

The Lord's Message: The Light of Grace

Date: September 19, 2021

Where: Tilghman UMC

Scripture Reference: Acts 9:1-19

I hope you were able to recognize the words in the Call to Worship as the words to the most famous of hymns, Amazing Grace. It has been estimated that this hymn is sung ten million times annually. It has been recorded by Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, and even the king of Rock and Roll, Elvis Presley. For the next seven weeks, we are going to be learning about God's Amazing Grace.

The writer of the hymn Amazing Grace is John Newton. John Newton was born in London, in 1725, to a Puritan mother and a sea captain father. John's mother died when he was seven. His father, not having anyone to raise John, took his son on board his ship. John quickly learned the language, the attitudes and the heavy drinking of life aboard a ship. At one point in his early life, he was impressed into the British Navy. John did not like Navy life. John tried to desert and, for his attempted action, John received eight dozen lashes. He was finally able to desert and sailed away on the slave ship, Pegasus. John's unruly behavior caused great consternation with the captain and crew of the Pegasus. The captain of the Pegasus was so irate with John that he gave him to an enslaver in West Africa named Amos Crowe. Amos gave John to his wife Princess Peye as a slave. The Princess was known for her harsh treatment of her slaves and she treated John vilely. His father, upon finding out about his son's situation, sent a man named Thomas to purchase his son. Thomas did just that. On the way back home, the ship encountered a storm off the coast of Ireland. The storm was so violent that ship almost sank. The ship developed a hole caused by the storm and waters started to pour in. John was so distraught by all of this that John started to pray to God to save him. By God's miraculous grace the cargo broke loose and shifted towards the hole in the ship blocking the water from coming in. The storm started to settle down and waters started to calm. His conversion to Christianity started. This would be a gradual situation. John says this about the experience, "I cannot consider myself to have been a believer in the full sense of the word, until a considerable time afterward." Just to emphasize this point, John would become a captain of slave ships. Making three voyages to purchase and sell human beings. It was not until John had a stroke that he would leave the slave business. It would be 34 years later, that John would write about the horrible ordeals of the slave business in a pamphlet entitled, *"Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade."* After his stroke, John would finally come fully to Christ. John was ordained as an Anglican Priest in 1764. He would write over 280 hymns. None would gain the popularity of Amazing Grace. The other part of God's wonderful grace about this hymn is that it would become popular with slaves and even referenced in the anti-slavery book Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriett Beecher Stowe. A hymn written by a former captain of a slave ship would lift the hearts of slaves. I know that you want to sing it right now, but we are going to save that hymn for next week.

Why would I go and spend all this time telling you the story behind the hymn, Amazing Grace? I believe that no one is outside of the realm of God's grace. It does not matter who you are or what you have done, God still loves you. How do I know this as fact? The answer can be found in the Bible in the story of Paul which Michael just read to you.

Let us pray.

Paul would confirm the fact that no one is outside of the realm of God's grace. Paul says this about himself "I am the worst" in **1 Timothy 1:15**. Why would Paul have such a demeaning attitude about himself? We need to search Paul's background for that answer.

Paul's name was Saul until God changed his name. We know that Saul was born in Tarsus sometime around 4 BC. This would be just after Jesus's birth. He died sometime around 62 to 64 BC. Paul would write most of the New Testament, a total of twelve books. The books of Luke and Acts were written by a disciple of Paul, the doctor Luke. Most theologians think that Luke gets his information from Paul. That would make fourteen of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament which were written by Paul or directly influenced by him.

In **Philippians 3:5-6**, Paul says this about himself. Paul talks about his upbringing and his education in **Acts 22:3**. The first time that Paul's, or Saul's, name is mentioned in the Bible is at the stoning of Stephen in **Acts 7:52-8:1a**. Saul's reason for approving the stoning of Stephen is because Stephen had broken one of God's laws. We talked last week about the importance of obeying God's law. The law that Stephen broke was the first law of the Ten Commandments, "You should not worship any other gods." Saul thought that Stephen was worshiping another god, God's Son, Jesus Christ. This enraged Saul. That is why Stephen should be stoned.

The Bible describes Saul's hate in **Acts 9:1**. In **verse 2**, we find out where this hate leads Saul. With the letters from the High Priest used to capture fleeing Christians and bring them to Jerusalem to stand trial, Saul begins his journey with his entourage to Damascus, the capital of Syria.

His life is about to encounter God's Grace. Look what the Bible says in **verse 3**. The light from heaven flashed around only Saul. We will learn in verse 8 that none of the other men had the light flashing around them. In **verses 4-7**, the light only speaks to Paul. In **verse 8**, we find that the experience with the light from heaven has left Saul blind. Just as God got the attention of John Newton through the violent storm, so God gets the attention of Saul through the blinding light, the light of Grace.

Now, Saul has experienced the light. Saul has heard the voice of Jesus. As a result, Saul is left blind. The men take Saul into Damascus to the house of Judas on Straight Street. From my research, there is a street call Straight Street that runs east and west through Damascus. Today, quite interestingly, the street divides the Jewish and the Christian areas. As far as to the nature of the man, Judas, to whose house Saul is taken, we do not know if Judas was a believer or not.

In verse 9, we find that Saul will reside at this house for three days, being blind, but not eating or drinking anything. From the evidence in verse 11, we learn that Saul was fasting and praying. John Newton was praying during the violent storm. Saul is praying after his encounter with the blinding light of God's Grace. We should learn from both of these men that praying to God is important for us to receive direction from God. That is why we should pray every day.

In Saul's case, God gets his attention by the blinding light, but now God brings in a believer of Christ named Ananias. Look at verses 10-12. Now, Ananias is rightly concerned about going to Saul. If we remember Saul has come to Damascus to round up Christians and take them to Jerusalem to stand trial and possibly be put to death. All the Christians in Damascus are well aware of Saul's intention. Ananias brings this concern up to God in verses 13 & 14.

God tells Ananias that no one is out of the realm of God's Grace. God has given Saul a special mission and Saul must learn how difficult this mission will be. Look at verses 15 & 16.

Ananias, trusting in God, goes to Saul. In verses 17-19, we see the result of God's Grace. Saul is filled with God's Holy Spirit. Saul is no longer blind. Saul is baptized, which means that now he professes Christ as His Lord and Savior. The old creation is gone and the new creation is growing. Saul is learning from the believers in Damascus all about this Jesus for whom he once had hatred. Saul, once a Pharisaic Jew, is now a believer in Christ. Talk about God turning his world 180 degrees! That is what can be done by the light of God's Grace.

Amen.