

How to Be Transformed by Grace

Texts: Acts 8:1-3, Acts 9, and various texts from the Paul's Letters

To explore the conversion of Paul (Saul of Tarsus) and emphasize Paul's message of grace, which runs through his letters in the New Testament. [Deliver this message after the reading for Week 12 is completed.]

Back Story

It is the early years of the Jesus movement (no, not the one in 1972; the one back in 0002!). The church is flourishing in Jerusalem, but resistance is intensifying, culminating in the death of Stephen, the church's first martyr. A great persecution ensues, spearheaded by a Pharisee named Saul from the city of Tarsus. In Acts 8:1-3 we read that Saul went from house to house, arresting men and women who were Jesus-followers. The church scattered throughout Judea and to Samaria. Some even traveled as far as Damascus, 130 miles to the north. Saul, unwilling to see Christianity thrive anywhere, headed north to Damascus to arrest disciples and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial. It is on this obsessive mission to Damascus that Saul is intercepted by God's grace.

Sermon Purpose and Outline

This sermon will explore the grace of God by telling the story of the conversion of Saul. Saul is intercepted on the Damascus Road and has his life redirected. As we watch Saul the persecutor become Paul the Apostle, we will be struck by the kindness, mercy, and grace of God in our lives.

Sermon Question: How can we experience a life-altering encounter with God's grace?

- 1. We Become Aware of Our Own Sin.** Acts 9:1-6
- 2. We Are Awakened to God's Mercy.** Acts 9:10-19
- 3. We Are Made Alive to Our New Calling.** Acts 9:20-22

Sermon Introduction

In *Les Misérables*, heartless felon Jean Valjean is caught stealing from the priest who offered him a meal and a bed for the night after his release from prison. When Valjean is captured by the police, rather than being accused by the priest, he is forgiven. This encounter with mercy serves as a transformational event in the thief's life. Valjean is redeemed. Reborn.

Creative Teaching Tool

Show the clip from the movie, *Les Misérables*, where Valjean is forgiven by the priest.

<https://youtu.be/pFfpbev9C8A>

On one occasion Jesus stated that *he who has been forgiven little, loves little* (Luke 7:47). The converse truth is that those who are forgiven much, love much. This is what happens to Valjean. Feeling utterly unworthy, he becomes the recipient of forgiveness and is transformed by the experience into a person of grace and compassion.

Now, if you have a past like Valjean's, you probably deeply resonate with his story of being the unlikely recipient of grace. You can appreciate how transformational it would be to receive undeserved mercy, which is a part of what grace means. For you, today's message may be difficult to embrace because you think your past is too stained to be able to be covered by God's grace. You might be tempted to reject this message, because you feel so unworthy. Keep listening.

On the other hand, you might relate more to the subject of this week's reading, the apostle Paul. Now, here was a man who had no idea he needed grace. When he was known as Saul of Tarsus, he had worked hard to cultivate his pedigree. He was born into an observant Jewish home, circumcised as an infant, and was a faithful and enterprising Pharisee. He was a zealous defender of his religion. In regard to the legalities of the Jewish law, his behavior was faultless. Grace? Saul of Tarsus didn't need grace! He was, by all appearances, a successful, religious, righteous, self-made man, doing just fine meeting the requirements of the law and living as a shining example of purity and justice in his community. So, why did Saul need grace?

And, why do you need grace? If you have lived a pretty good life, kept all the rules, raised nice kids, go to church regularly, and never had any major slipups in your life, do you really need grace? You may have an appreciation for the fact of God's grace, and in fact, you might go so far as to be thankful that God extends his grace to you to give you salvation even though you're not "perfect." But beyond that, does God's grace impact your life? Have you had a transformational encounter with grace? Do you even need a transformational encounter with grace?

Connection to the Overarching Theme: The Journey of Faith

The story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is a story of transformational grace. Ultimately, Saul's encounter with grace will transform him into Paul the Apostle. When Paul had a life-altering encounter with God's grace, he realized that friendship with God is not earned, but received by faith. From the beginning of the Bible, God has desired a relationship of trust and our response to God is a journey of faith.

