



Amazed by God's Love

- If you were going to make a list of sins that were especially heinous, how high up would you place the issue of human trafficking?...enslaving an individual or group of people for personal gain?...
 - it's hard for some of us to believe that slavery even exists in this day and age, but according to the UN's Global Initiative to fight this issue...there are **2.5 million people in forced labor at any given time as a result of trafficking...**
 - **161 different countries** are said to be affected by being **either a source, transit, or destination** for human beings who have been enslaved...
 - that includes countries on every continent and every type of economy...

- now please imagine this... what if a person involved in that activity wanted to change his/her life and join our church?...
 - and if that person wanted to become part of this church, would we possess enough grace to accept them into the family?...

- have you ever heard the name John Newton?...
 - he was a slave trader from England in the 18th century who would capture people and sell them to plantation owners...
 - he worked his way up in the business and eventually became the captain of his own slave ship...
 - But God got a hold of his heart...through the combination of a wicked storm at sea coupled with reading a Christian book titled Imitation of Christ...
 - and John Newton actually became a leader in the evangelical church of England...his name is associated with people like John/Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and Wilbur Wilberforce...he was that influential...
 - before his death, Newton asked to have this inscribed on his tombstone..."**John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy.**"
 - by the way, John Newton wrote a song you may have heard of...do you know what it is?...
 - It's called...Amazing Grace...and that's what I'd like to talk to about today –The Amazing Love of God...
 - with that thought in mind, please open your Bible to Acts 9...

I. God's Grace is Strong Enough to Redeem Anyone.

- the Lord clearly loves to surprise people with His grace...
- if you were reading Acts for the very first time...you would have practically fallen off your chair when you got to this chapter...
- you talk about an unexpected turn of events...
- and then you realize that this man eventually becomes the apostle Paul...

- the person humanly responsible for much of the rest of the NT you hold in your hands...
- arguably the most important figure to the Christian Church other than the Lord Jesus Himself...
- how else could you respond than by concluding that John Newton got it right for sure--- God's grace is amazing...
- and of course the questions that already need to start percolating are things like – do we really believe this?...
 - what evidence is there on a practical basis that we are convinced that God is a God of amazing grace and love?????...
 - what should that look like on a daily basis?...in an individual's life...in a church's life?...
 - it would really be a shame for all of us this to be true and any of us to miss the practical implications, right?...
 - so let's jump a little further into this text...there's no question about the fact that...

A. Saul's hatred of the church was practically insatiable.

- **Acts 9:1-2 - Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.**
- **Acts 8:3 - But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.**
 - remember that word ravaged was used a person being torn apart by a wild beast...
 - it's just an incredible convergence of forces...Saul ravaging the church and God building and uniting it...
 - but what can the Lord do about a guy like Saul?...here's the answer...

B. God is powerful enough to totally change the direction of a person's life.

- do you think that would be a fair summary of what we're reading here?
- and did you notice the subtle irony here in the way this story develops...
- the order Saul secured was the authority to go after people described as what?...
- **9:2 – “any belonging to the Way.”**
- we don't know for sure how the church was given that description, but probably because Jesus Christ had said... **John 14:6 - Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.**
- this week in my personal Bible reading I came across this passage from the book of **Job 9:32-35** – speaking of the Lord, He said...**For He is not a man as I am that I may answer Him, that we may go to court together. There is no umpire between us, who may lay his hand upon us both. Let Him remove His rod from me, and let not dread of Him terrify me. Then I would speak and not fear Him; but I am not like that in myself.**
- that's a fascinating way to describe the dilemma between a holy God and sinful men...there is no umpire between us...
- remember that Paul would later say... **1 Timothy 2:5 - For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,**
- that's why Jesus would say – I am the way...
- NOW SAUL IS GOING ONE WAY (to persecute Christians)...
- and what happens?...Jesus reverses his way as completely and dramatically as could possibly occur...

