

Amazing Grace: Our Stories  
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Introduction:

All month we've been talking about something that is fundamental to the Christian faith, and that is God's Amazing Grace. We learned from the life of Paul that even someone who has persecuted the church and put Christians to death can be changed by grace, and become an influential Christian. And we learned from Peter that even someone who has been a dedicated follower of Jesus, but whose actions have denied Christ, they can be forgiven and restored. Last week we talked about a woman caught in adultery, and the difference between the Law and Grace. We learned there's a difference between trying to live under the Law and earn our way into heaven, and about the rules of Grace, and how Grace doesn't give us what we deserve. Grace treats us better than we deserve.

That Grace is never more significant than when you experience it first-hand. And that is why our stories of God's grace are so important.

Every Christian has a story; a testimony of how they have encountered the living God. It starts the moment in your life you realized Jesus died for your sins, and that first time you realized that God loves you and can forgive you. So every believer can tell the story of what their life was like before they knew Jesus, how they came to accept Christ, and what life has been like ever since.

But that is only the beginning. The more you understand grace, the more you can and will notice how the Lord has shown you mercy, and protection, and provision, and guidance. When God causes the unexpected – maybe it's a restored relationship, or a surprise check in the mail just when you needed it—some people call that luck. But a Christian doesn't need to believe in luck, because God is the source of grace and mercy.

And most of all, God forgives us of sin. And here is where our stories are so important, because there is a world full of people who need a solution to their guilt. Jesus is the solution, and he proved it the day you gave your life to him. And when you tell others that story, it can change their eternity.

We all have neighbors and family members who are living their life for their pleasures, and they have no consideration for what's beyond this life. But God lavished his Grace on us, not only so we would be saved, but so that other people would see how we've been changed and take notice.

Let's look at one more story of God's grace from the Bible.

John 9 - 1As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

3"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. 4As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. 5While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

God can use anybody, even a blind beggar, to display his glory.

Displaying God's glory is THE most important thing that can ever happen in your life. And it needs to happen.

Tony Dungy - (Gratitude)

Coach Tony Dungy made history when his Indianapolis Colts defeated the Chicago Bears to win Super Bowl (41) XLI. He not only became the first black coach to win the NFL championship, but also the first coach to openly talk about being a Christian immediately after the victory.

During the post-game show on CBS, Dungy was asked specifically about the "social significance" of his victory.

*"I'm proud to be representing African-American coaches, to be the first African-American to win this. It means an awful lot to our country," Dungy said. "More than anything . . . (Chicago Bears Coach) Lovie Smith and I (are proud) not only (to be) the first two African-Americans (in the Super Bowl), but Christian coaches showing that you can win doing it the Lord's way. And we're more proud of that."*

What a simple, yet immense witness for Christ! And you might be thinking, "Sure, God can use outstanding people with lots of money and a successful career." Well, He absolutely can. But he can use an ordinary person like you or me, too.

Virginia Stetzer, as many of you know, is a charming and sweet woman. It has been my privilege to become acquainted with her. She volunteered to share about her life this week, and I believe hers is a powerful example of the extraordinary grace of God being evident through an ordinary person.

Virginia was orphaned by her mother shortly after birth, and alienated from her biological siblings. When she was 18 months old, she was taken in and adopted by foster parents. Her adoptive parents were committed Christians, and from the time Virginia came to live with them until now, she has been in church.

As any adopted teenager, learning of her birth mother, and the kind of life she led was hard news for Virginia. But soon after learning about this, at 16 years of age and attending the 1<sup>st</sup> Christian Church in Wilson, she heard the preacher teaching about a prostitute whom God forgave and loved. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, ministering to her through that sermon, it dawned on her. Virginia thought, if God can love that prostitute, surely he has loved me. It was God and his love and grace that gave me a NEW family and a NEW life. So that day, after the message, Virginia went forward and accepted Christ as her Lord and Savior, and she has never looked back.

That isn't to say life has always been easy. Medical difficulties have been a thorn in the flesh to Virginia and her family. But with a steadfast trust in Christ, she presses forward. Her daughter is also a committed follower of Christ, but she is physically unable to go to church very often. And so Virginia has committed that she will not take that ability for granted, and she will be in church as often as she can. And no matter what the future holds for them, Virginia and her daughter are grateful for all that the Lord has done for them already, and they want to serve him as long as they live.

The Lord uses ordinary people, and the stories they share of God's grace, to change the world. He can even use the blind beggar, the orphan, the prostitute, the drug addict, the homosexual, or the vilest offender. There is no one who is out of the reach of God's grace. He can forgive you, and he can use your life to make a difference in the world and in His kingdom.

Look at what Jesus does for this blind beggar.

<sup>6</sup>Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. <sup>7</sup>"Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

This man met the grace of Jesus. He became obedient to Jesus, and it changed him.

In my own life, I had to learn what it meant to be obedient to Jesus. I was not raised in what I call a Christian home. We went to church once in a while, and we celebrated Christmas, but that's not a home where Christ is the head of the household. Instead, after my parents had separated, my mother took me to church with her.

