

1 Timothy 1:12-17

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[0 : 00] Imagine yourself walking along a cobbled street in Cambridge, and across the street you see a young man, short in stature, sickly in appearance, seemingly of a nervous disposition.

And this young man is very tentatively approaching another man who seems to be offering him a publication of some description, but the whole scene appears very secretive.

Who could the young man be? What is the forbidden book that he is purchasing? Well, the young man that I hope you are visualizing in your mind's eye goes by the name of Thomas Bilney.

And the book that he is purchasing is a Greek and Latin edition of the New Testament, the work of the Dutch scholar Erasmus. It's a book forbidden by the clergy.

The year is 1519. Bilney was a serious and shy young man who was striving desperately and fruitlessly to earn his salvation.

[1 : 37] Little Bilney, as he came to be known by a future circle of friends, many of whom were much more famous than he was. Little Bilney scuttled back to his quarters, having purchased this New Testament.

And almost overcome by fear and excitement, he opened the forbidden book. And it is said that his eyes fell upon the words of 1 Timothy chapter 1 and verse 15.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.

One biographer speaks of how a new light flooded Bilney's fearful soul. As the Holy Spirit applied the truth with convicting and converting power.

And Thomas lifted his eyes from the pages of Scripture and exclaimed, I alone am like Paul, and more than Paul, the greatest of sinners.

[2 : 53] But Christ came to save sinners. Some 12 years later, on the 19th of August 1531, little Bilney was burnt at the stake in his home town of Norwich.

The first martyr of the Reformation to die on English soil. It is worth noting in the passing that Patrick Hamilton, the first Scottish martyr, was executed three years earlier in 1528.

But back to the trembling but joyful young man in Cambridge. I alone am like Paul, and more than Paul, the greatest of sinners.

But Christ came to save sinners. Christ came to save sinners. It was true 500 years ago, and it is true, wonderfully true today.

Christ came to save sinners. And as we explore the text line by line, we can do so reflecting on what thoughts might have gone through Thomas Bilney's mind as his eyes fell upon these precious words.

[4 : 11] So let's look at the verse and go through it part by part. How does the verse begin? Well, it begins with these words. Here is a trustworthy saying.

Here is a trustworthy saying. Now that is what Thomas was searching for. He was searching for. He was thirsty for.

He was desperate for a trustworthy saying. He had heard many sayings from the lips of priests and parsons that had proved anything but trustworthy.

None of these sayings, perhaps some well-meaning and all slavishly followed by young Thomas. None of them had brought rest and hope to his troubled soul.

What he needed was a trustworthy saying. And what does he read in the pages of Scripture? Here is a trustworthy saying. And so he listens intently as he reads the words that followed.

[5 : 16] And a trustworthy saying is what we all need. It's what you need. In a world of empty promises and fake news, you need.

We all need a trustworthy saying. Well, here you have it. What Paul goes on to say is trustworthy. It is true.

It is dependable. It's tried and tested. And so listen carefully to what he says. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves in thinking about the saying itself because there's something else that Paul says before that. Notice the verse. Verse 15.

Here is a trustworthy saying. That deserves full acceptance. You see, this is a saying that's not only to be studied.

[6 : 13] It's not only to be analyzed. It's not only to be dissected and pondered on. It is a saying, says Paul, that deserves full acceptance.

It is worthy of our acceptance because it is true. And it demands full acceptance because it is crucial and relevant to us.

It is a saying with eternal consequences for each of us. And so it is not only to be thought about and maybe even admired or pondered on.

But, says the apostle, it is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. And that full acceptance involves acknowledging what the statement says, that we are sinners.

But also trusting in the one identified as the Savior of sinners. Young Thomas, as a life transformed and a life that would be consumed by the flames gave ample evidence of, afforded to this saying, his full acceptance.

[7 : 22] What about you?

What is the saying? Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And very simply, these words can be considered.

And we can notice how this saying identifies, first of all, a person. It gives record of what we might call a journey. And it speaks of a mission.

First of all, the saying identifies a person. Who is this person? Well, Christ Jesus. And I think we're familiar with the significance of his name.

We say a name. We say a name. Of course, Christ is more than a name. It's more of a title. Christ, the anointed one, the promised Messiah. And so, in this saying, the one who is identified is the Messiah.

[8 : 43] The promised Messiah from of old. The one who the prophets had pointed forward to. Who would come and save his people. Christ Jesus.

And we remember the words recorded for us in Matthew chapter 1 and in verse 21, where it's explained to us why Jesus bears that name.

And you shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. And so, this saying identifies a person.

Christ Jesus, the promised Messiah. The one who would come to save his people from their sins. But the saying also, and at the heart of the saying, you have identified what I'm calling a journey.

Because it says, Christ Jesus came into the world. Let's think of that as a journey that he embarked on. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

[9 : 42] But what do we make of the language that Paul uses? That Christ Jesus came into the world. There's only four words, but they capture a wealth of truth concerning Jesus.

First of all, the words, at the very least, we could say, imply the pre-existence of Jesus. Though that reality that is clearly established across God's Word, though it is perhaps not definitively established by the language employed by Paul, this pre-existence of Jesus is certainly implied.

