 3:1-3 – “This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words.”

Paul’s Experience of God’s Grace as “Mercy”:
- 2 Cor 4:1 – “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.”
- 1 Tim 1:13-16 – “I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and an arrogant man, but I have been mercifully treated because I acted out of ignorance in my unbelief. Indeed, the grace of our Lord has been abundant, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost. But for that reason I was mercifully treated, so that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in him for everlasting life.”
Mercy Is Primarily an Attribute of God:
- Rom 9:15-16 – “For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy…”
- Rom 11:30-32 – “Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.”
- 2 Cor 1:3 – “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation,”
- Phil 2:27 – “He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another.”
- Eph 2:4-7 – “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

Christians Are Called to Be Merciful:
- Eph 4:32 – “and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”
- Phil 1:8 – “For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.”
- Phil 2:1-2 – “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”
- Col 3:12-14 – “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.”

Christians Are Called to Be Holy:
- Rom 1:7a – “to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy.”
- 1 Cor 1:2 – “to the church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.”
- 2 Cor 1:1-2 – “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God.”
- Eph 1:1 – “as he [God] chose us in him [Christ], before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him…” (cf. 5:27)
- 1 Thess 3:13 – “so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. Amen.”
- 1 Thess 5:23 – “May the God of peace himself make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- 2 Tim 1:9 – “He saved us and called us to a holy life, not according to our works but according to his own design and the grace bestowed on us in Christ Jesus before time began,”

Paul Often Refers to Believers as “Holy Ones” or “Saints”:
- 2 Cor 1:1-2 – “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God that is in Corinth, with all the holy ones throughout Achaia: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
- Eph 1:1 – “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the holy ones who are [in Ephesus] faithful in Christ Jesus:”
- Phil 1:1 – “Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the holy ones in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi…”
- Paul says “holy ones” about 25 times throughout his letters; he also uses “brothers and sisters” about 100 times.

Other Formulaic Greetings in Pauline Letters:
- 1 Thess 1:1 – “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace.” (cf. 2 Thess 1:1-2; Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; Tit 1:4; Phlm 3)
- Gal 6:16 – “Peace and mercy be to all who follow this rule and to the Israel of God.”
- 1 Tim 1:2 – “to Timothy, my true child in faith; grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- 2 Tim 1:2 – “to Timothy, my dear child: grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- See also 2 Jn 3 – “Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son in truth and love,” and Jude 2 – “may mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.”