I can honestly say I grew up loosely believing that Jesus was God's Son, but it had never been a reality until I became more committed to going to church. The more I learned about Jesus, and God's love, and about how with Christ, we get a new family, the more I wanted in.

A few years later, when I was challenged to read up on what the Bible says about being baptized, I decided to be immersed into Jesus Christ. It was a decision that had taken time. After all, I though I was already a Christian. But as I became convinced that I had not done all that the Bible required of me, and that I needed to respond to Christ in faith by being baptized, I did it.

I will never forget that sunny, summer day in Eastern Tennessee, where my friend Dave McCants baptized me in that ice-cold mountain stream. That Thursday afternoon, there was no longer any doubt in my mind that all my sins had been washed away by the blood of Jesus.

*Lynn Branch has a similar story:*

*Influenced by a dear, dear Aunt, I accepted Christ as my Savior at the age of 12. Looking back (sadly) I strayed from my spiritual walk for a time as a young adult, but returned to my roots - receiving the forgiveness I didn't deserve, but was (thankfully) still afforded. It wasn't until my faith walk took me to FIF that I was baptized by immersion (buried and raised anew with Christ) and I became a Christian filled with enthusiasm, love, and a desire for service for our most excellent God. Now, I'm walking by faith and trusting God to see me through even the most difficult circumstances. I trust that He is working to transform me, to renew my mind, and to use me for HIS greater good.*

Lisa Downs is a more recent example of someone who believed in Christ, but was ready to make a stronger commitment to him. And not only did she recently join our church, but she also realized that she needed to be baptized because she never had been. So 9 weeks ago today, Lisa also took that step in obedience to be washed in the blood of Jesus.

This blind beggar believed Jesus could help him, but it took a step of obedience for him to be made well. How about you? Maybe you believe in Jesus, just like I did when I was little. But to this day, you have never been obedient to Jesus' command to go be washed in Christian baptism. I would say to you, it's when we become obedient that we experience the grace of Christ. Don't put it off any more.

Let's see what happened next in our story:

8His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" 9Some claimed that he was.

Others said, "No, he only looks like him."

But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

10"How then were your eyes opened?" they demanded.

11He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."

12"Where is this man?" they asked him.

"I don't know," he said.

His friends couldn't recognize him at first. Granted, we may not go dramatically from blind to seeing, but people ought to know there has been a change after we respond to grace.

After the summer when I was baptized in 1996, I left home for college at James Madison University. That was not the right place for a new Christian like me. The pressures and temptations to drink proved to be too much for me to handle. Within a couple years, I seldom went to church anymore, I had made some poor relationship choices, and I was out getting drunk frequently. I'm not proud of those few years. They were wasted time in my faith.

But after a series of events where God was clearly working on my heart, I changed. I stopped drinking, in fact I can honestly say I have never been drunk since 1999. My life changed because

I rediscovered Christ in my life. He forgave my sins, and I realized that while I may have drifted away, Jesus never left me. That is grace.

And when I experienced that grace and restoration, people around me noticed the changes. My co-workers commented about it. My boss did, too. I had to say no to the partying in my life, and I had to abandon some friendships all together. Still, it's all been worth it. And Jesus has used my changed heart to make an impact on those near me.

Hilliard Woolard in our church described for me what his faith journey has been like, and when he most significantly encountered God's grace.

*I was raised in a Christian home and church attendance was, to the child I was, simply an accepted part of our family life. Mother saw to that and so Sunday School, morning worship, even most Wednesday evenings found us assembled alongside our church family. Accepting Christ as Savior at the age of eleven elevated my desire to become a more active part of our congregation and that continued through the teen years and high school graduation.*

*Upon arrival at college, several friends and I spoke often of finding a church home but somehow it never happened. As a result, worship and church service became secondary in later years by a life overtaken by work, friends, then marriage and a family.*

*I regret the lost years of my Christian walk, but through the powerful and amazing grace of our Lord I have found my way back. I seek these days to mature as a believer, serve better and continuously, and strengthen my weaknesses by becoming bolder in my journey with Christ.*

Who can know Hilliard today and not also know of his love for Christ and for the church? But what makes Hilliard's life so significant is no matter how far from God he may have drifted during college, he came back to the Lord with a deeper commitment. And everyone who sees him can know that God's grace has made him the man he is today.

Imagine where Hilliard and I might be if we had not known Christ before we went to college. We both drifted from our faith, we both have regrets of sin and of wasted opportunities to serve Christ, but the Grace of God forgave us both and redirected our paths.

Where will you be, or your kids or grandkids be when they leave home for college or career? Will they know the Lord before they leave? Will they be stronger in their commitment than most, and will they be able to serve Christ in that setting rather than drift from him? Most of all, will people notice that we have been changed by the Amazing Grace of God or not? These are questions I can say from experience, we MUST ask before it's too late.

Back to our formerly blind friend in John chapter 9. Let's read together how this story plays out.

13They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. 14Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. 15Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see."

16Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath."

But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided.

17Finally they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened."

The man replied, "He is a prophet."

18The Jews still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. 19"Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?"

20"We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. 21But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." 22His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had

decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ[a] would be put out of the synagogue. 23That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

24A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God,[b]" they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

25He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

26Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

27He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

28Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! 29We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

30The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. ~~31We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. 32Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. 33If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."~~

~~34To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.~~

#### Spiritual Blindness

No one can argue with your testimony. It's simply your story of how Jesus has made a difference in your life. Someone may not believe the Bible, but they can see your life with their own eyes. They may deny it or dismiss it for something else, but there is no argument against a life changed by Christ.

Robert and Mary Coggins believe their lives have been changed by Christ.

*Individually, in our early years, we both accepted the Lord, were baptized, and served the Lord faithfully for many years. Later, still individually, with may difficult and life changing circumstances for both of us, we drifted away from the Lord. Looking back, we can see that even though we failed Him, His hand never left us. Through His love and grace, eventually He allowed us to find each other and brought us together as a couple. Through His mercy, and our repentance, he helped us to find our way back to Him. Today, we are very thankful for our lives together, our family, and His many blessings on us!*

Our church supports Johnny and Helen Scott in their ministry of Bible Translation and their involvement in an organization called "Pioneer Bible Translators." Grace is something that Johnny and Helen both have experienced several times as God has directed their paths. The most significant time in his life that Johnny experienced God's Grace was during a very dry spell in his walk with the Lord.

#### Johnny Scott – forgiveness

*God's grace has been evident to Helen and I in so many ways but the one that comes mind the most for me goes back to before I met Helen. I grew up in a Christian home and have been in the "Christian Church" since I was six years old. I was baptized when I was nine. The way I figured it at the time and what I told my preacher was, "If I know the difference between right and wrong and I die without being baptized I'll go to hell." Anyway, as soon as I was old enough I began working part-time jobs and often worked on Sundays which meant I couldn't be in church. I grew far from the church and the Lord during that time but at the same time had a lot of pain to deal with over my parents' divorce and just growing up in general. I began using drugs and alcohol in high school and by the time I was 20 my addictions controlled my life. I was faced with not having a place to live and I had lost my job. My Dad said that I could not move back home unless I got help. Here is where I get to the grace part. I checked into St. John's Hospital on May 4, 1989. My clean date is May 5. (Kind of ironic, [because Cinco De Mayo is kind of like St. Patty's day, another reason to party.] There was a chapel at the hospital and one of the first two or three*

*nights I was there I went in and just began to pray. I'm not even sure what I prayed, it was probably more the groans we feel when we don't know what to say. There in that chapel that night I knew I was going to be OK. God had kept me alive for a reason I knew that much. Little did I know 19 years later I would be training to be Bible translator in a distant land. It's an amazing thing, God's grace. I don't pretend to understand it. It is the one thing I just have to accept and say thank you and try to live my life in a manner that shows how much I appreciate it.*

Today no one can deny that Johnny is a different person, and he says the difference in God's grace. Some of us, myself included at times, may put a guy like Johnny up on a pedestal and say, "It takes a super Christian to go onto the mission field, and to leave everything behind like he and Helen will." But the reality is it only takes someone who has truly experienced God's grace.

When you become aware of God's grace, you want to serve him. Look what happened to the man in John 9.

35 Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

36 "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him."

37 Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

38 Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

After I recommitted myself to serving the Lord, my senior year at James Madison was completely different. I wasn't perfect, but people noticed I was changed because of my faith. I was in church every week again. I had a quiet time consistently. But as I thought about my career choices, I became restless. I didn't sense that God or I would be satisfied if I went into the Music Business or Law School. It was at that time that I met President Bill Griffin and his wife Trish. They visited our church and had lunch with me and a few others. During that meeting, they planted the seed of ministry in me.

I remembered going to church as a teenager and people encouraging me to lead, and saying, "You could be a preacher someday." And a youth minister had asked me to consider going to Bible college, but I had dismissed it and went to a secular university anyway. But this time was different. I had witnessed the Lord changing my life around. I had seen Him working. I was becoming a different person, and my goals and priorities were changing. And as I thought about my future, and what I wanted to give my life to, it became clearer and clearer that God was calling me to a life in ministry. I applied to Roanoke Bible College, was accepted right away, and after I graduated from JMU, I headed to Elizabeth City.

When God has changed you with his grace, you may be tempted to give up. You may even go through a dry spell in your faith, but the question remains, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Will you live a life of worship, serving the one whose grace has set you free and made you clean?

We've heard the stories today of people who have been changed by God's Amazing Grace here in this congregation. What will your story be? I hope it will be a story of how you were before Christ, followed by how you accepted Christ, and how your life has been different. But the only person who can make the choice to have a story like that is you. Can you say, "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"? If you're ready, you come forward this morning and say yes to the Amazing Grace of Christ, and confess him as the Lord of your life, repenting of your sins, and be washed in the watery grave of baptism to have those sins washed away.

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