

Amazing Grace: Paul's Story  
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Introduction:

Today, we begin a new series called "Amazing Grace". As I think about my life, I am blown away by God's grace. He has protected me, saved me, blessed me more than I deserve.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
 That saved a wretch like me.  
 I once was lost but now am found,  
 Was blind, but now I see.

Simple words. Meaningful words. A young child can understand the message of that song, and yet scholars still endeavor to uncover the depth and breadth of this thing called GRACE. The word Grace is a lot like the word love. It can hardly be defined, but it is so fundamental to life and to our understanding of God, we can't understand life without it.

A lot of people have tried to define Grace. Some call it God's attitude toward mankind. It's His favor given to us when we never deserved it. Some call it:

God's  
 Riches  
 At  
 Christ's  
 Expense.

Warren Wiersbe defines grace as "when we get something that we don't deserve." I like that definition. That is exactly what God has done. He has given us something that we don't deserve.

In any case, grace is a gift from God that grants us life, and favor, and love, and forgiveness. The word is used in the New Testament about 170 times, and 100 of those times it's used by the Apostle Paul. Every one of Paul's letters from Romans through Philemon start and finish with reference to "Grace". Perhaps that's because Paul had experienced God's life-changing grace in a way few others had.

That wonderful hymn, "Amazing Grace" is our theme song for the month. That song was written by a man named John Newton who had been a captain of a slave ship before his conversion to Christ. When we understand his story, which we will spend more time on later this month, the song has even deeper meaning.

John Newton was not the first nor has he been the last to receive the amazing grace of Christ. I believe the best way to understand grace is not merely to define it or talk about it, but to hear the stories of people who have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This month, that's exactly what we will do. We are going to hear from people who encountered God's Amazing Grace, who were freed from death and sin, and who would never be the same again.

Each week we will see how God's grace has been poured out on people and how that grace is available to you. Each week we will focus on a recipient of God's grace and talk about how that grace changed their life.

We will learn from Peter's story. He made some bad choices, but the Lord forgave him and showed him grace. We will learn from a woman who was caught breaking God's law, but then Jesus rescued her and saved her life and her soul with his Grace! We will finish the month by looking at our stories, and how God has shown Grace to Christians in this room and in our area. But, today we begin by looking at the man who understood grace better than almost anyone else in history, the Apostle Paul.

Jesus explained to his disciples one evening that those who have been forgiven of the biggest debt, demonstrate the greatest love to their Savior. I believe the reason Paul wrote so much about God's grace is because Paul considered himself to have been the worst sinner of all.

1 Timothy 1:12-16, NIV

"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. 13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

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. 16 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 on him and receive eternal life."

Here's what I would like to do. I just want to share with you a couple stories this morning. They are stories that can change your eternity, because in these stories, God has revealed how much he loves us and desires to save us. Let's read the first one together.

Turn to Acts 22

Paul's Testimony:

3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. 4 I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, 5 as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

6 "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me.

7 I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?'

8 " 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked.

" 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 9 My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

10 " 'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked.

" 'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' 11 My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

12 "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. 13 He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him.

14 "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. 15 You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

Ac 22:3-16

That was Paul's testimony. Every Christian has a testimony. Yours and mine might not be as dazzling or dramatic, but it doesn't have to be. All of us were at one time headed down a road without Christ. We had plans to do things our own way, intentions to sin. We wanted to do the right thing, but we were unaware that trying to do good would never win us favor with God. Only by encountering Jesus Christ and putting our full trust in him could we go from being blind to seeing. Only when we become a Christian can we say we are no longer lost, we are found.

In a way, Paul's testimony is a lot more like our own that you might think. And He illustrates how anyone can be saved. And he wrote about it over and over again in the New Testament. he wrote in Romans 10:9-10, 13, NIV, "That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved... "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

And how did Paul "call on the name of the Lord"? Ananias told him how. He said, Get up and be baptized, calling on His name. When we trust in Jesus, and confess he is our Lord and repent of our sins, we call on his name at baptism. It is in that watery grave that our sins are washed away, and we are covered by His grace.

So after Paul is baptized let me read you what he does next:  
Turn back over to Acts 9:19.

Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. 20At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 21All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" 22Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.[a]

23After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, 24but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. 25But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

26When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. 27But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. 28So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. 29He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. 30When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

It wasn't easy right away for Paul. He met opposition from his former allies. And he met opposition from the ones he once persecuted. But God's love won out.

For us, becoming a Christian won't solve every difficulty right away. And it may mean some difficulty getting along with your old friends, and it will take some adjusting to a new life. But Grace is worth it. Understanding that God loves you for who you are...knowing that you'll never be the same again...being guilt-free...having no more regrets...inner peace...courage for the future...all of this is wrapped up in that small but powerful word: grace.

