

April 14, 2013  
Easter 3

*"Amazing Grace on the Road to Damascus"*

### **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.

I am holding in my hand a Bible story book for children from Concordia Publishing House. It contains some of the best Bible pictures I have seen. If you turn to the lesson about Paul's conversion, you see the Apostle Paul being knocked to the ground by a blinding light from heaven. He is shielding his eyes as he looks up into the light.

The Bible is filled with accounts of God intervening in the lives of people with miracles. What beautiful pictures we see in this book of the Lord dividing the waters of the Red Sea or Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead or Jesus appearing to his disciples on the night of his resurrection. This morning we direct our attention to this mighty miracle of God that changed Saul, the mean and nasty persecutor of the church, into one of the greatest missionaries the Christian church has ever known. As we reflect on this miracle of God's amazing grace, we reflect on the same amazing grace that has also saved "a wretch like me."

## **The old Saul**

He was truly a monster, this man, this Saul of Tarsus, traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest Christians and put them death. Hitler was a monster. Stalin was a monster. The young man who killed the children in Newtown was a monster. So was Saul. "Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." This man breathed out threats against the church. Acts 8:3 says, "But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them to prison." Woven into the very warp and woof of his existence was the burning zeal to get rid of as many Christians as possible.

He was not just content to destroy the Christians in Jerusalem. He acquires letters from the high priest that gave him permission to visit synagogues and ask for the names of Jewish people who had become Christian. Think of the effort and the money needed to travel to Damascus, take people prisoner, tie them up and then take them back to Jerusalem. Who paid for all this? Did Paul pay this out of his own pocket or did he have other fanatics who supported him in this work?

It is obvious that Saul hated the Christian faith with a passion. He hated the Christians for their teaching that Jesus was Lord and God. He hated what they believed about Jesus dying on the cross for their sin and rising from the dead. The Christian faith stabbed Saul at the very heart and core of what he believed as a Pharisee. It threatened to take his belief in his works as the source of his salvation and turn it into a pile of rubbish. He writes in Philippians that he was "a Hebrew of the Hebrews, in regard to the law a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church."

It has been said that if you want to make people mad, tell them the truth about the sin they commit in their daily lives and what the consequences will be on judgment day. You can make them even angrier by telling them there is nothing they can do to save themselves. And if you want to make them so angry their blood begins to boil, tell them how Jesus has done everything to take away their sin. Travel to Mecca during a hajj. Hold a Bible in the air and tell the Muslims gathered there that all their good works to please Allah are worthless. Tell them how Jesus is Lord and God, and how he totally removed the punishment we deserve by his death on the cross. I doubt whether you would escape without having your life threatened.

The human race has seen more than its share of religious fanatics who have done awful things to appease their false gods. The prophet Jeremiah deplores the Jewish people of his day who gave up the worship of the true God and even sacrificed their children to satisfy and appease the god called Baal. See that Hindu over there with the large fish hooks embedded in his chest muscles with strong fishing line that pulls a large wagon of flowers and fruits to the altar of his false god. See that nice old man living next door to you. He comes over to your home with a basket of tomatoes fresh from his garden. He is the one who picks up your paper when you are gone and even feeds the whiny cat in your back yard. He sincerely believes with all his heart that his efforts at showing kindness and love to people will earn him a nicer place in the life hereafter.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelist Dwight Moody was once walking down the streets of Chicago

with a good friend. They walked past a man who was drunk and lying in the gutter muttering nonsense and foolishness. The friend said, "Just look at the poor man." Moody responded with these now iconic words, "Here by the grace of God go I."

What gutter and sewer of false hope and fanaticism would you be in if the grace of God had not rescued you or me? Here is how we are described before God's amazing grace rescued us. Ephesians 2 says, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature, and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest we were by nature objects of God's wrath." Here by the grace of God go I. Or as the Apostle Paul wrote, "By the grace of God, I am what I am."

## **The New Saul**

Saul was determined to pursue Christians. Jesus had an even greater determination to pursue Saul and bring him into his kingdom. "As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?'" A light from heaven? A light from heaven? This must be the Lord God appearing to him in full glory just as the Lord God appeared to Moses in a burning bush, and to Abraham, and Jacob and Isaiah and Ezekiel. He calls out the name of the Lord with the words, "Who are you Lord?" Then he hears his Lord and God speaking, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Three little words, "I am Jesus" and his whole world suddenly changes. The bright light that shone around him was not nearly so bright as the light of faith that now glowed inside of him. Everything the Christians had said about Jesus being Lord and God, Jesus being the Savior of the world and Jesus rising from the dead is true.

Some might argue that there is no way that Saul could become a Christian from just this one appearance. Let's recall who this man was. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He knew the Old Testament backwards and forwards. As an expert persecutor of Christians he knew what they believed, but up to this point he loathes and hates the name of Jesus. Everything falls into place when the voice that spoke to him says, "I am Jesus." What power there is in the name of Jesus to turn the hearts of people away from false hopes to the one true God! Acts 4:12 says, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Jesus says more to Saul as he now trembles in child like faith and trust. The voice of Jesus says, "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." Later Paul would write how Jesus personally appeared to him. "And last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."

Saul got up from the ground. He got up from the ground to go to Damascus not to persecute Christians but to follow the words of Jesus. He was blind for three days. For three days he did not eat or drink anything. The great mind that had been given to him from the Lord now reviewed well known verses of the Old Testament and applied them to Jesus. "He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities."

Neurons are now connecting words about Jesus he has heard from Christians to words he knows about Jesus from the Old Testament. He would never forget the moment that Jesus appeared to him. He would always treasure those three days of reflection that followed.

Jesus had a special plan for Saul. The great persecutor of Christians will become Paul the great missionary. He will pursue people in love to bring them into Jesus kingdom the way Jesus pursued him. Jesus tells Ananias to go to a man named Judas living on Straight Street in Damascus. There he would find Saul praying. Saul is praying. He is praying in the name of Jesus for the first time in his life. At first Ananias is reluctant to get any where near Saul because he has heard of the terrible things he has done to God's people. But then Jesus says emphatically, "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." Later Paul would write that he had the privilege of bearing about in his body the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ. He would carry multiple scars from multiple beatings for the name of Jesus.

Ananias places his hand of blessing on Saul and says, "Brother Saul..." He calls him his brother. This once violent persecutor is a brother in the faith. "The Lord has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit was already there in Saul's life. Now a greater measure of the Holy Spirit was there for him to boldly witness to Jesus and his resurrection just as a great measure of the Holy Spirit waits for us to witness to Jesus and his resurrection. Paul is baptized, baptized in the name of the true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In Acts 22 Paul later recalls how Ananias told him, "Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name." What a blessing it was for him and for us this morning to have the personal assurance of forgiveness that baptism brings.

How did you come to faith in Christ? Think of all the people the Lord Jesus used to bring you to believe what you believe this morning. Grace is and always will be truly amazing. Please join me in saying, "Amazing grace...Amen."