

Grace: The Story of Paul

Grace—part 6

August 4, 2019

The power of God's grace is no better seen than in a changed life. I'm not talking about changing careers or changing your life situations. God's grace is most powerfully seen in changing our human nature to more and more reflect the nature of Jesus Christ. It is a change of character, identity, purpose, beliefs, priorities, values, and inclinations. It is most clearly seen in our personal lives and in how we relate to people.

This week we'll look at the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and his transformation. (Since Saul is most known by his new name, Paul, I will be using both names interchangeably).

DAY 1: Paul's past life

1. Saul of Tarsus was raised as a Jew. He had the most formal education a Jewish man could have. He was an up and coming star in the Jewish faith.

2. After the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave the Christian faith exploded. To the most devoted of Jewish leaders this was a crisis of epic proportions. The new faith must be stamped out. This is where we are first introduced to Saul.

3. Stephen was giving testimony to God's redemptive history. When he got to the point of Jesus, this set the Jewish listeners into a frenzy.

Acts 7:57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Acts 8:1 And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

4. Saul believed he was doing the right thing. But that was only the beginning.

Acts 8:2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.

³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Acts 9:1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest...

Acts 9:2 ...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.

5. Try to imagine who someone like this would be in our world? This kind of thing goes in our world, today. Jihadi terrorists, Hindu terrorists, and even the (generally) peaceful Buddhists burn church buildings in India

6. What strikes you from today's devotional?

DAY 2: Saul's conversion: meeting grace

Acts 9:3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

⁴ *He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

⁵ *"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.*

⁶ *"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*

1. As Saul was on his way to Damascus to deliver some knockout punches to Christians, he was suddenly interrupted by meeting the resurrected and living Jesus Christ!

2. Take note of the progression of Jesus relating to Saul.

a. A light flashing from heaven all around him. (In other passages, the light is described as blinding). The suddenness and brightness of this drove Saul to the ground!

b. He hears a voice.

c. A question is asked.

d. The question addresses Saul, directly.

e. The question appears to be a rhetorical question, as if to say, "Why on earth would you do THAT?!"

f. Saul asks who is addressing him, calling him "Lord." The effects thus far, have humbled Saul.

g. Jesus identifies Himself as the voice, AND as the One Saul is persecuting!

h. Imagine Saul's response. He thought Jesus was a fraud, and dead. He also assumed he was persecuting a renegade sect of crazy people. Now he realizes that the situation is MUCH worse than imagined. He is persecuting Jesus the Lord.

i. In essence, Saul is told to report for duty!

3. What strikes you about this episode, so far?

4. Verses 7 and 8 add interesting and telling corroboration of Saul's testimony.

Acts 9:7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ 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.

7. What strikes you from today's devotional?

DAY 3: Grace: a change of “ownership”

Acts 9:5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting;

1. Saul was shell-shocked to hear this news! His recent life had been predicated on this new Christian faith to be a fraud, carried on by stealing a charlatan's dead corpse and claiming resurrection. "Impossible," or so he thought.
2. Now the very one he thought a dead and a charlatan is very much alive. The message of Christ is true. Jesus is the Messiah, God, the Lord in the flesh!
3. What would you assume would be the Lord's next words to Saul?

Acts 9:6 ... but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

4. Apparently, the conversion of Saul happened just prior to this command of Jesus. The question is, how did that happen? Saul must have realized that what he had been doing was not only sin against man, but sin against God. He surely realized that he could have faced immediate judgment. But judgment did not happen! Perhaps his mind went back to the martyrdom of Stephen.

Notice what everyone witnessed *as* Stephen was being stoned!

*Acts 7:59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.*

5. What do you think Saul realized about God's grace in the life of Stephen?

6. Back to our story.

Acts 9:6 ... but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

7. What does Jesus assume Paul will do as a result of this command?

8. One of the theological questions sometimes asked is this. "Is it possible to have Jesus Christ as your savior but not as your Lord?"

9. How would this episode answer that question?

10. What strikes you from today's devotional?

DAY 4: Grace exhibited through a Christian to Saul

1. We can experience the grace of God through God Himself. But oftentimes, we experience the grace of God through another Christian. Today we'll see this in a man named Ananias.

Acts 9:6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

*Acts 9:10 In Damascus there was a **disciple** named **Ananias**. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹¹ 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. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."*

Acts 9:13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

2. Imagine you are Ananias. And imagine that instead of Saul, someone like Osama bin Laden is named in this vision. You are to go to visit the man who has become known worldwide as a persecutor and killer of Christians.

a. What fears would you have had?

b. How would you respond?

Acts 9:15 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. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

5. How would these words from God have helped you obey?

Acts 9:17 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." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized...

6. Ananias could easily have been on Saul's "hit list" in Damascus. Now Ananias is taking the initiative to find Saul! Undoubtedly Saul realizes the irony of this situation. One came to persecute and murder, the other came to bless and do God's work.

7. If you had been Saul, what effect(s) would this interchange have had on you?

DAY 5: Living a life of grace

1. We fast forward the life of Saul, now Paul, about thirty years. Paul is in a Roman prison for his faith. This time he is facing execution.

2 Timothy 4:6 (RSV) For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come.

2. All the trinkets and “treasures” we foolishly chase will seem like wastes of time and life. When you face the end of your life what will be important to you?

2 Timothy 4:7 (RSV) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

3. At the end of Paul’s life what mattered to him?

4. We get another glimpse into the power of grace in someone’s life as Paul talks about his last challenge.

2 Timothy 4:16 At my first defense no one took my part; all deserted me....

5. Imagine you have spent the majority of your life serving Jesus Christ. You have started churches in Gentiles regions. You have trained a large number of missionaries. Now, at the very end of your life, you face a trial. And, not one person shows up for support. Paul puts it this way, “They all deserted me.” How would you have responded?

2 Timothy 4:16b May it not be charged against them!

¹⁷ But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the message fully, that all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

6. How did Paul respond? How did grace play a major part in his amazing response?

7. What strikes you about the power of grace in Paul’s transformation?