Have you experienced it? There's a lot more we will say about grace this month, but I want you to see that it started for Paul the same way it starts for everyone. We are all sinners. We have all been blind to the love of God and utterly lost spiritually. But for anyone who encounters Jesus and who wants to see again, and wants to be found, Grace is there to save us.

Conclusion: There is another story I'd like to share. This one comes from India.

Mahipaul was a Hindu extremist. That means that he was committed to the destruction of any religion that was not Hinduism. He hated Christians and his passion was the total annihilation of the Christian faith in India. He was a leader of that movement. He received a salary, had an apartment, an office and a car all furnished by those who were in agreement with his aims. He became a trainer in destruction: at times training up to 1500 Hindu's at a time on how to destroy churches and mosques.

All was going according to his plan when his world was rocked. His lovely wife suddenly and rapidly grew ill. She became so sick that she could not get out of bed, in fact she could hardly move. The doctors could do nothing to alleviate her pain or bring about a change in her condition. Mahipaul made sacrifice and offering to every Hindu idol he could find, but nothing changed. His wife was dying. All their prayers to their Hindu gods went unanswered, and Mahipaul became hopeless and despondent.

One day, as he was walking through a train station, a Sikh man noticed that he was downcast. (You can usually recognize a Sikh because they are the well-dressed Indian men who wear the full turban on their heads. The Sikh religion was developed combining philosophies and teaching from both Hinduism and Islam.) The Sikh man asked Mahipaul what was wrong. He explained to the man the situation his wife was in and the sheer hopelessness of her condition.

The Sikh man said something that would eventually have a dramatic impact upon Mahipaul's life. He told Mahipaul that he should pray to Jesus, because Jesus would answer his prayers.

Mahipaul was infuriated. He told the man, "If you value your life, you will leave and never say the name of Jesus in my presence again!" He went home, still fuming over the man's suggestion.

He told his wife what the man had proposed. But her reaction was very different. She told him that they had tried everything else, why not pray to Jesus. And in time, Mahipaul gave up and relented. This was his last hope. Nothing else had worked. Praying to one more God couldn't hurt. So, he prayed to Jesus that his wife would be healed.

Within the week she was out of that bed and he was convinced that Jesus Christ had healed his wife. His wife shared that conviction.

Mahipaul's next step was to find a church because he really did not know much about Jesus. He knew where a church met because he had targeted that church for destruction. He knew when they met and so he went and waited for the Christians to come. He waited for an hour, no one showed. He waited two hours and still no one showed.

Finally, one man approached him. It was the preacher of the church. He asked Mahipaul what he wanted. Mahipaul said he wanted to learn about Jesus and he was waiting for the Christians to come to church so he could join them. The man informed him that no one would come because they had seen him standing by the building and everyone knew that he was the leader of those who persecuted Christians.

Eventually, Mahipaul gave his life to Christ and he was trained by Dr. Ajai Lall. He is now a preacher, preaching to the very people he once trained to destroy the church. The Hindu's have put a price on his head and he is in danger where ever he goes, but he continues to proclaim the gospel of Christ.

He experienced the amazing grace of Jesus.

I could tell you more about Mahipaul. I could tell you about how after he was baptized into Christ, he went home to his father's house to tell his dad what had happened to him. When he told his Hindu father about his conversion to Christianity, his father got up, went to the bedroom, brought

back a pistol and began firing it at his son. Mahipaul barely made it out of his father's house alive.

I could also tell you how after a few years, his father got sick, too. The doctors said there was nothing left to do. Mahipaul went to his father one more time and said, "When my wife was sick I prayed to Jesus Christ for her to be made well, and she was made well. Father, I would like to pray for Christ to make you well, too, but I will only do it if you ask me to." Eventually, his father asked Mahipaul to pray for him. And in a week, his father was out of that bed, because the Lord healed him.

Mahipaul's entire family has surrendered to Jesus Christ. And when I hear that, I am humbled, because a man who once hated Christ has become a hero in the faith. And when I consider my life, I am not half the man Mahipaul. That is Grace. It can turn the vilest offender into a saint. It can turn a terrorist into an evangelist. It can turn you and me into a spirit-filled follower of Jesus Christ.

Folks, if God's grace is not amazing, if that story is not amazing, then I don't know what is.

Grace is about forgiveness, and about salvation, even when we didn't deserve it. It's what Paul was talking about when he wrote:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—Ephesians 2:8, NIV

For Mahipaul, it meant he would spend the rest of his life serving his Lord Jesus Christ. And he won his father and his whole family to the Lord. They will all be in heaven one day because one man's encounter with grace changed him forever.

Grace is about saying, "I once was blind, but now I see." Are you ready to see? Are you ready to call on the name of the Lord and be baptized into Christ, receiving his grace? No sin—Nothing you have ever done or thought or said can keep the Lord from loving you and accepting you right here and right this moment except you. But let me warn you now, if you will accept God's grace, you will never be the same again.

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