

How Grace Works in a Sinner's Life

Acts 9:1–31

Studies in Acts #12

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“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” This is obviously one of the most memorable Christian songs that even our culture knows.

Because of that we forget how amazing it is that God looks upon a sinner in grace to forgive and to bless. The theme I want to pursue tonight is *how grace works in a sinner's life*. And in Acts 9 we have one of the most powerful—if not *the* most powerful—example of grace in the conversion of Saul. This should encourage us that God has been and is still at work in us as well as encourage us in how we deal with the spiritually lost among us.

1. *Demonstrated in Paul's Pre-Conversion*
2. *Demonstrated in Paul's Conversion*
3. *Demonstrated in Paul's Calling*

Demonstrated in Paul's Pre-Conversion (vv. 1–2)

We see how grace works in a sinner's life *demonstrated in Paul's pre-conversion*. In 7:58, 8:1, and 8:3 we see him persecuting the church. The word in 8:3 for “ravaging” is only used this one time in the New Testament. In the Greek Old Testament it is used in Psalm 80:13 of the wild boar that trampled the Lord's vineyard. Calvin thus called Saul pre-conversion a “wild and ferocious beast.” And now here in verses 1–2 we read, **But Saul, 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. In his **breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord** we see that this is what characterized his life. This is what animated his life. Every time he breathed he exhaled **threats and murder!**

We need to go away from this text so overwhelmed with awe at just how bad, how sinful Saul was. He was the last person on the face of the earth that the ancient church thought would be saved. Even Ananias says this in verse 13: **Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.** In seeing this, we should be overwhelmed at just how gracious our God is! He can save the chief of sinners. Think about someone in your life that is so far from God that you've almost lost hope of them ever coming to know the Lord. Now look at Saul! Here's what he said of himself pre-conversion. How would you describe your friend?

In Acts 22:3 he speaks of his zeal for Judaism and his strict training in the law and in 26:5 of his membership in the strictest sect of Judaism. In 1 Timothy 1:13 he says he was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man. In Galatians 1:14 he says he had a passionate jealousy for God's law. And in Philippians 3 he listed off his credentials as an anti-Christian:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Phil. 3:4-6)

Again, Saul was the last person on the face of the earth you would have expected to be converted. Can't God do the same today? Saul and your friend was like an unattractive

piece of coal. But God saw in him a diamond. And he made him such! This is how we need to view our unsaved friends.

Demonstrated in Paul's Conversion (vv. 3–19)

We see how grace works in a sinner's life *demonstrated in Paul's conversion*. On his way to persecute the Lord's people **suddenly a light from heaven shone around him** (v. 3), knocking him from his feet onto his knees (v. 4), blinding him (v. 8), and saying, **"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"** (v. 4) I find it so interesting that Saul replies, "Who are you, Lord?" (v. 5) He could be saying, "Sir," but it also means Lord. But this is right after the account of Stephen's witness! Was he cut to the heart already? The Lord whom he thought he was zealous for is the Lord he is persecuting! (v. 5) In persecuting this weird sect of Christians he thought he was serving the Lord, but the glorified Jesus says he is actually persecuting him, since they and he are so united together.

It's interesting that twice we are told that he was blind in verse 8 and verse 9. Things are usually reiterated for effect. Blindness was a curse of the Old Covenant threatened to disobedient Israel. And later in Acts 22:6 Saul says this happened at "noon," or mid-day. In Deuteronomy 28:28–29 the Lord spoke of blinding Israel at mid-day! Here he is personally experiencing the curse of the covenant. He thinks he is being obedient to the law of the Lord, serving the one true God, but in reality he is being disobedient to him!

How is God's grace working in his conversion? I want to suggest something to you tonight that will lead to an application of this text. We typically think of Saul's conversion as sudden as he is knocked off his feet. But consider this: even before this dramatic experience Jesus Christ was working in Saul's life. How do I know that? When Paul recounts his experience in Acts 26:14 he says Jesus said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." Ancient farmers would use a sharp stick to poke an ox to move in a direction. And sometimes the ox would kick back. The more it kicked, the more it was poked; the more the end would drive deeper into the ox. Paul was like a wild and ferocious beast. His will was strong. But Jesus' was stronger! He's heard Stephen's preaching of the law and gospel. And as he says in Romans 7, he thought he was spiritually alive apart from the law, meaning, the actual meaning of the law. But when the law came to him in reality, sin came alive and he died (Rom. 7:9).

Here is the application: the Word doesn't always bring sudden conversion as we would like it to. It doesn't always produce instant results. I've had to learn this as a pastor here for fifteen years. What we need to be confident in is that God's Word will accomplish everything he wants it to accomplish when he wants to accomplish it. Our task is to spread seeds, water them with prayer and let God give the growth. C.S. Lewis described it like this in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. He said describes God is "the Great Angler," the great fisher; he was like a cat chasing a mouse; he is like a hound closing in on a fox; he is like a Divine chess player.

Demonstrated in Paul's Calling (vv. 20–31)

In seeing the magnitude of Saul's sins and the even greater magnitude of God's grace, we see how grace works in a sinner's life *demonstrated in Paul's calling*. One commentator said it like this: "The raging lion has been changed into a bleating sheep."¹ As we read: **immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God"** (v. 20). Again, Saul's conversion was hard to believe; it sounded too good to believe: **And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?"** (v. 21) And again in verse 26: **And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.**

What a God this is! And note the parallels between Moses' calling and Saul's. First, both their names were called twice, as is common in calling narratives in Scripture. Second, Moses saw a burning bush while Saul saw a light. Third, Moses fell down and so does Saul. Fourth, God identifies himself as I Am while to Saul he says, "I am Jesus."

Our text ends with one of those growth summaries: **So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied** (v. 31).

Isn't that what we pray for here? May God bring it to pass! Amen.

¹ Lenski.