

# The Amazing Grace of God

Message for Sunday, June 14, 2015  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Acts 9:1-19

## Children's Message:

Some religious leaders were really upset with Jesus, because he was always hanging around with people who did bad things. They thought he should avoid such people.

So Jesus told them a story about how much God loves everyone, even the bad people.

*Read Luke 15:1-7, the lost sheep parable.*

Let's think now: what kind of bad people today would Jesus hang around with? Any ideas? *Make a list of four or five.* (Example: people who tell lies; people who cheat; people who murder.)

We're going to sing about each of these people. Here are the words:

God loves you and I love you,  
and that's the way it should be, Hallelujah!  
God loves you and I love you,  
and that's the way it should be.

What do we say about the (*one from the list of the bad people*)? Sing the song. Repeat for each person on the list.

Finally, what do we say about you (*pointing to each one of the group*). Sing it one last time.

**Message** "The amazing grace of God"

## 1) When you know you've really done something bad...

In my high school years, I got involved in public speaking. I was at a debating tournament one year which was set up as a copy of the United Nations. We were the ambassadors representing our nations, debating a resolution about the Middle East conflict. I was supposedly representing Libya, at that time an outspoken and aggressive enemy of Israel.

During my speech, I made the usual derogatory remarks about Israel and its policies. This happened years ago, and I obviously can't remember exactly what I said. But it was something like, "You Jews are the cause of this trouble. You Jews should be content with what you have, rather than trying to grab more and more land away from your neighbours." I went on some more, talking about "You Jews." Sometime during my speech,

the two students who were supposed to be the representatives from Israel got up and walked out.

During the snack break in the middle of the morning, I happened to come across those two students. They stood out in the crowd because they wore on their jackets the bright blue flag of Israel. I laughed about the morning, and complimented them on their strategy of making a dramatic exit during my speech. They nodded, but I noticed that they did not share my amusement. Rather, they looked very grim. I also noticed some small decoration they were using as tiepins. I inquired what it was, and they said it was the Torah, the holy book of Judaism.

Suddenly it dawned on me. These two weren't just playing the part. They really were Jewish. I had not just criticized Israel; I had said terrible things about all people who were Jews. Including them.

The realization hit me like a kick in the stomach. How could I be so ignorant!? How could I make it up to them? Of course, I couldn't. I had said those horrible things, and it was over.

I dropped to my knees in front of them, and profusely apologized. This was no theatrical gimmick; I didn't even think about it. It was pure instinct: I wanted them to know how much I was ashamed of myself, and falling to the ground just happened.

Something like this happened to Saul one day on the road to Damascus. He was on a mission to round up all the Christians he could find, to put them in prison or to execute them. This new cult was dangerous: already thousands had been led away from the true worship of God to follow this false god. But then something happened.

**Acts 9:3-5, Today's English Version:**

**As Saul was coming near the city of Damascus, suddenly a light from the sky flashed round him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?"**

**"Who are you, Lord?" he asked.**

**"I am Jesus, whom you persecute," the voice said.**

Max Lucado describes Saul's experience like this: "When he found out whose voice it was, his jaw hit the ground, and his body followed. He braced himself for the worst. He knew it was all over... He prayed that death would be quick and painless."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado, in *The Applause of Heaven*.

Have you ever had an experience like that? Where you suddenly realize how wrong you've been, and it's too late to do anything about it?

- Perhaps it was an accident — you were late for an appointment, and passed a car when you should have waited, and suddenly there was someone there...
- Perhaps it was something you did on purpose — as a teenager you were part of a group that picked on that weird kid in your class...
- Perhaps you didn't even know you were doing it — you have high standards, and you expect the same from others, including your children. And when they don't measure up, your attitude tells them they're no good. And you've been doing that for years...

When you've blown it, what do you do? When you've done something *really* bad, remember this:

## 2) ... Jesus is reaching out to you

I didn't tell you what happened in my story with the two Jewish students. When I fell down and apologized, they were unbelievably gracious and forgiving. They had been considering taking me down a side corridor and beating me to a pulp (which I entirely deserved), but my sincerity changed that. They accepted my apology, and helped me back to my feet. The amazing thing is that, through the remainder of that weekend, we became good friends and spent most of our time together.

