

April 22, 2007  
Easter 3

*"Gripped by Grace on the Road to Damascus"*

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### ACTS 9:1-19

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**M**eanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup> "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. <sup>6</sup> "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." <sup>7</sup> The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. <sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. <sup>10</sup> In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. <sup>11</sup> The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. <sup>12</sup> In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." <sup>13</sup> "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." <sup>17</sup> Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord-- Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here-- has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." <sup>18</sup> Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup> and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

It happened in Midland, Texas in the late 1980's. 18 month old Jessica McClure was walking in the backyard. Suddenly she stepped into a hole, actually it was a narrow 10 inch well. Down she went. Her body became wedged 22 feet down. The whole nation watched the news. We prayed for 60 hours as rescue workers worked frantically to keep her alive. They fed her through a tube and kept watch on her with a video camera. Then they dug a shaft next to the well and lowered a man down. He dug alongside the well cut the pipe and was able to rescue Jessica. Jessica McClure became known as everybody's baby. Perhaps some of you remember praying for her as I did.

In the history of the Christian church there have been cases of people being dramatically rescued when they were lost or even violently opposed to the Christian faith. Such was the case with Saul of Tarsus, the man who took the name of Paul and became the great missionary of the Christian church. This morning we want to see how he was gripped by

grace, amazing grace, as he traveled from Jerusalem to Damascus to search for Christians he could send to their death. The same Lord and Savior who grabbed Saul has also grabbed you and changed you into a whole new person.

### **Look at Saul on the road to eternal death**

The road that Saul traveled from Jerusalem to Damascus was a road that would ultimately lead to eternal death and punishment. Listen to how he is described, "Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." This man breathed out hatred for Christians the way we might breathe out air. He was on the road to Damascus to find Christians he might lead back like common criminals to be put to death in Jerusalem, just as he was involved in stoning Stephen, the first martyr in the Christian church.

Notice it says that he wanted to take men and women as prisoners back to Jerusalem. Mothers and fathers were torn from their children. Little voices screamed, "Mommy, Daddy! Don't go, don't leave us." Later on in Acts 26 the man who was once named Saul said that he tried to get Christians to blaspheme or speak evil about the Lord.

What kind of fanaticism would tear mothers and fathers away from their children, or try to coerce people to blaspheme the Lord and turn against him? What kind of fanaticism would have a mother and father pull up in a car to a checkpoint in Baghdad, step out of the car while their two children are in the back seat, and then set off the car bomb? It is a religious fanaticism that is at its worst. Old Saul who became new Paul wrote about this fanaticism that pervaded his life in his letter to the Galatians, "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers." In Philippians he wrote that he was "a Hebrew of the Hebrews, in regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church." Saul would justify just about anything to persecute the people who said Jesus was the way the truth and the life, and no one could come to the Father except through him.

Religious fanatics, we have all seen them. Look over there. See that Hindu man pulling a wagon of flowers and fruit with cords attached to fishhooks that have been embedded into his pectoral muscles. Look over there. See the people in Mexico crawl on their knees on hard cobblestones to offer their peso to the priest. Look at the top of that pyramid. See the Mayan priest sacrifice a human being to guarantee blessings from their sun god. Look at the WW2 pilot who desperately tries to shoot down a kamikaze plane as it heads for US ship. Look at the carnage that appears daily in the news about religious fanaticism in Baghdad. All are walking on the same road that Saul was on, a road that leads to eternal death and destruction. Romans 10 says that they have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge. It is based on a false hope that will end in destruction.

Let's look around us more closely and ask the personal question, "How many people do you know who are on the wrong road, the road of death and hell, not the road that leads to eternal life? There he is. Mr. Bible Hater. He loves to make fun of Christians and the teachings of the Bible. He's the one who says, "The church is filled with hypocrites. I don't want anything to do with hypocrites." Then there is Mr. Materialist. He loves his toys and even sports a bumper sticker that says, "The one with the most toys at the end wins." Over

there, look over there. He is your neighbor coming to you with fresh vegetables from his garden. A nicer man you will hardly ever meet. He is convinced beyond any doubt he will have a higher place in heaven because he makes every effort to show kindness and love to people.