He already existed before he embarked on this journey. He came into the world. He was elsewhere, but he came into the world.

So it speaks of or certainly points to his pre-existence. But if we focus in on this picture of a journey, maybe we can explore that in different ways. We can think about where he came from.

You know, every journey has a point of departure as well as a destination. So where did he come from? Where was he going to? And by what means did he embark on this journey?

[10 : 52] Let's think about the journey from that perspective. Where from? Well, Jesus came from heaven. In the words of the hymn that we sometimes sing, From heaven you came, helpless babe, Entered our world, your glory veiled, Not to be served, but to serve.

And give your life that we might live. He came from heaven. The eternal Son of God came from heaven. From the glory of heaven. From being seated at the right hand of the Father.

He left heaven. And he embarked on this journey. And he came into this world. Of course, that answers the second question we pose. Where to?

What was the destination for Christ Jesus? He came into, well, the saying tells us, He came into the world. He came to the dwelling place of sinners like you and me.

He came to this sin-sick and broken and hopeless world Of darkness and death and suffering. How did he undertake this journey?

[11 : 55] How did the eternal Son of God, The creator of the universe, The one who had set the stars in their place, How did he embark on this journey? How could it be that he would come from heaven?

How could he come into this world? By what means? Well, by means of the incarnation, In the words of John at the beginning of his gospel, The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

And we need to just pause and ponder on that for a moment. What a journey the eternal Son of God undertook. Christ Jesus came into the world.

So there's a person, there's a journey, But there's also a mission that this saying identifies. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. As we think about the mission on which he embarked, We can notice the identity of those to be saved, But also the extent of the salvation as secured.

[13 : 08] Who did he come to save? Well, again, in few and simple words, We have a clear answer. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

And we're all sinners. And so we can place ourselves As the object of this saving mission. He came into the world to save sinners.

And I'm a sinner and you're a sinner. So he came to save us. This was his mission. These were those for whom he came. He came to save sinners.

And he came to secure our full salvation. What Paul says is simple and yet is very clear. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

This was something that he was going to do. And he was going to do it without anybody's help. He didn't need the cooperation of those to be saved.

[14 : 08] He came to save and he saved. He saved to the uttermost. Everything that was necessary for our salvation was secured by Jesus. That's what he came to do.

He came to save and he saved. And for that reason he could cry out and triumph from the cross. It is finished. The task that I was given by the Father.

I have completed it. I came to save sinners. Well, I have done all that is needful to save sinners. This is the mission on which he came.

And of course, this was music to the young ears of Thomas Bilney. Here he discovered and saw perhaps for the first time that there was nothing that he could contribute.

Of course, this was the truth that he had become painfully aware of. But he also discovered that there was nothing he was required to contribute to his salvation.

[15 : 14] Here he had been suffering, trying to secure acceptance with God. Trying to live a life that somehow would merit the good favor of God.

And failing miserably. Always falling short. Always conscious of guilt. Weighing him down. And wondering if he would ever be good enough. And he discovers, well, it's not for me to save myself.

That's why Christ Jesus came into the world. He came to save me. I can't do it, but he has done it for me. It was Jesus who did the saving.

How did Jesus save sinners? Well, the saying does not reveal the means. We're not given that information in this one saying.

But it's clear that it involved dealing with our sin. He came to save sinners from the guilt and the consequences of sin. How did he do that?

[16 : 17] Well, he lived a life of perfect obedience in our place. And he died a sinner's death in our place. Taking upon himself the punishment that we were due.

He saves us from our sin. He saves us from the consequences of our sin. And he saves us for eternal life. As Paul goes on to indicate in the following verse.

Where he speaks of himself as an example for those who would believe on him. Believe on Christ Jesus. And receive eternal life.

A life united to and in the service of Jesus. And young Thomas, when his eyes fell upon those words. And when the Spirit applied those words with convicting and converting power in his own experience.

Young Thomas was more than eager to live this new life. This eternal life in the service of his Savior. And one anecdote will suffice that speaks of his service for Jesus.

[17 : 24] Following his conversion, Thomas was eager to share the good news with others. And this was a risky matter. He had discovered these truths from this forbidden book.

The New Testament that he had secured. And his sharing of the good news resulted in considerable opposition. And one brilliant young priest in particular.

By the name of Hugh Latimer. Resolved to silence young Thomas. By force of argument. And his intellect was much superior to that of young Thomas.

Thomas. And Thomas was aware of the intentions of Hugh Latimer. And he resolved to win Latimer by friendship. And one day Thomas approached Latimer.

And indicated to Latimer, who was a priest. A desire to confess. Now Latimer, when he heard this, was ecstatic. He thought, ah, young Thomas has realized the error of his ways.

[18 : 24] He's going to confess. He's going to confess. He's going to recant of his heresy. And he's going to do it to me. And I will absolve him. And he thought he had won the victory.

When Thomas said to Latimer, I want to confess. But the confession that Thomas had in mind was quite a different one.

He confessed his newfound faith in Jesus Christ. The one who came into the world to save sinners. And the witness of Thomas, the truth of Scripture, and the power of the Holy Spirit all combined to draw Hugh Latimer to trust in Jesus for his salvation.

