

ACTS 2016
Part 9
“Simply Amazing”
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You can turn in your Bibles to Acts Chapter 9. At the beginning of March we picked up our series that we had paused for a while back in late last year. We were looking at Acts and took a break from it, and have picked up that journey again at the beginning of March.

Acts Chapter 1 through 7 is very much about the Gospel message filling Jerusalem. And it lays out how God moved through the apostles to make the new covenant of Jesus known amongst the people in Jerusalem.

And in Acts Chapter 7 Stephen, a man full of faith, full of wisdom, full of the Holy Spirit, delivers a speech to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council in Jerusalem. And at the conclusion of his speech, they stone him to death and a great persecution, we are told, breaks out against the church.

And we have looked at the last couple weeks at how the church is scattered out of Jerusalem. And what was designed to try and end the growth of the church and end the proclamation of the Gospel only pushed it out and scattered it into the regions around Jerusalem.

And the last two weeks we have looked at how Philip was used by God to bring the Gospel message to a Samaritan city.

And one of the most prominent roles in this persecution is a young man named Saul, who we are introduced to in Chapter 7, who gives approval to the stoning of Stephen.

And Acts Chapter 9 provides a miraculous, nothing short of a simply amazing account of this person’s conversion and their encounter with Jesus Christ. And that’s what we are going to be looking at this morning.

Acts Chapter 9:1 we read this:

“Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest 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.

“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?’

“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.”

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.

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.

For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, ‘Ananias!’

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

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.

“In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.’

“Lord,” Ananias answered, ‘I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

“And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.’

“But the Lord said to Ananias, ‘Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

“I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.’

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.’

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

“At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.”

We will stop there.

There are three things I want to look at in Acts Chapter 9 that truly, simply are amazing. They are amazing hate, amazing grace, and amazing change.

Let us first take a moment to pause and reflect on who this young man is that has had this encounter on the road to Damascus.

We are first introduced to Saul at the conclusion of Acts Chapter 7 when Stephen has delivered his speech to the Sanhedrin and laid the case before them about to who Christ is and that they always resist the Holy Spirit.

As he was being stoned we are told in Acts Chapter 8:1 that while they were killing Stephen and stoning him to death, we read in Acts 8:1,

“Saul approved of their killing him.”

A couple verses later, again about Saul, it says,

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

And in Acts 9:1, what we just read:

“Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.”

He went to the high priest and asked for letters so that he could hunt them down in the city of Damascus.

In Acts 26:11 Saul, looking back on his life, makes this statement:

“Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished,” (Christians, that is) “and I tried to force them to blaspheme.”

“I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.”

Saul is chief enemy number one of the New Testament church. Saul is so zealous to destroy the church that his ambition is actually leading him to a foreign city.

He asks for letters so that he might go up to Damascus, a region now located in Syria. And it was called the Decapolis. It was one city (Damascus was) in a series of ten cities that were self-governed under the Roman Empire.

But Saul is so zealous to destroy the church that he is in fact going to travel approximately 240 kilometers so that he might discover who would identify as Christians in the synagogue in

Damascus so that he can arrest them and try and get them to blaspheme and renounce their faith in Christ.

For all intents and purposes, as we look at Acts Chapter 8 and 9, Saul is in essence a terrorist.

And terrorism is the use of violence and threats to intimidate or coerce, especially for political purposes.

And Saul's terrorism has caused him to travel a great distance to try and end the spread of the message about Jesus.

And as we look over our history, both distant history and even recent history, we see acts of terrorism in the news all over the place today.

In fact, as I was driving in I heard about a shooting in a night club. Certainly as we look over the last week, we see the low lying anger or rage that exists within our world. Sometimes it is political ideologue that is behind state-sponsored terror. Other times it is religious motivations behind terrorism.

And as we look out over history we see that to be true.

And hate can cause you to do a lot of heinous things, just as it has caused Saul to approve of the stoning of a young man, to try and destroy the church, ripping apart families to throw them in prison.

As he described it: having them punished, trying to force them to blaspheme, so obsessed with persecuting them, on his way to Damascus, breathing out murderous threats against the church.

Hate blinds you to the humanity of others. It hardens you towards God because God is love. And that is the mystery in Acts Chapter 9.

Saul believes that he is serving God's purposes. Saul was a Pharisee devout to the study of the law. So he thinks he is in fact serving God by hunting down the members who follow Jesus.

And it speaks to how anger and hatred can blind us to what God is really trying to do. And not only does that hatred and that anger exist in our world today.

I, for many years, served with Urban Promise in some difficult communities and I saw what frustration or anger or bitterness can do in our own city. And we hear of shootings in our city, we hear of robberies in our city, we hear of hate-motivated crimes that take place in our own neighborhoods.