Saul's experience was similar (although of course on a much grander scale, since he had offended the Son of God). The initial message he received was vague, and not particularly reassuring:

**Acts 9:5-6, Today's English Version:**

**"I am Jesus, whom you persecute," the voice said. "But get up and go into the city, where you will be told what you must do."**

On top of that, the Lord did something that caused Saul to go blind. Three days went by while Saul waited in a borrowed bedroom, in silence and darkness. He couldn't see the world around him; all he could see was inside himself. And it wasn't a pretty sight. I'm not surprised that he didn't eat anything during that entire period.

When you've done something really bad, and you're feeling horrible inside, what do you do?

- You can go into denial, or make excuses (same thing): "Why is everyone making such a big deal over this? It wasn't that serious." "Everyone makes mistakes." "It wasn't actually my fault."

- Or you can admit that you did wrong, and ask forgiveness.
- Then there is the other extreme, where you might think that there are some sins that are too terrible to forgive.

If anything, Saul leaned towards that last option. He called himself "the worst sinner of all" [1 Timothy 1:15]. He had approved the death of Stephen [Acts 8:1]. Surely he could not expect anything less for himself.

Imagine, then, how he felt when Ananias came. Here's what happened:

**Acts 9:17-19, Today's English Version:**

**So Ananias went, entered the house where Saul was, and placed his hands on him. "Brother Saul," he said, "the Lord has sent me — Jesus himself, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here. He sent me so that you might see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." At once something like fish scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he was able to see again. He stood up and was baptized; and after he had eaten, his strength came back.**

Instead of condemnation, Saul receives compassion. Instead of punishment, he receives prayer. Instead of death, he receives healing.

Saul's response was immediate: he gave his life to Jesus Christ. (Maybe he had already done that during the three days of solitude; we don't know.) He got up and was baptized even before he had anything to eat.

## 3) The amazing grace of God

Saul's life was transformed as a result of his experience. He even got a new name: shortly after this, he called himself Paul. Instead of persecuting Jesus and his followers, he began preaching Jesus. That became his whole purpose in life:

**Acts 20:24, Today's English Version:**

**"I reckon my own life to be worth nothing to me; I only want to complete my mission and finish the work that the Lord Jesus gave me to do, which is to declare the Good News about the grace of God."**

The story of Saul is not an isolated example. Millions of people through the ages have had this same experience: living a life devoted to self, pleasure, power, money, booze, drugs — *anything* but God — and then finding the real answer in Jesus Christ.

It is the story of the grace of God. Grace is a profound theological word, but its meaning is very simple: God loves you. Period.

**John 3:16, Today's English Version:**

**“For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.”**

Think about that: “God loved the world.” It says “everyone.” I looked that up in a dictionary, and you know what I found? “Everyone” means *everyone*! There is no one to whom God says, “Nope, you’ve gone too far. Get out of here.”

Grace says that you can’t do anything to earn God’s love. No matter how good or righteous you are, you can’t make God love you any more.

You also can’t do anything to lose God’s love. No matter how bad or sinful you are, you can’t make God stop loving you, or even love you less.

You can reject that love, but he still loves you just the same. Or you can accept that love, and let Jesus fill your life.

You can be good and righteous, and still reject God’s love. Actually, the “good” people are in greater danger of missing God’s grace than those who know they’ve messed up. I so often hear someone say, “I’m a pretty good person. I live a good life. I think God will take me in.” That sounds pious, but it’s actually a *rejection* of God. Instead of accepting God’s love, this person is saying, “No thanks. I don’t need your help. I’ll do it my own way.”

One final thought: the person who has experienced acceptance by God, will find it much easier to accept others. In other words, once you have received grace, you pass it on to others. Once you have been loved even though you don’t deserve it, you can reach out to others with that same love. More than anything else, our world needs to experience grace. Are you willing for God to work through you to make that happen?

### **Next Steps:**

- All of us have days we dearly wish we could live over again... but we can’t. Confession and forgiveness are our only hope.
- Confess your wrongs: to the person you hurt, and to God. Don’t make excuses or point fingers. Just say, “I’m sorry.”
- Ask forgiveness from that person, and from God. The other person may refuse, but sincerely try your best.
- God will *never* reject your confession. That’s the good news Jesus came to tell us: of God’s love and grace. Receive it.
- Then do the same with others who have hurt you.
- Read Acts 10 *and* 11 in preparation for next Sunday.