

# Amazing Grace . . .

## Now I See

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Have you ever been around someone whose whole outlook on life suddenly changed? For the better? That is one of the great joys of the Faith. It's the Spirit at work.

Jim Wallis this past week wrote about realizing he had cancer completely changed his sense of in control-ness, giving him new awareness of the Spirit's presence.

Sometimes change is subtle and meaningful. One morning before going to high school, my nephew announced he was going to read the paper every day. Few in his generation do that. Who knows why he made this decision!

The result: we all noticed he started seeing life in a bigger perspective.

Most of us know people who made a sudden change, small or big. Many of us can look back over our lives and see a time that changed us. Maybe that is why the author of the Book of Acts makes a big deal out of the story of the conversion of Saul / Paul ("*Paul*" is merely a Latin form of the name "*Saul*."

It seems this story has been downplayed in recent years in most churches. We don't hear it told as often as we used to. When it is told, many Biblical scholars point to how different the Acts story's details are from Paul's own letters' versions of his dramatic change. Or, like John Dominic Crossan they think Paul's sudden change is linked with political realities of the time. Crossan suggests Paul's change came in large part because he sees the fledgling, fast-growing Christian movement as a force that would offer stronger resistance to the Roman Empire than his group of Jewish Pharisees.

Maybe we are hearing less about this story because of how hard it is to deal with some writings attributed to Paul. Letters written by him or students who signed his name contain statements about women, slaves, and other groups that are hard to explain. Perhaps, for some, this story in Acts is just another of the embarrassing tales associated with his life. After all, what kind of person would walk 200 miles to find people to persecute?

In today's language: "the guy had issues."

I happen to like this story. Maybe I'm just in a light-hearted mood, but to me it has humor. I see bits and pieces of every-day life in every phrase.

Why was Paul blinded by the light? This story tells me Paul HAS to change because the world as he had constructed it for himself falls under its own weight. The light doesn't strike him to the ground as much as the weight of his own intellectual and emotional burden became flat out too heavy to carry.

The Spirit has lots of ways to work. Maybe the Spirit was whispering in Saul's ear, "This isn't right Saul. You don't have to persecute these people.

Often the story is told in a way that makes Paul a hero. He's willing to change.

It is important to be willing to change (Greek: metanoia) when God guides us.

It's clear there is another hero in the story: Ananias. Hear the story from his point-of-view. He is not an apostle, just a humble follower of Jesus, The Way.

Ananias hears the Spirit call him, and is willing to answer. When the Spirit tells him to go see Saul, he, as any of us would, protests:

<sup>13</sup>"I have heard from many sources about Saul  
and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

The voice of the Spirit tells him "Go anyway!" He does. He heals Saul:

**We are called to be Ananias. We are called  
to be grace in action.**

Look around you. You'll see many modern-day Anaiases. This past week a 5-year-old girl named Jayden set up a stand selling pink lemonade across the street from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka. Her parents told her that church had a message of hate. She decided to raise money for love and peace. Who knows how many "Sauls" will be healed?

One of the most inspirational stories of the past 20 years is the change of life in South Africa. Released from prison, Nelson Mandela was elected president, and chose national reconciliation as his primary work.

He asked the former President de Klerk as to be his Deputy President. Mandela personally met with senior figures of the apartheid regime, emphasizing personal forgiveness and reconciliation. He said, **Courageous people do not fear forgiving, for the sake of peace.** Did you see the movie *Invictus*, which tells the story of how Mandela urged all South Africans to support the traditionally white national rugby team as South Africa hosted the 1995 Rugby World Cup?

Mandela oversaw the formation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate crimes committed under apartheid by both government and ANC, appointing Bishop Desmond Tutu as chair. The Commission granted individual amnesties in exchange for testimony of crimes committed.

This Saturday our city celebrates Juneteenth, which reminds us how far we've come in our own nation toward racial reconciliation and that we have still a long way to go.

Right now there is "metanoia," growing awareness how bullying takes place in all age groups and its destructive toll on lives. The Spirit is at work!

The story of Ananias and Saul reminds us we all are called and that the Spirit will guide us. The Spirit gives us opportunities every day to help heal divisions both little and big. We might reframe a harsh word. We might change a life.

One of the best examples of how to do this is the story of Jesus responding to a harsh question by John the Baptist. John is in prison and sends messengers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one...or shall we look for another?"