And he, like Thomas, would die a martyr's death as one of the Oxford martyrs back in 1555. But back to the moment when Thomas' eyes fell upon these words.

And try to imagine the reasoning in the mind of Thomas as he read the words, as the words began to filter through his mind. He came to save sinners.

[19 : 34] Well, I'm a sinner. So he came to save me. But even as the truth began to dispel his lingering doubts, new doubts emerged in the form of a question.

Might it not be the case that I am too great a sinner? Yes, Jesus came to save sinners. But did he come to save one so great a sinner as I am?

Might it be that I'm excluded? Yes, others perhaps. But not me. I'm too great a sinner. And as perhaps that doubt began to presence itself in his mind and thoughts, of course, he then read what Paul goes on to say in this same verse.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.

Of whom I am the worst. What do we make of what Paul declares or confesses? Well, we can note the sense of it, the tense of it, and the purpose of it very briefly.

[20 : 48] When Paul identifies himself as the worst of sinners, we might say, well, is that true? Was Paul in the history of humanity the worst of sinners?

Well, that's how Paul considered himself. And why did he consider himself in that way? Well, let's notice what he has just recognized in the previous verse, even as he writes to Timothy in verse 13.

He acknowledges, even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, and so that reality of his identity is very much to the fore as he writes. And he thinks, here am I.

I who was a blasphemer. I who was a violent man. A wicked man who persecuted the saints. I'm the worst of sinners. That's the sense, I think, of what he says when he identifies himself as the worst of sinners, of whom I am the worst.

But intriguingly, having said that, we notice the tense of what he says, of whom I am the worst. You see, Paul identifies this reality as being true of him in the present as he writes.

[21 : 55] Paul was very conscious that though he was a forgiven sinner, he was still very much a sinner. And of course, that is true of all believers. It was true of Thomas Bilney.

When Thomas Bilney began to share the good news and preach, he was, as would be expected in due course, arrested. And he was threatened with execution if he did not recant his newfound faith.

And many urged him to recant that his life might be saved. And under that pressure, and no doubt overcome by the fear of the stake, he did recant.

And he denied his Lord. You see, he was a believer. He had been born again by the Spirit of God, but he was still a sinner. He was still weak.

And on that occasion, he fell short. And of course, that is true of all of us. But as well as the sense of the words of Paul and the tense of Paul's confession, we have, most importantly perhaps, its purpose.

[22 : 58] Namely, the hope that it extends to all. It's the very reason, as Paul himself says, the very reason why he identifies himself or highlights that he is the worst of sinners.

Because he does that in verse 15. Of whom I am the worst. And then he says, but for that very reason, I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

The logic, if you wish, is very clear. What Paul is saying is, if Jesus can save me, the worst of sinners, then he can save you.

Whoever you are, whatever you have done, however wicked you are, however faithless you have been, however rebellious, whatever adjectives you want to add to that. Whoever you are, Jesus can save you.

He came to save sinners. And Paul says, I'm the worst of sinners, and he saved me. Well, he can certainly save you. If God could save Paul, he could save Thomas Bilney.

[24 : 09] If God can save Paul, he can save you. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

What will you do? Remember, as we've just read the verse again, remember that this is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. How will you afford to this saying, full acceptance?

Well, Paul helps us in that regard in what he says in the following verse, when he speaks of all those who would believe on him, believe on Christ Jesus, and receive eternal life.

That is the manner in which we afford to the saying, full acceptance, by trusting in Jesus Christ as our Savior and receiving from him eternal life.

That's what Thomas Bilney did 499 years ago. He believed. He trusted in Jesus as his Savior, and he received eternal life.

[25 : 09] Life to the full in the here and now, and hope for eternity. And this hope for eternity was powerfully evident when Thomas faced death for a second time.

Having recanted on the first occasion, he was in prison for a period of time, and then he was released, and he was restored. He repented of his faithlessness on that critical occasion, and he determined to once again preach the good news.

Indeed, when he headed to his home region, Norwich, East Anglia, he said to his friends, I'm bidding farewell, you will not see me again.

Because he knew the lie of the land, and off he went. And he began to preach the good news again of Christ Jesus, who came into the world to save sinners. And he was arrested, and he was tried, and he was condemned.

And on the eve of his execution, some of his friends gathered with him in his cell. And they were concerned for him, as you can imagine.

[26 : 16] And he urged them not to be overly concerned. And he opened up the words of Scripture and read these verses, verses that we've already read during this service. He read these words from Isaiah chapter 43.

But now, this is what the Lord says, May your eyes fall upon and be opened by the words of this.

Trustworthy saying, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you that when we turn to your Word, the Bible, what we discover in its pages are trustworthy sayings.

Truth that is eternal. Promises that you always keep. A description of our condition and reality that is painfully accurate.

But also the wonderful good news of what you have done in and through your Son to save sinners such as we are. We pray that you would indeed help us.

[27 : 49] Help us each and every one. To not only acknowledge that these words are true. But to grant to them the full acceptance that they are worthy of. And we pray this in Jesus' name.
Amen.