

23—Acts 9.1-19—Amazing Grace

I. Introduction

- a. We left off last week with not only an Ethiopian eunuch rejoicing that Jesus (that suffering Lamb in Isaiah) had taken away his sins but also the angels in heaven rejoiced over the salvation on this one lost sheep. And now he is headed home different. He may be in charge of the treasures of the queen but he now has an eternal treasure within. Though Luke does not tell us about every story of how the gospel continued to spread, we are pretty certain from history that the gospel spread to Africa because of God's amazing grace shown to this Ethiopian eunuch.
- b. We encounter another story of conversion today. Though we can all sing with John Newton, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me" most certainly, we find one that seemed impossible to save in our text this morning.
- c. Let's take a look at one of the most amazing stories of grace you will ever read.

II. Main Point

- a. The Sovereign grace of Jesus saved one of the most dangerous men to the church.

III. Outline

- a. Saul before Christ
- b. Saul meets Christ
- c. Saul meets Ananias

IV. Exposition

- a. The first two verses inform us that Saul is still seeking to stamp out the church. Like many testimonies I've heard stories, over the years, of life before Christ was one of immeasurable wickedness. We need to take note of who Saul is right now.
 - i. I think this is important because we tend to look at certain people and think they are too far gone. Or we may think that about ourselves. Saul is what we would call a terrorist.
 1. He was exactly what Stephen had described earlier: (Acts 7:51) ⁵¹ "...stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, always resisting the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.
 - ii. Though Philip is headed north to Caesarea along the Mediterranean coast preaching the gospel, a man who we already know about by the name of Saul is headed north up the eastern border of Israel some 140 miles from Jerusalem to Damascus.
 1. We were first introduced to Saul as the young man who was giving his approval of the stoning of Stephen. From that day on, Luke says in (Acts 8:3) Saul was ravaging (lit. destroying) the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.
 2. We are uncertain how long this went on but we know from 9:1 that "Saul is still breathing threat and murder against the disciples of the Lord."
 - a. This imagine is unbelievable. It's as though with every breath comes a threat of murder.
 - b. And his targets are disciples of the Lord—people like me and you.
 3. Whether this is legal in the Roman empire seems questionable. Even Saul's procedure of acquiring letters from the high priest do not make it legal under Roman rule. Eventually, persecution goes from permitted but not legal to legal but infrequent to legal and wide-spread.
 - a. In other words, Saul was seeking authority and cooperation from the synagogues of Damascus no matter what Rome thought about it.
 - b. What is his purpose? To hunt for disciples of Christ, if he finds any belonging to the Way, men or women, he will arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem.

- i. The Way! Here's a new description for disciples of Christ. How will they be identified? Most certainly all who follow THE WAY. Who is the THE WAY? Jesus.
 1. In other words, careful surveillance might reveal who they are by seeing how they live.
 2. What would our lives reveal?
 - iii. There are many in the world that could be compared to Saul's level of wickedness.
 1. For example, Chuck Colson, President Nixon's former "hatchet man."
 - a. He went to prison for obstruction of justice and who knows what all we he did.
 - b. He was born again and started the Prison Fellowship
 2. Maybe the slave-trader John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace.
 3. There are numerous stories of Jihadist Muslims turning to Christ. Can you imagine having changed your name to Mohammad because of your former life and then stepping into an underground church in Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia and when they ask you your name, they all seem very suspicious?
 - a. That's the feeling you would have if Saul were to walk through our doors.
- b. Saul's life was marked by zealous violence toward the church but there is one greater than he working for the salvation of his people—Saul meets the Risen Lord Jesus.
 - i. This story has captured my attention for years. Every time I read it; I am struck by the sovereign grace of God in Christ. Indeed, it gives you that image that was so popular in early Christian art of a shepherd carrying a lost sheep on his shoulders back to the fold. In this case, it seems the shepherd actually turned a wolf into sheep!
 - ii. In v. 3, we see that Saul is on his way to Damascus and just before he arrived (seemingly just on the outskirts of the city) a light suddenly shone around him.
 1. (There are details of the story that are fleshed out as this it gets told again in other places.)
 2. We know from other places that it was noon. To see a blinding light at noon is remarkable.
 3. We also know this was Jesus himself as Paul claims later in 1 Cor. 15 where he talks about the resurrection.
 - a. This is a theophany which is an appearance of God. In this case, it is the Son of God. Every time we read about one of these in scripture the same thing happens every time. The person falls to the ground.
 - i. It is the perfect posture before the risen Lord Jesus. We who were made from the dust of the earth fall in submission before the Creator in the dust.
 - ii. In this blinding light, Saul sees the Light of the World!
 4. Someone speaks. We know who it is. The one speaking knows who Saul is.
 - a. In v. 4 the voice says, "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?"
 - i. He could have said because he certainly knows, "Why did you approve of murdering Stephen?"
 1. "Why are you headed to Damascus to arrest my disciples?"
 - ii. Yet, he asks why are you persecuting ME?
 - b. An all-important question at this point is the identity of the person saying this.
 - i. Thus, Saul asks, "Who are you, Lord?"
 - ii. Jesus did not identify himself in the first question.
 - iii. The use of "Lord" here may be the way we might use "sir" which is possible.