Jesus is not proprietary. He does not get huffy. Jesus is not competitive. He didn't say: *How many people did John heal by calling them viper's brood?*

Jesus does not play people off against each other. He simply says:

<sup>22</sup>"Go and tell John what you see and hear.

Those who are blind recover their sight, those who can't walk are walking,  
those with leprosy are cured, those who can't hear are hearing,  
the dead are raised to life, those who are poor have the Good News preached  
to them.

<sup>23</sup>**Happy is the one who doesn't lose faith in me."**

**We would do well to emulate Jesus' example! Stop competing.  
Stop playing people off against each other. Reframe harsh  
comments.**

This is Amazing Grace. Jesus and Ananias show us a better way:  
Don't wait for the Spirit to solve the problems of hurt and violence.  
Let the Spirit guide you to act with pure compassion.  
You have received Grace. Now BE Grace. Offer Grace. Live Grace.

Amazing Grace ...now I see.

Grace is not merely a gift to make us feel better about ourselves.  
Grace is a call to action. Now, like Ananias, we see what we are supposed  
to do.

This morning you are invited to sing this hymn as a creed:  
**I have received Grace, and I believe I am called  
to BE Grace in action.**

**FIRST SCRIPTURE ACTS 9:1-21**

read by Jay Stewart, Lance Hall

Meanwhile, Saul continued to breathe murderous threats against the disciples of Jesus.

He had gone to the high priest <sup>2</sup>to ask for letters, addressed to the synagogue in Damascus, that would authorize him to arrest and take to Jerusalem any followers of the Way he could find, both women and men.

<sup>3</sup>As he traveled along and was approaching Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed about him. <sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

<sup>5</sup>"Who are you?" Saul asked. The voice answered,

**"I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me. <sup>6</sup>Get up now and go into the city, where you will be told what to do."**

<sup>7</sup>Those traveling with him were speechless. They heard the voice, but could see no one.

<sup>8</sup>Saul got up from the ground unable to see, even though his eyes were open. They had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus.

<sup>9</sup>For three days he continued to be blind, during which time he ate and drank nothing.

<sup>10</sup>There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. Christ appeared to him in a vision, saying, "**Ananias.**" Ananias said, "Here I am."

<sup>11</sup>Christ said to him, "Go at once to Straight Street, and at the house of Judah ask for a certain Saul of Tarsus. He is there praying.

<sup>12</sup>Saul had a vision that a man named Ananias will come and lay hands on him so that he would recover his sight."

<sup>13</sup>But Ananias protested, "I have heard from many sources about Saul and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

<sup>14</sup>He is here now with authorization from the chief priests to arrest everybody who calls on your name."

<sup>15</sup>Christ said to Ananias, "Go anyway. Saul is the instrument I have chosen to bring my Name to Gentiles, to rulers, and to the people of Israel.

<sup>16</sup>I myself will show him how much he will have to suffer for my name."  
<sup>17</sup>With that Ananias left.

When he entered the house, he laid his hands on Saul, saying, "Saul, my brother, I have been sent by Jesus Christ, who appeared to you on the way here, to help you recover your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

<sup>18</sup>Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight.

He got up and was baptized, <sup>19</sup>and his strength returned after he had eaten some food.

Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days, <sup>20</sup>and soon began proclaiming in the synagogues that Jesus was the Only Begotten of God.

<sup>21</sup>Everyone who heard Saul was amazed. They said, "Isn't this the one who wiped out those in Jerusalem who called on the name of Jesus?"

Didn't Saul come here just so he could bring them in chains before the chief priests?"

**SECOND SCRIPTURE GALATIANS 2:19-20**

8:30 read by Frank Dougherty

It was through the Law that I died to the Law, to live for God. <sup>20</sup>I have been crucified with Christ, and it's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

**GOSPEL SCRIPTURE LUKE 7:18-23**

10:45 by David McCreary

John's disciples reported these things to him. John summoned two of them <sup>19</sup>and sent them to Jesus with the question, "Are you the One who is to come, or must we wait for someone else?"

<sup>20</sup>When the couriers came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptizer has sent us to you to ask,

'Are you the One who is to come, or must we wait for someone else?'

<sup>21</sup>Immediately Jesus went and healed many people of diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind.

<sup>22</sup>Then he gave the couriers this answer: "Go and tell John what you see and hear.

Those who are blind recover their sight, those who can't walk are walking, those with leprosy are cured, those who can't hear are hearing, the dead are raised to life, and those who are poor have the Good News preached to them.

**<sup>23</sup>Happy is the one who doesn't lose faith in me."**