

June 16, 2024
As You Are Going: The Amazing Grace of God
Acts 9:1-19
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Intro – Theme...

Before his conversion, John Newton, the Anglican pastor and hymn writer from the 1700's, was notorious for his life of sin. He was the son of a sailor and his mother, a godly woman who taught him the things of the Bible, died when he was young. When he came of age, he joined the British Royal Navy but was eventually discharged and found himself following in his father's footsteps as a sailor on various merchant ships, specifically ships that were involved in the slave trade. Of course, sailors aren't typically known for their moral conduct, but, by all accounts, John was the worst of them all. It is said that he lived a life of such profanity, coarseness, and debauchery that even many of his fellow sailors were reportedly shocked at his behavior. In fact, one time, the crew of his ship despised him so much that they left him in Africa as a slave to a wealthy slave owner. Fortunately for him, his dad eventually sent someone to rescue him and he would go on to captain one of his own slave ships.

During one particular voyage, Newton and his crew found themselves stuck in a severe storm. When John thought that his ship was going to sink and that all was lost, he began to remember some of the things his mother had taught him about Jesus when he was a young child. And in the midst of that storm, he experienced a profound change of heart. Even though, before that time, he was known in the slave trading industry as "the Great Blasphemer," he now embraced the God he had for so long rejected. The ship weathered the storm and from that moment on Newton devoted his life to Jesus. He was eventually ordained into the ministry and actually went on to play a key role in the movement to abolish the slave trade. God took this profane, blasphemous, grossly immoral slave-trader and transformed him into a child of God with a new heart, a new purpose and a completely new way of living. Toward the very end of his life, as John was reflecting on all that he had been through and all that God had done in him and for him, he stated, "My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior." This is the same John Newton who wrote a poem in 1772 describing the grace God had given to him, a sinner, and it was set to music and published in 1779, the words of which have become one of the most famous hymns in history, I think you may have heard it before, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see."

This is a great story and there are many other stories from throughout the history of the church that I could tell of God showing his amazing grace toward those who were once living lives in rebellion against God. In fact, every salvation, including your own if you are in Christ, is a story of God's amazing grace. But no matter the story, there is none more notable or dramatic than the one recorded in the passage we're going to read today. For through it, God would turn the world upside down and nothing would ever be the same. If you are able, please stand with me as I read the word of God. [Read Acts 9:1-19]

Our passage today begins with a man named Saul who we're first introduced to back in ch 8. There we read how Saul stood by, and gave his approval, as Stephen, a deacon and leader in the early church, was stoned to death, and in 8:3 we're told that, "Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to

prison.” Then Luke, the author of Acts, takes a detour for the rest of ch. 8 to described for us what was happening during that time in Judea and Samaria among those who had fled the persecutions in Jerusalem. Now in ch. 9, we come back to Saul and we read in vs.1-2, “Saul, [was] still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

So, Saul’s basically spearheading the effort to get rid Christianity once and for all. Talk about being on a mission. It just happened to be a mission that was in direct opposition to the God he thought he was serving. He was on a mission to capture as many Christians as he could. Yet, as he was going, see what I did there? As he was going, the passage goes on to describe how Jesus interrupted his plans. Now, I’ve read this somewhere but couldn’t find it to site it properly, but just know that I didn’t come up with it, but I think it describes perfectly what’s going on here. “Saul was on his way to capture Christians, he ends up being captured by the grace of God.” And the verses we have read today are saturated with the grace of God, even through the word is not actually found in the text. When the Bible talks about grace it can simply be defined as, “unmerited, or undeserved favor.” A more robust definition, which can be found on the Christian website, Gotquestions.org, says that, “Grace is the ongoing, benevolent act of God working in us, [which we cannot earn] and without which we can do nothing.”

And we’re going to look at several different aspects of God’s grace as we work our way through Acts 9 together, and hopefully when we’re done, we can stand back in awe and praise God for his amazing grace not only in the life of Saul, but in our own lives as well. The first aspect that we see, as suggested by its definition, is that God’s grace is a gift to the undeserving. If there was ever anyone who didn’t deserve God’s grace, it was Saul of Tarsus. Look again at how vs. 1 describes him. It says that he was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” So, the picture we get of Saul isn’t of someone who’s just trying to do his religious duty. This guy is in a murderous rage. He’s obsessed with arresting as many Christians as he can and, in some cases, even seeing them put to death. And this isn’t just in Jerusalem anymore. Saul actually gets authorization to travel 150 miles outside of Jerusalem to the city of Damascus, which was about a week’s journey, so that he can round up the Christians there as well. It appears that as the persecution arose in Jerusalem, some of those that fled, sought refuge in Damascus in modern day Syria.