- iv. Yet, the appearance has Saul on the ground as this light from heaven shines around him. He understands that he is inferior. Lord is an appropriate address to the One who is superior.
- v. The voice replies, "I am Jesus."
 - 1. It is the phrase "I AM". (ἐγώ εἰμι)
 - 2. Further identity is—whom you are persecuting.
 - a. This might be strange to us since we understand Jesus to be resurrected and had ascended to the righthand of the Father.
 - b. We must conclude: to persecute the disciples of Jesus is to persecute Jesus.
 - c. The church is called the Body of Christ.
 - d. Jesus claims his disciples as his own body. To strike the church is to strike Jesus.
 - e. The suffering of the church never goes unnoticed by Jesus.
- c. Jesus tells Saul in v. 6, "Rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."
 - i. You might think more needs to be said. However, Saul knows who Jesus is. When he told him his name, nothing else needed to be said at this point.
 - ii. They were near the same age. There's no doubt that Saul knows almost everything that has happened the last three years in and around Jerusalem.
 - 1. His teaching. Miracles. Healings. Death burial and resurrection.
 - 2. I doubt he is as zealous as he is with little to no details of who Jesus claimed to be. In fact, as we will see in a couple of weeks, he immediately preaches that Jesus is the Son of God.
 - 3. When the voice claims to be Jesus, it would be like for Saul...it's true. It's all true. He really is alive. He really is the Son of God. I was wrong. I had it all wrong. I am fighting against God!
 - d. Maybe for further evidence and certainly describing exactly what happened, Luke tells us about those who accompanied Saul.
 - i. (Acts 9:7) ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.
 - ii. "So this isn't a subjective, mystical experience. There were other witnesses. They heard the voice. The whole thing struck them speechless." (Bret)
- iii. When confronted with the revelation of Christ, what will Saul do?
 - 1. Jesus' commands him to rise, go into the city and wait for further instruction.
 - a. It should literally say, "Saul was raised from the ground."
 - b. The next phrase is passive too which is: "his eyes were opened."
 - i. "...he saw nothing."
 - ii. This sounds like a spiritual opening of the eyes and a physical blindness.
 - c. The next saying in (Acts 9:8) and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.
 - 2. Saul is helpless. Blind. In need of someone to lead him.
 - a. Saul, you may have authority from the chief priest to arrest my disciples in Damascus but you do not have my authority.