Later in his journey, Paul would word it this way:

Philippians 3:9

*“Not having a righteousness of my own which comes from the law, but that which is **through faith** in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is **by faith**.”*

Let's continue in the journey of faith, by discovering how Saul, a successful, religious, righteous, self-made Pharisee, is transformed by his encounter with the God of grace.

Sermon Question: How can we experience a life-altering encounter with God's grace?

1. We Become Aware of Our Own Sin. Acts 9:1-6

As Saul travels toward Damascus, he thinks that he is serving God. He believes that Christianity is a cancer that must be removed to ensure the purity of Israel. He believes that the resurrection of Christ is a myth to be destroyed. The distressing element here is that Saul is fighting God while he thinks he is serving Him.

As Saul nears Damascus, a brilliant light flashes around him. He falls to the ground and hears a voice:

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Saul is stricken with blindness. He is told to enter the city and wait. Though Saul is physically blind, I believe he is seeing for the first time. He sees that he was fighting God instead of serving him. He sees that Jesus is the resurrected Lord and not a farce. He sees that he himself has been the cancer in the synagogue, not the Christian believers. As he sits, incapacitated with blindness for three days, he begins to see his true self with clarity.

Creative Teaching Tool

Put on a blindfold to illustrate Saul's blindness. For three days Saul sits in blindness, but during this time he realizes how blind he has been all along. A life-altering encounter with God's grace starts when we become aware of the horrifying reality of our own sinfulness. The deceptive nature of sin is that it often **doesn't feel like sin** while **we** are doing it. Like Saul, we can be blind to our sin, thinking we are serving God when in fact we are fighting him.

Illustrations

- People involved in a church division, where pastors or church members firmly believe they are serving God, protecting the truth, or advancing the faith, even though the church is being shredded and divided around them.
- A man throws his entire life behind building a title, position, and salary, giving little time or attention to his wife and children. He believes he is working hard for them, while the family is disintegrating under his nose.
- A woman lives a life of simmering rage, but refuses to see her bitter resentment as sin. Instead, it is excused away as normal reactions to a less-than-attentive husband, or inconsiderate children, or pain from her past. She can become self-righteous, seeing the sin around her, but blind to her own buildup of bitterness and unforgiveness.

This is the blinding nature of sin. It is an act of God's grace when he makes us aware of *our own* sin. Until we see *our* deep need for God, it is not likely that we will turn to him, or be transformed by him.

2. We Are Awakened to God's Mercy. Acts 9:10-19

Textual Explanation

Here is truly amazing part of the story. Saul, who has been fighting God without realizing it, is treated mercifully by God. A believer named Ananias is sent to heal Saul of his blindness. God even calls Saul his "chosen instrument."

It is deeply moving that God was reaching out to Saul while Saul was still fighting him. God extends his mercy to Saul, who is healed of blindness, receives the Holy Spirit, and is baptized.

Cross References

In Luke 15, the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son remind us of the gracious heart of God toward the lost.

Illustration

The words and the back story of the hymn *Amazing Grace* are particularly appropriate here.

*“I once was lost but now am found / was **blind but now I see**”*

What it means to live under grace is illustrated by the life of John Newton. Newton was born in London, half a century before the American Revolution, to a mother of superb spiritual qualities and a nondescript father. His mother died when he was six. Five years later he went to sea with his father who was a ship’s captain. He became a midshipman and for a time led a wild existence, living in utter disgrace. He rejected the God of his mother, he renounced any need of religion and he lived an irresponsible and sinful life. Eventually he became a slave trader, crossing the ocean several times as captain of a slave ship, responsible for terrible human degradation among the captives he had crowded on board. But grace was always a factor in his life. He survived a deadly fever in Africa, and his ship survived a terrible storm which almost killed him. Finally, dissatisfied with his life, he began reading the writings of Thomas à Kempis. Somehow, the Holy Spirit began stirring inside his soul, awakening him from sin, urging him toward salvation until he finally gave his heart to Christ. He was so thoroughly converted, in fact, that he felt a call from God to enter the ministry. He was eventually ordained in 1781 and accepted a pastorate in Olney, England. But Newton’s disgraceful past never left his memory and he was completely dumbfounded over the privilege of living joyously free under the divine grace of God. In an intense moment of inspiration, when he was thinking of the wonder of the grace of God which had saved even a wretch like him, he wrote the hymn, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.”