Listen to how Saul describes his own actions in Acts 26:9-11, “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.” So let’s understand that Saul’s out for blood. He doesn’t just want Christians to stop their mission. He wants to make them suffer. Yet, even while Saul’s in this murderous rage, God shows grace toward him. Again, God’s grace is a gift to the undeserving.

In 1 Timothy 1:15-16, Paul, the Greek version of his name, would later write that, “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.” So, why does he say he received mercy? So that in him Jesus could “display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal

life.” In other words, Jesus wanted to make it clear that he’s able to save anyone. If he can save Saul, he can save anybody.

And, by the way, that includes you and me. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done, how badly you’ve made a mess of your life, what people you’ve hurt, or what heinous sins you’ve committed. You can’t out sin God’s grace. That’s the beauty of it. There’s a song by the Christian artist Natalie Grant called “Clean.” And the chorus goes like this, “There’s nothing too dirty that you [God] can’t make worthy. You wash me in mercy, I am clean.” Whatever you’ve done, Jesus’ blood covers it all. That’s the answer. That’s how God can show such grace toward the undeserving and, at the same time, uphold his perfect standard of justice and righteousness. Jesus bore our sins on the cross. He suffered the punishment for our sins so that what we end up receiving isn’t the punishment we deserve but the free gift of grace we don’t deserve. Of course, in order to receive this grace from God, we have to repent of our sin and put our trust in Jesus as our only hope of rescue. So, if you think you’re undeserving of God’s grace, you’re absolutely right. That’s the whole point. God’s grace is a gift to the undeserving. And his grace toward Saul is a perfect example of that.

Not only do we see in our passage that God’s grace is a gift to the undeserving, we also see that he initiates it. God initiates grace. Look at vs. 3-7. [Read/summarize]

Notice here how Jesus is the one who takes the initiative. He takes the initiative to seek Saul out. Saul wasn’t looking for Jesus. Actually, the opposite is true, Jesus was looking for Saul. And that’s the way it always is. God is always the one who initiates the movement of someone coming to faith. The fact is, he has to because we never will. You see, the Bible teaches that, in our natural condition, the sin nature that we all inherited from Adam at the fall, in that condition we’re spiritually dead. Ephesians 2 makes this clear. Starting in vs. 2, “You were once dead in your trespasses and sins...” Vs. 4-5, “But God... even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ Jesus, by grace you have been saved.” We don’t have the capacity to come to God or take even one step in the right direction on our own. But the scriptures tell us of a God who initiates and moves toward his people.

You know, a lot of people mistakenly picture salvation as God reaching down to us as we at the same time reach up to him. It’s the “God helps those who help themselves” way of thinking. But the truth of God’s grace is that God helps those who can’t help themselves. Let me illustrate it for you this way. On a few occasions, I have had the opportunity to go white water rafting. And if you have ever been, you know that there is a time of instruction with the guides before you go down the river to go over the different scenarios that could occur should someone fall out of the raft. And that’s a good thing, because on one of the trips I was on, Kathleen was also there (we were not married at the time), we got sideways in one of the rapids and everyone, except Kathleen fell out of the raft including the guide!

Obviously, I survived, but with some bumps and bruising, but you might think the best way to get someone back into the raft who has fallen out of the raft is to simply grab their hand and pull them in. But, as the rafting guides explained to us, that’s actually not the best way at all since it is very difficult to hold onto someone’s wet hands. Instead, the best way to get them back into the raft is actually to have them facing away from you, grab the shoulder straps of their life jacket, and to fall back into the raft, using your full body weight to pull them in. In other words, you do all of the work, and they just let you do it. And that’s a picture, although not a perfect one, of what God’s grace looks like in saving us. Listen, we don’t have the capacity to reach up to God at all. We’re floating in the water unconscious, bashing up against the rocks of life and getting entangled in the branches of our sin. In fact, we’re spiritually dead. There’s no way we

can ever reach up to God as he reaches down to us. Instead, he's the one who initiates. He's the one who makes the first move. He's the one who draws us to himself and puts repentance in our hearts and enables us to put our trust in him.