And maybe if we are really honest this morning, this struggle with anger or bitterness or hatred exists within our own home.

Maybe you are here this morning and if you were completely honest to people around you, the very anger and frustration that is driving Saul might have a grip on your life. It might be a frustration with your workplace. It might be a frustration with where life is at, at this moment, or maybe even the person that you have married and there is an anger and a frustration that is always underneath the surface. And people walk on eggshells around you not knowing when that volcano is going to go off.

Saul is literally blinded by his hatred and is breathing out murderous threats as he takes his journey to Damascus.

And Saul, within about a kilometer of Damascus, on a mission to savagely hunt down the Christians, is met by Jesus Himself.

And this is where I am amazed by the grace of Jesus because here you have a terrorist to the early church, breathing out murderous threats. Jesus has witnessed what Saul did in Jerusalem. Jesus has watched him go from house to house and arrest His followers, arrest His church, and throw them in prison.

He has seen them punished and tried to make them blaspheme. He has witnessed Saul doing all this. And He has watched Saul for 239 kilometers, approach Damascus.

And within a mile of his destination where he is going to seek out to destroy the church, the bride of Christ; Jesus witnessing this, appears to Saul. And it stops him in his tracks.

And there are two beautiful attributes about Jesus that we discover here.

The first is this: in His exalted state, brighter than the noonday sun, He appears to Saul and it drops Saul to his knees.

In fact he is blinded by the brilliance of who Christ is.

Jesus is holy. Jesus is the light of the world. And in His resurrected state, He appears to Saul and blinds him with who He is.

And in reverence Saul falls to the ground at the sight of Jesus.

And the truth is in Scripture we are told that we will all experience this one day where we will appear before Jesus and we are told in Philippians, the second chapter, that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow in reverence to who He is, be blinded by who He is.

So first we see that Jesus is holy. But look at what Jesus does to this man who is bent on destroying His church, who is savagely hunting down the people who are following Jesus. Look at what Jesus does to this terrorist who is on the war path.

Jesus doesn't destroy him in the process of revealing Himself to him, although He could have. And He doesn't insult him; He simply asks Saul a penetrating question.

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

You know it made me realize this week as I was looking at this passage how often God meets us and disarms us with a question.

After Adam and Eve had disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden in Genesis Chapter 3, when God enters into the garden in the cool of the day, we are told that the first thing He does is ask Adam and Eve a question, “Where are you?”

As I looked at the Gospels and I watched Jesus’ ministry, one of the observations is that about 135 times in the Gospels Jesus asks people questions. And oftentimes what He was doing was it’s His way of bringing what’s on the inside of us out into the open.

And it makes me wonder what would Jesus’ question be to you today? If He was to appear to you – here we have in this account Jesus saying to Saul, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?”

It’s as though as Saul was taking the journey, breathing out murderous threats against the church, Jesus is up in heaven watching him bent on the war path. And Jesus appears to him and says to Saul, “Saul, Saul, what are you doing? Why are you doing this?”

And as I look at Jesus in the Gospels, oftentimes asking questions that intersect with the deepest motives of someone’s heart, it makes me wonder what question would He ask you today.

Maybe if you are here struggling with anger or a frustration that is in your life, might He be asking you today, “What’s going on? Why are you so angry?”

What would our answer be?

As I looked at some of the questions that Jesus asked in the Gospels, in life groups this week there might be a few questions that we explore together as a community.

Listen to some of these questions that Jesus asked people in the Gospels, and maybe He asks us as well today.

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?

Why are you so judgemental?

Why are you so afraid?

Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?

Do you believe that I am able to do this?

Why did you doubt?

Do you still not understand?

Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am?

As you study the Gospels and you look at how this holy, holy, holy God who the angels have to cover their face as they behold His glory, also comes and appears to us and asks us questions that bring what's on the inside of our hearts out into the open.

That's what He does with Saul here. It is so amazing that this terrorist isn't destroyed by Jesus. Jesus simply comes and asks him a question: "Why do you persecute Me?"

Do you notice that Jesus put it into a personal statement?

"Saul, as you have been arresting the members of the church, as you have been hunting down the body of believers, do you realize that your actions are actually a persecution against Me?"

And Saul, captivated by Jesus, who appears to Him, Saul who has fallen to his knees in reverence because of who is before him, cries out,

"Who are you, Lord?"

Isn't that fascinating?

Paul, or Saul, says, "Who are You, Lord?"

Saul is a Pharisee. He is someone who has devoted his life to the study of the God of the Old Testament. He is someone who is devout in His observation of the Old Testament law. This is someone who takes spirituality and who God is seriously. He has given his whole life to it.