Are we any different? Why do I not worship gods like Woden, Thor, and other gods of the forests and trees as my German ancestors once did? No, listen to what we once were as we were born into this world according to the words of Ephesians 2, "All of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of the sinful nature, and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest we were by nature objects of wrath." The evangelist Dwight Moody was walking down the streets of Chicago with a friend. The man turned to Moody and said, isn't that disgusting as he pointed to a drunk lying in the gutter. Moody looked at the man in the gutter and then turned to his friend and said, "Here by the grace of God go I."

Are you ready now to see a spectacular rescue? We love rescue stories and it does not get any better than this.

### **Look at Saul rescued by the risen Lord**

As Saul approaches Damascus he does so with great determination and dedication. However, there is someone even more dedicated than he is and with great determination on his face. It is Jesus, the loving Shepherd who longs and yearns to take the lost sheep in his loving arms.

A bright light appears, much brighter than the noonday sun, flashing all around him. He falls to the ground and hears a voice saying, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" A voice from heaven? A flashing light? This must be the Lord God almighty who once appeared to Moses in a burning bush. "Who are you Lord?" Saul asked. He calls out with his voice the way his fathers had done: "Lord" and "Jehovah God." The voice that comes back to him says, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Three little words, "I am Jesus." His whole world instantly changes. The bright light that shone around him was not as bright as the light inside of him that began to see Jesus as Lord and God, Jesus as his Savior, Jesus as the fulfillment of the many promises he had memorized from the Old Testament.

I can remember learning this story about Saul as a child and being fascinated by what happened, especially with the Bible pictures showing Saul on the ground and light around him. What bothered me though was the little time it took for him to become a Christian, especially when it takes years for some people to come to a saving faith in Jesus. Think of how much Saul knew about the Messiah in the Old Testament and the important messages of redemption embedded in the animal sacrifices. Think of what he probably knew about the Christian faith and their teachings about Jesus as God's Son, and how Jesus came to suffer for us. Christians were reaching Jewish people by showing them the words of Isaiah 53, "he was wounded for our transgressions and applying them to Jesus." Paul must have heard the reports of the resurrection and even heard that the nail marks were still in the hands of Jesus. Words that he once hated are now the words of hope and faith and peace with God. It all fell into place with the words, "I am Jesus."

Saul was blind for three days, but what a blessing that blindness was. He could not see the

world around him, but he could see the brilliant glory of a whole new world with Jesus as his Lord and God. The Jesus that Stephen prayed to as he was being stoned to death is the name that Saul started using in his prayers. "Lord Jesus you are my refuge and strength." "Lord Jesus, You are my Savior. Lord, Jesus, you are my God, you are my righteousness, you are my shepherd, thank you for rescuing me."

The grace that gripped Saul and led him to confess the name of Jesus, also grabbed him and put him on a whole new road of service for Jesus his risen Lord and God. The Lord told a man named Ananias to go and visit Saul on a street in Damascus called Straight Street. At first Ananias was reluctant because he heard about Saul did to Christians. Then the Lord told him, "Go this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Just as this water bottle can be used to carry water while hiking, the Lord used Saul to carry the message of forgiveness and peace with God through Jesus to other people. The word for carry is used in the New Testament for a ship carrying supplies across the water. Saul would be used to bring the message of Jesus to people in other regions of the Mediterranean world, sailing from city to city and country to country.

The blindness did not last long. Ananias came to Saul and told him, "The Lord who appeared to you has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Ananias placed his hands on Saul and the blindness fell from his eyes like scales. He could see with his physical eyes. More important he saw things with his faith eyes that he never saw before. Then he was baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He carried with him all his life the blessings of being buried with Christ in baptism into death and raised with Christ all his life.

How did you come to faith in Christ? Maybe you grew up in a Christian home. Your parents took you to church or read the Bible to you. You may be tempted to think that your situation was not as amazing as that of Saul. Don't even think that for a moment! It was the Lord who used your family, your friends, your pastor and your Sunday school teacher to grab you and bring you to Jesus. What Saul later said of his life applies to yours and mine as well, "By the grace of God, I am what I am." Join me in saying, "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." Amen.