

08/28/11

Living Life Together As We Are Amazed by God's Grace

- 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...
 - not surprising--but certainly saddening, the percentage of those people who are also **victims of physical or sexual assault, or both is 95%...**
 - a stat that surprised me was that while **52% of those recruiting victims are men—42% are women...the remaining 6% are recruiting teams comprised of a man and a woman...**
 - here's one other stat – in **54% of the cases the recruiter was a stranger to the victim, but in 46% the recruiter was known to the victim...**
 - imagine doing that to a neighbor, or friend, or even member of one's family...it's beyond belief...
- now please imagine this... what if a person involved in that activity wanted to change his/her life?...
 - and what if somehow, some way that person heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and wanted to repent and believe in Him?...
 - would God's grace be sufficient to save such an individual?...
 - and if that person wanted to become part of this church, would we possess enough grace to accept them into the family?...
- I realize you might say – that's a pretty unlikely hypothetical – slave trader becomes Christian if he can only find enough grace...
- really – 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 – **Living Life Together as We're Amazed by God's Grace...**

- with that thought in mind, please open your Bible to Acts 9...page 99 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...
- we are coming to a great chapter in our study of the book of Acts...and for those who have just started attending the last few weeks...the logic behind studying Acts right now is because it's part of our theme this year of **Living Life Together**...
- we're thinking about what does it mean for our church to be the kind of place where it is easy for men/women to feel/be connected...
- we want to be small – in the sense that a person could come here and quickly/easily build friendships and relationships that really make a difference – are a powerful instrument of hope and encouragement and redemption and change...
 - this is a good time for us to be having this conversation...last Sunday there were more people here than any other non-holiday in our history...
 - and we're glad for that but we see it as a sacred trust...
 - add to that the fact that work is being done just a half-mile south of us on both sides of CR 550 to construct a huge housing development of apartments, duplexes, and single family homes...we are in the perfect location to impact a significant number of people for Christ...
 - but we're not trying to be big – we're trying to be effective...we recognize that there is a difference...so learning what it means to live life together is really important...
 - and we think that going back to the book of Acts – the first written history of the early church makes a lot of sense right now...
 - let's study how they lived life together then to learn everything we can about how we should live life together now...
- so last week we left in an interesting situation...
- because on the one hand you have this madman named Saul who was persecuting the church...literally chasing down followers of Christ and throwing them into prison...
 - so believers are being scattered all over the Roman world...but they responded to those hard times by proclaiming Christ as they went...to people of many different ethnic groups and economic conditions...
 - that's what we learned last week from the life of one of the church's first deacons...man named Phillip...how do you handle hard times?...not by hunkering down, not by protecting yourself or hoarding your resources...no, you handle hard times by finding some Samaritans...people who are far away from the Lord and maybe even a lot different than you – and you live for Christ, and proclaim the gospel of Christ...and stand back and see what happens...
 - and in Phillip's case...what happened was...a whole lot of people repented and believed...
- but there's one giant outstanding detail...what are we going to do about this madman named Saul?...he is so out of control...somebody really ought to do something about him, you know?...
- let's listen in...**read Acts 9:1-31**...
- did you see our theme this morning?...**Living Life Together as We're Amazed by God's Grace.**
- and with the time we have remaining...let's think about **3 ways the strength of God's grace is demonstrated.**

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

- the Lord clearly loves to surprise people with His grace...
- if you were reading this book for the very first time (and I realize some of you are)...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?...
 - 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.**
- do you see how the camera is panning back and forth?...we had that verse early in chapter 8...
- **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...
 - and then we had the story of this faithful deacon...who in the midst of hard times is proclaiming the gospel to the Samaritans, no less...
 - it's like, what?...and many of them repented and believed and representatives from the Jerusalem church came down and these Samaritans received the Holy Spirit...meaning they were on an equal par with the Jewish brothers and sisters who had come to trust Christ...
 - subsequently you would received the Holy Spirit the moment you believed but that particular process was important to bring unity and authentication to this new development in the church...
 - Jews and Gentiles...even Samaritans being one in Christ...
 - it's just an incredible convergence of forces...Saul ravaging the church and God building and uniting it...
 - then Phillip is told to go and preach to an Ethiopian Eunuch...whom many believe would have been a black man...which screams yet another message about the great diversity that is going to exist in the church...
 - I mean, this isn't a social club of people coming together because of their common heritage and personal traits...
 - this is hard to believe...but then the camera pans back to Saul...who is still what...
 - still breathing threats and murder...