But when he encounters Jesus he is so undone and he is simply left with the statement, "Who are You, Lord? I know You are the Lord, but I don't know who You are."

His whole life he sought the Lord. But he didn't know who He was until this moment. "I know You are the Lord, but I don't know You."

You know it begs us to ask the question. You might be coming to church all your life. Do you know Him? Do you know Him? Do you know Him as Lord and Savior? Not just this person that people talk about, but have you experienced Him yourself?

And Saul falls to the ground in reverence and under the weight of this personal encounter with Jesus, and asks this question. And how do you think Saul felt when this blinding light replies, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

The One who the apostles were testifying about in the city of Jerusalem and Saul heard them testifying but didn't listen despite the miracles they were seeing.

The Jesus that Stephen, as he was giving up his last breath, was testifying about, and Saul there giving approval unto his death; this very Jesus is the One appearing to Him.

“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”

The One who all the people he persecuted and tried to force to blaspheme.

Do you think Saul, when Jesus made that statement, started to have a flashback to all of the things he had done up to that moment trying to stop the spread of this Jesus thing, was thoroughly undone when Jesus made that statement?

This very One that he had been opposing is Lord of all. This very Jesus, who he was trying to stop, has now appeared before him.

Imagine how Saul feels when Jesus makes that statement.

You know Saul, who eventually becomes the Apostle Paul, writes a letter to Timothy and in 1 Timothy Chapter 1, looking back on his life at this moment, makes this statement:

“I was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man, but I was shown mercy...

“The grace of God was poured out on me abundantly.”

God meets this self-described blasphemer, persecutor, violent man, and in His encounter brings all of the anger and hatred out of him and asks him, “Why are you doing this? You think you are serving God but you are not.”

And Saul starts to discover who Jesus is. Saul, who was blinded by his hatred is now blinded by the person of Christ and led into the city.

And Acts Chapter 9:6 simply states that Jesus said,

“Get up, go into the city and you will be told what you must do.”

There's not much of an option there is it?

Saul, again looking back on his life in Acts Chapter 26, looking at this moment, provides us with a little more detail as to what Jesus said to him in this encounter.

In Acts 26:16 we see this:

“Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me.”

Verse 17:

“I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and find a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

This is amazing grace indeed. Not only is Jesus appearing to Saul and not destroying him in the process, He is also calling Saul into missionary service and giving him a vision that will subsequently change the course of the rest of his life.

Now who of us, if a terrorist was on their way to our home or to our church this morning to drag us off and arrest us, would ever think that it would be safe to interact with him? If someone was coming against us is that how we would treat them?

You look at our political landscape these days; that is not commonly how terrorists are dealt with.

And Saul is within a mile of the city and Jesus not only appears to him; He also commissions him into His service.

And it is interesting to note that what people group did the Pharisees like the least? It would have been the Gentiles.

And Jesus appears to Saul and says, “You are My chosen instrument to take this message to the Gentiles.”

This is a complete 180 folks, on so many levels. Jesus has just transformed the life of a terrorist, who was trying to stop the message of the Gospel, into a missionary who is going to reach out to a people group that he formerly despised, and will be one of the greatest missionaries in human history to point people to Jesus.

And the one who was sent to destroy the church becomes one who is one of the greatest missionaries the church has ever witnessed.

You know if you are here this morning, if there is anything you take from Acts Chapter 9, if you are wrestling with anger, if you have some deep abiding frustrations in your life and it seems to be popping up in all areas of your life; if Jesus can transform the life of a terrorist who was breathing out murderous threats against the church, He can transform your life today.

You see these aren't stories that we just share about something that Jesus did thousands of years ago. That very Jesus who appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus; He is here right now.

And if you think that you are serving Him, if you think that you are serving God by perpetrating violence against others, it is not God you are serving. My prayer is that Jesus reveals Himself to

you right now and that you get an understanding of the one true God who came in the person of Christ.

And just as Paul needed to have a personal encounter with Jesus and surrender to Him in faith, and experience His amazing grace; if you are here this morning and you wrestle in this area, He can reveal Himself to you today and deliver you from your anger and frustration because what we know of Scripture is that Saul never went back to terrorism again. He was delivered from his anger and his hatred.

And these things are still happening in our world today. Those who are opposed to Jesus, once they get a true glimpse of Him, are restored.

And we are told in Verse 9 of Chapter 9,

“For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.”

What do you think it was like for Saul those three days as he wasn't eating or drinking anything, as he was certainly praying and reflecting on what had just happened in his life?

Do you think his memory went back to the stoning of Stephen? Do you think his memory recalled the faces and maybe even the names of all the people that he had punished trying to get them to blaspheme?