- Saul's worst fear is realized in a second...Jesus is alive...just like these crazy people have been saying...Jesus really is the promised Messiah of Israel...and everything I've been living for has been wrong...
- and then Jesus made it possible for Saul to personally trust Him as savior and Lord...that's grace my friends...That is love!
- and here's something I hope we all see...this business of God being able to redeem anyone...
 - **Ephesians 2:8-9 - For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.**

- now, let's push this further...because I believe what we just talked about will happen...in the lives of all kinds of people, some who have been living in ways that are far from Christ...
 - so what if God chooses to draw some to Himself right now...if you already know the Lord, where does that leave you in terms of how you relate to those who have just come to Christ and may have rough edges all over the place?...
 - answer – be like Ananias...the principle is...

II. God Love Can Help You Welcome New Believers into the Family.

- do you see the principle there?....

A. The Lord uses people as the instruments of His grace.

- amazing grace isn't simply a song we sing, it's a lifestyle we live...
- and you have to love the fact that the God who temporarily blinded Saul, apparently giving him an opportunity to humble himself, be led into the city by someone else because that's the only way he could find his way, and then think carefully about the way he'd live for a few days...
- God wants Ananias to lay his hands on him...
- **9:12 – so that he might regain his sight.**

- you have to wonder what was going on in Ananias' mind...
- like, Lord, maybe we need to rethink this...Saul is coming to imprison me...maybe leaving him blind would be a good idea...at least long enough for me to pack my bags and get out of town...
- have you ever told the Lord – I'm not sure your plan is a good idea?....and listen...

- **Acts 9:13-14 - But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."**

- Ananias wasn't chided for that comment – don't think you can never cry out to the Lord...

C. Be sure to err on the side of grace. GOD IS LOVE AND HE WILL NEVER CHANGE!

- one of my favorite phrases in this entire text is the way Ananias addressed Saul...did you see it in verse 17...
- **Acts 9:17 - ...Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight...**
- friends, that's amazing Love (and trust) too...brother Saul...brother Saul...

- here's something I would encourage you to ask God to give us in abundance...sufficient grace to receive every person the Lord wishes to draw to Christ and to this place...
- so that when people have a Damascus Road experience, or when they are in the process of having a Damascus Road experience...what they will find from this church family is not a group of individuals who act like judges...or who are afraid to get our hands dirty with the challenges and backgrounds of real people...
 - but instead would find us to be a haven of grace...
 - brother Saul – the Lord has sent me so that you may regain your sight...because I've never gotten over the fact that once was a day that I had to receive mine...

- this is actually one of the things that I love about our church family...
 - we don't really care about what mistakes they made in the past, or what sins they committed...
 - we want to be instruments of grace – and as I see people get involved in all sorts of community based ministry – it's with a spirit and attitude of amazing love...

- now, let's broaden that out some...

III. God's LOVE Can Help the Church be a Forgiving Community.

A. The believers in Damascus protected Saul.

- you can imagine how this church family would have responded to this news...
- they say... **Acts 9:21 - All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and *who* had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?"**
- but when the Jews started opposing Saul – who stood by him?...**Acts 9:25 - but his disciples took him by night and let him down through *an opening in the wall*, lowering him in a large basket.**

B. The believers in Jerusalem struggled, but Barnabus led them to extend grace.

Acts 9:27-28 - But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles...And he was with them...

C. In so doing, the church received an incredibly effective servant.

- **Acts 9:28 - And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.**
- who knows who the Lord wants to use as an unusually effective servant in our town?...
- who knows who the Lord might want to add to our team?...

..

- someone who received a meal at the homeless shelter?...
- one of our counselees from the community?...
- someone coming off work release?...
- a person who received food at the Co-OP?...

- that's just the way the Lord often works – because after all, He's a God of amazing grace...

AMAZING LOVE< HOW CAN IT BE?
THAT THOU MY GOD, WOULD DIE FOR ME?