We don't meet God halfway or reach up to God as he reaches down to us. Instead, anything we do is the result of something that God first does in our hearts. Saul did not receive God's grace because he was wise enough or good enough or because he somehow found enough strength within himself to reach up to God. He was totally unable to take even one step in the right direction, and God came to his rescue. God initiated it all. And the same is true for us. Praise his name!

As we continue moving forward in this passage, we see thirdly that God's grace humbles us. If that wasn't evident already, look with me at vs. 8-9 [Read]

So, the result of Saul's encounter with Jesus was that he was left blind. And he remained blind for three whole days. He had to depend on others to lead him by the hand into Damascus and to take care of him. And, in all likelihood, the reason Jesus did that to him was because Saul had to be humbled. You see, Saul was a Pharisee. And as a Pharisee, he was quite proud of his moral superiority and religious achievements. He studied under the most respected rabbi of his day, a man named Gamaliel. He would have memorized the entire Old Testament law word for word, and he would have taken painstaking measures to go above and beyond what the law required. So, Saul's religious credentials were quite impressive. Yet that just made it all the more necessary for Jesus to humble him.

And that's something that's necessary not just for Pharisees like Saul but for everyone before they can come to Jesus. Because everyone has a proud heart. Deep down, we all think we're good enough, or at least that we have the capacity to be good enough, to earn God's favor. What we need is for God to put an end to our pride. The Bible puts it this way, "we must take up our cross daily and follow Jesus." Which means we must die to ourselves, our pride, on a daily basis in order to follow Jesus more closely. Kind of like a demolition company might take a wrecking ball to a building, we need God to take a wrecking ball to our pride. Not one wall can be left standing. Everything that we're looking to and leaning on and trusting in apart from Jesus has to be completely destroyed, and we have to be brought to the place where we're willing to come to Jesus with empty hands and receive salvation as the free gift that is dependent not in any way on our merit but only on the merit of Jesus. What does that look like in your own life? Don't let pride get in the way of what God's doing in your life by his grace.

The fourth aspect of grace that we see in this passage is that it reveals to us the glory of Jesus. Notice that the center of this passage is Jesus revealing himself to Saul. On the road to Damascus, Saul saw Jesus in his glory. He had a personal encounter with Jesus that forever changed him. And that's the most important piece of any true conversion. Becoming a Christian isn't about agreeing intellectually to a set of theological points. It's about encountering and embracing the person of Jesus. Just like Saul saw Jesus in his glory, for who he truly is, we have to see Jesus in his glory as well, not physically, of course, but spiritually. And it's his grace that reveals these things to us. We can't behold Jesus in this way until he opens our eyes to do so. And that comes by his grace.

So what about you? Have you ever encountered not just the idea of Jesus but the person of Jesus? Have your eyes ever been opened to behold his glory in a life-changing way? Brothers and sisters, encountering Jesus is what changes us.

The way we grow and the way we're continually transformed into the likeness of Jesus is by beholding his glory. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "And we all, with unveiled face,

beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” So how does it say we’re transformed day by day? “Beholding the glory of the Lord.” The way we overcome sin isn’t by gritting our teeth and trying harder. It’s by experiencing Jesus and enjoying Jesus and beholding the glory of Jesus in such a way that sin just becomes undesirable. In other words, we want Jesus more! God’s grace reveals to us the glory of Jesus so that we can see him as he truly is.

Which leads us to the final aspect of grace, we see that God’s grace opens our eyes to truly see. The passage goes on to describe how God sends a man named Ananias to heal Saul of his blindness. Ananias doesn’t want to go. Well guess what the name “Ananias” means? Ananias is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Hananiah*, which means “Yahweh has been gracious.”

Verses 18-19 describe what happens when Ananias comes and lays his hands on Saul. We read, “And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.” And those scales falling from Saul’s physical eyes are intended to picture the way in which God’s grace had removed the blinders from his spiritual eyes as well. For the first time, he was able to see things as they really are. Who he truly was, a sinner in need of God’s Grace. And God, as a loving Father, who had given grace to him as a free gift through his son, Jesus.

And as we think about the grace God’s shown to us even when we, like Saul, were in such a helpless and hopeless condition, it should inspire us to appreciate the true depth of God’s amazing grace, to be in awe of him and to truly see him. And the more we do so we’re encouraged to live out the mission he has invited us to be a part of as an expression of our gratitude. As we are going, by God’s grace, let us be the church on mission. Let’s pray.