- b. He has seen Jesus who can not only heal the blind but cause blindness.
 - c. The one who was breathing murderous threats finds himself for three days without sight, and neither ate or drank.
 - iv. What do you make of this?
 - 1. The risen Lord Jesus is in control not Saul.
 - 2. The risen Lord Jesus is merciful. Saul deserved death.
 - 3. To this point, Jesus himself has done everything which is another unusual break from the patterns we have seen. He has only worked through his apostles and disciples so far.
 - a. Again, we shouldn't take this to be the new normal. This doesn't happen again in Acts.
 - b. There are several people that I would like to walk them down the Damascus Road for Jesus to knock them off their horse.
- c. But here comes the witness—Ananias.
 - i. In v. 10 Luke introduces us to a new character in the story. He is a disciple of Christ who was at Damascus. One who would have been bound and brought to Jerusalem a few days ago if found. One that Saul was looking for and Ananias would have been underground.
 - ii. Like Philip and the eunuch, the Lord is directing the entire event. He speaks to Ananias in a vision.
 - 1. (Acts 9:10) "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."
 - a. This is the same response Abraham and Samuel made when called.
 - b. This is the posture of a disciple of Jesus when he calls. God help us be like this.
 - 2. Now the instructions: (Acts 9:11-12) ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."
 - a. My first thought is Jesus knows every detail. Yet sometimes the details are what bothers us.
 - i. If Jesus had left out that this was Saul, we probably do not here Ananias ask questions.
 - 3. We discover this vision causes Ananias to be afraid.
 - a. Why? Because he knows who Saul is. He knows that he has obtained authority from the chief priests to extradite people like him back to Jerusalem.
 - b. Take courage. Jesus uses fearful disciples. He is patient and gentle. He can handle our questions. He is not displeased with him. He helps him understand. He explains what is going to happen. He assures him that Saul is not somehow faking all this and is really lying in wait for him.
 - 4. Jesus makes sure he knows that this is no scam.
 - a. (Acts 9:15-16) ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."
 - i. This vision gives us the information for which all of this has happened. Up to this point we haven't known the purpose except to regain his sight.
 - ii. Now we know that Saul is a chosen instrument of his for the express purpose of carrying his name before the Gentiles, Kings and the sons of Israel.
 - 1. The one who caused his disciples to suffer will now suffer too.
 - iii. But what about Saul's conversion? He has all the information needed. I think he believes it's true. But will he trust and follow Jesus?

- d. That gets us to the last point. The Risen Lord Jesus saves Saul and invites him into the family.
 - i. Ananias' fears are relieved. In v. 17 he goes to the house of Judas on Straight Street and enters to find it just as Jesus said. Ananias trusts the Lord and acts on it. Fears will come. I have them all the time. But it cannot determine my actions. Faith in Christ must respond. Faith bids us to go!
 - 1. Ananias lays hands on Saul. What a reversal. The one who came to lay his hands on him is now being held by one of those disciples. Not to bind him but to loose him.
 - 2. The way Ananias addresses Saul is unbelievable. "Brother." He's in the family.
 - a. Who are brothers according to Jesus? (Mk. 3:32-35) ³² And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." ³³ And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."
 - b. The reversal is unbelievable. From terrorist to a disciple of Christ.
 - ii. Ananias tells Saul, (Acts 9:17) the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."
 - 1. Salvation has come! Can you believe it? He's a murderer.
 - 2. This is the display of sovereign grace! I don't know how else anyone could explain this. Indeed, Saul could sing as we have: "He sought me and bought me with his redeeming blood."
 - 3. (Acts 9:18-19) ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.
- e. Lessons to learn from this and how to respond
 - i. Never doubt that anyone is too far gone. Jesus came to save sinners. Whether they are the chief of sinners like Saul or one like the lady we will see later named Lydia who was a God-fearer whom the Lord opens her heart to believe. God's grace is not conditional. Justification precedes sanctification. Jesus saves sinners like you and me by his grace!
 - ii. Never doubt the power of the risen Lord Jesus. There is no authority that thwarts his plans and purposes. Right now, think of someone who you believe is impossible to reach with the gospel. Who is the least likely person to come to faith?
 - 1. The biggest hurdles I see are those think they are Christians but give no evidence that they are. Then I recall that I was one of those and Jesus saved me.
 - iii. Never let fear keep you from obeying Jesus. Yes, there are fearful things but we need to be willing and ready to gladly obey Christ when opportunities come. We need to be prepared and looking for open doors.
 - iv. Finally, we need to realize like Saul did that Christ's patience towards us has a purpose.
 - 1. (1 Tim. 1:13-16) ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.
 - 2. His patience towards you was to display his patience to others who were to believe in him for eternal life! yes. His patience with you is a witness to the world that Jesus saves sinners!