- don't you love the terminology God uses to grip your attention...
- if you've ever said, the Bible's boring – what you really revealed is, you're boring...please don't confuse those two conditions...
- 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.**
- in other words...I am the promised Messiah...I am the fulfillment of texts like the one we studied last week that the Ethiopian Eunuch was reading in his chariot from Isaiah 53...how the Messiah would be slaughtered like the Lamb of God...who would take away the sin of the world...who would be “the way” a person could come to a Holy God...
- 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...
- and delightfully, that's one of the names given to the early church...they deserve to be imprisoned because of the way they've selected to be selected to be reconciled to God...
- then Saul chooses his way...the road to Damascus...where he can hunt down and capture and imprison some of these Christians...another name of derision they'll be given...these little Christ's...
- and you can imagine Saul heading out with his band of men on their way to ravage more of the church...picturing himself as entering the city as a powerful man and binding these followers of Jesus and bringing them back to Jerusalem...
- 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...God's amazing grace...
- and here's something I hope we all see...this business of God being able to redeem anyone...

C. That includes you.

- and no, now that the Bible is completed...we don't need and we won't have God speaking audibly to people and convincing them of the importance of repenting and

believing...because now we have the completed new testament to communicate that message every bit as powerfully...

- and I wonder how many people will hear this message today who have never yet met Christ on the road to Damascus...
- and that's one of my reasons to be thankful for what is happening here numerically, but at the same time concerned...that we could have people coming who have never genuinely allowed God to change the direction of your life...
- that's what it means to repent – to admit your sin and then turn around and ask God to give you something that you cannot earn on your own merit...
 - His grace...the only way your sin will ever truly be forgiven...
 - the only way your life will ever truly be changed...
 - the only way you will ever possess the kind of perfect righteousness necessary to enter heaven...is by accepting the gift of amazing grace...
- **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, if you say – I'm not sure I've ever done that...what should I do?...
 - let me try to illustrate the answer to that question...
 - did you hear about the guys a couple of weeks ago who had been out tuna fishing?...they had actually caught several fish already and if you know anything about tuna, you know they can be big so they had them strapped to the side of the boat which has a way of attracting sharks...
 - the water was choppy and then their bilge pump went out which meant they immediately started taking on water...
 - then they were swamped by a couple of large waves...and with practically no warning at all the boat sank...
 - so they hardly had time to even think...now they're out in ocean, miles from land...in really big trouble...
 - then something amazing happened...
 - they had an emergency walkie talkie on board---but no one thought in the rush to dive overboard to grab it...
 - what they didn't know was that the device floated...which is a pretty smart design feature for a boat's emergency walkie talkie when you think about it...
 - and they're out in that choppy water and up pops their walkie talkie...
 - and they were able to radio for help and a nearby vessel rescued them...
 - now how long do you think it was between the time they saw the walkie talkie, and the time they were grabbing it and radioing for help?...
 - do you think it was a long debate about the merits of radio transmission?
 - do you think they swam around for a while enjoying the afternoon believing another walkie talkie would probably surface later?
- listen...there are people who will hear this message today who have been around the gospel for a long time...but you've never grabbed the radio and placed the call for help...
- it's time to grab the radio...if God's grace was sufficient for Saul – it's sufficient for anyone...it's that amazing...
 1. You could do that right now...
 2. Have questions? – sign up for intro to faith
 3. If you make that decision today – tell someone...

4. Make your faith public by baptism...just like Paul did (another reason to sign up for Intro – as a part of publically identifying yourself with those who are on the Way...the way of Christ...)

- 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 Grace Can Help You Welcome New Believers into the Family.

- now obviously this isn't the same Ananias of chapter 5...but he was probably a leader in the church at Damascus which means Saul would have been coming to imprison people just like him...
- and the Lord speaks directly to Ananias and doesn't tell him what has happened to Saul – he just tells Ananias to go help Saul regain his sight...
- 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...

B. There is nothing wrong with expressing honest concern with ministry opportunities.

- **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...
- I've had some people ask me about what we're doing with the United Way – but don't they support Planned Parenthood – wouldn't we inadvertently be supporting abortion services if we did this?...
- that's a fair question – and the answer is no – our local United Way doesn't support Planned Parenthood...but the question is valid for sure...
- but don't fail to see where Ananias ended up...

C. Be sure to err on the side of grace.

- 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 grace 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...
- 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...
- there is no question about the fact that we are out there when it comes to philosophy of ministry...
 - this is not country club Baptist by a long shot...
 - we have purposely positioned ourselves to reach as many un-churched men and women in our community as possible...and 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 grace...

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

III. God's Grace 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?...
 - one of the skateboarders?...
 - 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 food pantry?...

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