Creative Teaching Tool

Before moving on in the message, have the congregation sing *Amazing Grace*, a capella.

An encounter with God’s grace starts when we awaken to our own sin, it is sealed by the utter miracle of receiving God’s mercy in spite of our sin, and grace finishes its transforming work when we awaken to our new calling.

3. We Are Made Alive to Our New Calling. Acts 9:20-22

Textual Explanation

Ananias, who is sent to heal Saul, receives this information about Saul's future calling:

*"This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name **before the Gentiles...**"* Acts 9:15

With this sentence, the course of the church will change. Note that Paul will carry the name of Jesus to the Gentiles. To this point, the Jesus movement has been exclusively for the Jews. The first disciples believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. But now, through the preaching of Paul, the mystery of God will be revealed, that Jesus is the savior of the world, the redeemer of people from all nations.

Cross Reference

This is a fulfillment of what was promised to Abraham, father of the Jewish people. *"...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* Genesis 12:3

Textual Explanation

Saul begins immediately to speak boldly about Jesus. *"At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the son of God."* Acts 9:20

Saul is given a calling, a purpose, and a mission. Saul the persecutor became Paul the Apostle. He would eventually travel thousands of miles to bring the message of Jesus to the Mediterranean world. Our New Testament contains thirteen of his letters.

A life-altering encounter with God's grace will make us alive to a new calling.

Application

When Christ forgives our sins and enters our lives, he begins to radically transform our mission. We will be made alive to a new calling. This doesn't necessarily mean that you'll have a career change, like Paul. Nor does it mean you have to have come out of a life of crime, like Valjean. But no one can encounter God's grace without being transformed at some level, without experiencing a new motivation for everything we do:

- His grace will transform us from being materialistic to giving with gracious generosity.
- His gracious forgiveness will transform our lingering resentment to forgiveness of others.
- His undeserved mercy will transform our suffocating anxiety to a life of prayer and trust.
- His undeserved love fills our reservoir so we don't have to fill it ourselves with self-centered pursuits, and out of that reservoir we can love others by serving them.
- When we encounter God's mercy for ourselves, that unleashes mercy in us for others.

Illustration

If you tend to be more of a Saul than a Valjean, it could be very easy to slip into your old habits of achieving spiritual results on your own. The process of being transformed into the likeness of Christ is just as much a function of grace as your initial salvation is.

“We tend to give an unbeliever just enough of the gospel to get him or her to pray a prayer to receive Christ. Then we immediately put the gospel on the shelf, so to speak, and go on to the duties of discipleship. The grace that brought salvation to you is the same grace that teaches or disciplines you. But you must respond on the basis of grace, not law.”

— Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace*

Cross References

Ephesians 2:8-10

*“We are saved by God's grace but **created to a life of good works.**”*

2 Corinthians 5:15

*“And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves **but for him** who died for them and was raised again.”*

Conclusion

Paul never got over the fact that God had saved him. In his letter to Titus, he reminds the younger pastor that they came to know Jesus through the God's extreme mercy.

Titus 3:3-5

“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when

the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.”

Remember: Saul of Tarsus wrote this! He was obviously a man who had a life-altering encounter with the grace of God.

Have you truly encountered God’s grace? Has he revealed to you the depth of your sin? Has he awakened you to the miracle of his mercy? Has he offered you a new and fuller life by giving you a calling of a richer sort than you have been pursuing? Take him up on his offer. He is extending his hand of grace to you. Reach out and grasp it, and receive all that he’s extending to you. You can never earn it, but it will cost you everything you have. But if Paul were here, he would tell you it’s the best exchange you can ever make!