There was probably a depth of repentance in Saul's life about the things he had done, but at the same time a beautiful mystery unfolding as to the grace of this God that he had just encountered on the road to Damascus.

And we see an amazing change within Saul. And the first person to be notified of the change that had taken place in Saul, in Verse 10 we are introduced to Ananias. And he is called by the Lord to go and look for Saul.

Now I just want to imagine that conversation for a moment. Please imagine if you were Ananias, living in Damascus. You know Saul is coming to hunt you down, potentially kill you or force you to blaspheme. He is going to break up your family. He is a terrorist. He is going to throw you in prison.

And imagine you are praying to God and the Lord appears to you in a vision and says, “Hey, Ananias, you know the one who is arresting people in Jerusalem?”

“Yes, Lord, You mean the one breathing out murderous threats, right? Yes, I have heard about him.”

“Good. I want you to go and look for him. He is blind right now and I have told him you are coming.”

Just to put that in modern day context for us. Al-Baghdadi is the leader of Isis, someone who has done some bad things, someone who has persecuted some people, would be described probably by most people as violent.

Imagine you're praying and God says to you, "I want you to board a plane, fly, look for al-Baghdadi (I have given you the address – he is a Judas' house on Straight Street). He is waiting for you."

"Lord, You want me to go to the person who is breathing out murderous, threats against me?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"You want me to go to the person who has come to arrest me."

"Yeah, that one."

Think of Ananias thinking of some of the teachings of the apostles where Jesus says, "I send you out like sheep among wolves. He who wants to save his life will lose it."

"Lord, I know those verses, but seriously?"

"Yeah, he's waiting for you. Go to the one who is breaking up families. Go to the one who has come to arrest you. Go to the one who is a terrorist. That's who I want you to go and talk to. He is waiting."

Who of us would blame Ananias for his apprehension?

And when you look at Saul, again from the exterior, who of us would ever imagine that a terrorist who is trying to destroy the church would be the very instrument through which the church would experience rapid growth?

God's ways are not our ways. It's a mystery who He is. And His amazing grace should captivate us all because it is simply astounding what happens in Acts Chapter 9.

And Ananias has this back and forth with the Lord but it ends abruptly in Verse 15 when He says, "Go. G-O. Get out of here and go. He is waiting for you. I have told you where he is. This man is My chosen instrument."

The very vision that God had given Saul on the road to Damascus, He also let Ananias know of His plan so that when Ananias shows up he can say, "You are going to be His chosen instrument to the Gentiles."

"Oh, really? That's what He told me as well."

He confirms it through His body.

And the one who came to persecute the church, we are told that he at once started to preach in the synagogues that Jesus was the Son of God. The one who came to persecute is now proclaiming the very One he came to persecute.

The one who had come to hunt down the Christians by the end of Chapter 9 is himself being hunted down by the Jews who reject Jesus.

And the one who had come to take prisoners in Acts Chapter 9 is now a prisoner of the greatness of who Christ is.

Acts Chapter 9 is simply amazing.

And I close with this. Do you believe Jesus is still doing this today? Do you believe that you have committed any human atrocity that creates too great a distance between you and God, for Him to satisfy?

Maybe today He is coming to you and He is saying, “Why are you doing that? What’s on the inside?”

Maybe He is inviting you into a relationship with Himself and you are the one arguing as to why you have done too many things, that that’s never possible. And He is simply saying, “Trust Me. Come to Me.”

If you are here this morning and you acknowledge that your anger or whatever issue or whatever sin it is that you have in your life, is too great for you to overcome, I’ve got good news for you.

It’s not too great for Jesus to overcome. And just as He set Saul free from the anger and hatred that was consuming him, He can set you free today.

There will be pastors up here at the front who would love to pray with you, answer any questions you have. But most importantly, there is Jesus here who wants to set you free from that frustration or that hatred.

And just as He can heal Saul, so He can heal you today.

Let’s pray.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.

Lord, we stand amazed at Your grace. We stand amazed at how You move in people’s lives and the transformation that only You can bring, how You can turn us from hatred into love, from resisting You to proclaiming You.

And Lord, thank You that as You meet us in Your holiness, in Your brilliance, in the power of who You are, You don’t obliterate us, You don’t destroy us. You bring what is on the inside out.

And I pray that right now in this room, You would do the same. And Lord, that You would set people free from whatever is holding them back from You. And reveal Yourself to us and Lord, we stand amazed at Your grace and may we experience it in fresh ways, in new ways this week.

And as we go through our week, just like Ananias, Lord, give us eyes to see who You are at work in, and that we wouldn't try and determine what You are doing but that we would just be obedient and go and speak to whoever it is You would have us go to.