

**Ps 14; Jer 4:11-12, 22-28;
1 Tim 1:12-17; Lu 15:1-10**

Just about the time Jesus was born in Bethlehem, another Jewish boy came into the world in Tarsus, capital city of Cilicia (which we recognize as Turkey). His parents named him Saul. His father was a Pharisee, so the boy was steeped in the Torah from day one: much religious training, piety and devotion. He went to Jerusalem to study with the great Rabbi Gamaliel. He became the most zealous anti-Christian Pharisee ever. He rounded up Christians and put them in prison. He stood by approvingly the day Stephen was stoned to death for being a Jesus-follower.

Saul was on his way to Damascus with letters from the Sanhedrin (the Jewish governing body) commissioning him to break up the Christian groups in that city and imprison them as well. He was stopped abruptly by the appearance of Jesus Himself. Christ's glory blinded Saul for three days. What was going to be a brilliant career in the church was redirected to teaching and preaching about this Messiah – Jesus of Nazareth. Saul of Tarsus became the Apostle Paul, church planter and evangelist over most of the Roman Empire.

In this letter to Timothy, Paul confesses his wrongdoing before he believed in Jesus: a blasphemer (denied that Jesus is the Son of God) – a persecutor (harassed and tortured Christians for their faith) and a man of violence. Paul had been subject to fits of rage and acts of cruelty toward Jesus-followers.

On that road to Damascus he was showered with the super-abundant grace of the Lord Jesus. It did not seem to be such a wonderful thing when it happened. But he knew the Torah, the prophets and the writings. He began to understand that he was not a righteous and obedient servant of the Most-High – but, just a sinner saved by the grace of God in Christ. He was transformed from a power-hungry religious nut into a humble servant and follower of Jesus. There is hope for us all.

Let's move forward in history to the middle of the 4th c AD. In the small town of Thagaste, N Africa a boy was born to Patricius and Monica, a Berber couple. Dad was a pagan, Mom was a Christian. The child's name was Augustine. He did well in school and became a brilliant rhetorician and

philosopher. His family managed to send him to the prestigious school of rhetoric in Carthage, in modern day Algeria. Though he was brilliant, Augustine had a strong rebellious streak. Late hours, carousing in the city, sexual exploits and loose morals were his delight. He thought it was fun, but Monica his mother began praying earnestly for his conversion. He continued in the same way for many years, had a mistress, an illegitimate son and dabbled in heresies and strange philosophies. Monica kept praying.

At age thirty-one, Augustine began listening to faithful friends, to his mom and to a great preacher, Bishop Ambrose of Milan. Augustine moved to Italy to teach in the imperial school of rhetoric. Augustine began a period of soul searching and repentance. He was baptized and put his life of sin behind him. He wrote in his *Confessions*:

*Late have I loved Thee, O Lord; and behold,
Thou wast within and I without, and there I
sought Thee.*

*Thou wast with me when I was not with Thee.
Thou didst call, and cry, and burst my deafness.*

*Thou didst gleam, and glow, and dispel my
blindness.*

*Thou didst touch me, and I burned for Thy peace.
For Thyself Thou hast made us,
And restless our hearts until in Thee they find
their ease.*

*Late have I loved Thee, Thou Beauty ever old and
ever new. (Justus.anglican.org cited in Wikipedia,
09-09-19)*

Monica was overjoyed! Augustine entered the priesthood. His remarkable transformation gives us all reason to hope in Jesus' sacrifice. Even persistent rebels are cleansed and begin to serve the Lord. Augustine was found by the Good Shepherd. He was sought and found like the woman's precious silver coin in the parable.

Please open your Bible to Luke 15. In the lives of the Apostle Paul and Augustine, Bishop of Hippo and see two great sinners become great saints. Jesus says there is a big party in heaven when anybody is made whole by believing and trusting the Creator God. We are restless 'til we rest in Him.

At the beginning of Luke 15 we see all the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus. Sinner is strange word in our time. We don't use it much because it implies that somebody is being judged. Heaven forbid we should judge. Along with the tax collectors who flocked to hang out with Jesus were prostitutes and thieves, robbers and cheaters. The Pharisees criticized Jesus for being a friend of sinners.

Doesn't Paul remind you of the sheep that wandered away from the flock? He thought he was doing great – getting rid of Jesus followers – doing what God wanted. And Augustine reminds me of the silver coin that rolled away from the woman. He got caught in the floorboards – just couldn't return. He liked hiding out from God. What a good joke to pretend there is no God. Let's move on in Luke 15.

I believe you have heard of the prodigal son. He's the kid who ran off with his entire inheritance and squandered it on foolishness, wound up trapped in poverty and shame. He decides to return to his father, ask for forgiveness and a job.

As he starts toward the house, his dad sees him and runs out to hug and kiss him. The father gives him gifts and puts on a huge barbeque in his honor. Isn't this just like Augustine? He ran and ran from his heavenly Father until finally he realized his need to be reunited with the One who loves him best.

And we find the older brother who stayed home to work for his father is furious that his loser younger brother gets all this loving attention, while he gets nothing. Isn't he just like the Apostle Paul? Why should Gentiles get so much grace and restoration with God, while he has worked so hard to be righteous all his life?

Jesus goes out to gather in the wanderers, the lost and the run-aways. These stories are for the over-religious Pharisees and scribes. They are also for you and me. Being separated from God leaves an emptiness in the human heart. We are created to live in the light of God's presence. Whether you have pursued pleasure, wealth and foolishness – or have been imprisoned in a religious straight-jacket thinking you have earned God's favor – either way, isn't it is time to let God

be God? Jesus is our hope of being with God now and forever. Amen.