

Unstoppable Grace

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, Book of Acts, chapter 9, starting at verse 1. But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found anyone belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them down to Jerusalem.

Now, as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him, and falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And he said, Who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing.

So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias.

[1 : 2 6] And the Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Here I am, Lord. And the Lord said to him, Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.

For behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight.

But Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.

And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name. But the Lord said to him, Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and the kings and the children of Israel.

For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. So Ananias departed and entered the house, and laying his hands on him, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

[2 : 5 4] And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and taking food, he was strengthened.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus, and immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, He is the Son of God.

And all who heard him were amazed, and said, Is this not the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name?

And has he not come here for the purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests? But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus, by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him.

[4 : 0 0] But his disciples took him by night and led him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists, but they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and were being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. This is God's word to us today.

[5 : 12] May we be blessed. Good morning, everyone. Will you pray with me as we come to God's word?

Let's pray. Father, I pray that wherever we're at, that you would meet us, even as powerfully as you met Saul that day.

Lord, I know my words can't do that, but I also know your word can. And so I pray that you would give us listening ears to your word. In Jesus' name I pray.

Amen. Well, I wonder what picture you have of a person who is just desperately lost. They're just so far away from salvation, from believing in Jesus.

What kind of person does your imagination ponder up? Is it someone who's just addicted to some substance or gambling or something and their life is spiralling down and down?

[6 : 27] Is it that sort of testimony, that kind of person you think of? When I saw the image of a missionary we keep in contact with, where you're just in Myanmar, of this hall full of people blindfolded 24-7 basically, not talking to each other, just trying to get rid of all desire.

They've never even heard of Jesus. They just look like statues just sitting there. Is that the kind of picture of someone, whoa, they are desperately lost?

Maybe you picture someone who's just obsessed with their money or their achievements or their beauty. They're just trying to prove themselves day in and day out.

Maybe that's the kind of person you picture is desperately lost. Could someone being desperately lost look more like what you and I are doing right now?

Is that possible? That what you and I, myself included, even preaching or sitting and attending church, is it possible that is close to a picture of someone really, really lost?

[8 : 00] Well, in our time in Acts, this term, we have seen Jesus' unstoppable word of salvation go out. And it's happened through such unlikely means.

It's the death of Stephen and persecution that has spread his people out into Judea and Samaria. And it's brought in the most unlikely people.

People who have been hostile to God for centuries, the Samaritans, but they're now reconciled. They're brought in. People who think, like the eunuch, they will never, ever, ever be allowed to come into God's place.

But they get that embrace of Jesus. So the most unlikely people. But if we've got all this good news, and if we've, in all this good news, we might have forgotten what's actually going on in the landscape.

There is a huge threat. And Luke reminds us of that in verse 1. And Saul is still breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

[9 : 10] He was there giving approval to Stephen's death. So when it says murder, Luke's not exaggerating. Saul is a picture of someone who is incredibly lost.

Today we're going to see just how unstoppable Jesus' grace is. I think I want to take us through.

I think we see three things in this passage. We see that his grace is so unstoppable that it can take someone who thinks they're on the right path and just doesn't want to hear a word about it and turn them into someone who willingly suffers for Jesus.

We're going to see that even with that profound change in Saul, that the church had a real hard time accepting him. The grace that they loved to have for themselves, it was really hard to accept someone else.

And I think we also see the transformation in Saul's life. When people saw him and heard him, they just couldn't deny it.

[10 : 30] He's just such a testimony to the grace of God found in Jesus that they just couldn't deny it. They didn't know what to do with it. So that's where we're headed this morning.

Saul is the picture of the most lost person you can imagine. Let's imagine Saul on the road that day. Your law, O Lord, is a lamp for my feet. That's how the Old Testament describes the law. It's a lamp for my path. I am walking the right way on the road to Damascus.

We find out when he talks about his conversion later on, it is the middle of the day. He's in the noonday sun. He thinks he's walking on the right path to God.

I know God approves of me. I am surpassing my peers in knowledge of the Scriptures. I'm surpassing my peers in obedience to the requirements of the law. And now I'm surpassing my peers in holy zeal.

[11:33] I am leading the way for the honour of your name, God. For the honour of Moses. For the honour of the temple. For the honour of your son, Israel. I'm just burning with passion.

How dare they claim that Moses pointed to this man. Have they not read Moses? Cursed is everyone who's hung on a tree. How dare they say that? How dare they claim that a temple now points to a human being?

And I hear that they're even allowing Samaritans and eunuchs to come in, as unclean as they are. They're profaning the high priest. They're profaning the sacrifices.

How we can be made right with God. How dare they claim that the Holy Spirit has come. The Spirit would never, ever lead people to worship a human being. Zeal for you consumes me.

I'm like Phineas who sees this blasphemy for what it is. I want to throw a spear through it. He is so sure he's on the right path.

[12:42] God bless my trip. Now this isn't in scripture, okay? Bless my trip. As the noonday sun lights my path, as you stoned that blasphemous Stephen, bless me.

Help me capture every man and woman to get rid of this, this heresy, those who follow the way. And in the noonday sun, it's an even greater light.

Knocks him to the ground. He thought he was righteous until he saw this light. He saw the righteous one.

He heard a voice saying, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Who are you, Lord?

I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now he was sure he was on the righteous path.

[13:59] He could see where he was going. Now he's blind. But he was sure he was leading the way and now he's got to be led by the hand. He once fasted to observe the law.

He is so struck by this experience. For three days, he's just, he's just, he's just dismantled to the core. He doesn't think of eating and drinking.

He's just so overwhelmed by who he has seen. And he's sitting in darkness. Just, he's broken down. His world is broken down. His idea of God is broken down.

His idea of himself being right with God and who he is. He's just broken down and he's sitting in darkness. And I just, the last thing that's just burned into his image is seeing Jesus.

And he's got three days. Think about that. Think about that. Think about that. Think about that. I think he experiences a kind of death for those three days.

[15:07] I want to pause here. If you think becoming a Christian is committing to a lifestyle, if you think that's what the call of Christianity is, come and live this lifestyle, I hope that idea dies.

See the conversion of Saul. it is not putting on a lifestyle. It's actually being confronted by a Jesus that actually breaks you down to the core of your being.

It's being confronted with a God who is there. He's bigger than your ideas of him. There's some things about him that you won't like because he's there.

He's bigger than your own thoughts and your own desires of what you want God to be. And Saul encountered that God. We all must encounter him. That's conversion. Encountering a Jesus who is there and he breaks you first.

I just wonder what was going through Saul's mind for those three days. Jesus really is alive.

[16:27] He's alive. He's in heaven. He can enter this world whenever he pleases as if it's his world. His glory outshines the sun.

It has blinded me. He chose to remove my sight. He's given me a vision that a man that I came to arrest and maybe beat, maybe kill is going to come and restore my sight.

He can choose when to take my sight and when to give it. And yet he died. I know he died. He was cursed on that tree. But he's vindicated.

God has vindicated him. If he's vindicated, that curse mustn't have been for him. His sin, it must have been for others.

I thought I was righteous. I thought I was doing what God wanted, but oh my goodness, I'm actually raging against the Lord and his anointed.

[17 : 39] God wanted to be corrected. Now who knows what he was thinking. I'm kind of just piecing things together from other things he's written later on.

God said, but Jesus' unstoppable grace, it first strips Paul down of his self-righteousness, of his goodness. goodness. I like John Bunyan's hymn.

John Bunyan, I don't know if you know the name, he wrote Pilgrim's Progress. And he wrote this hymn, nothing either great or small, nothing sinner, no.

Jesus did it, did it all long, long ago. doing, that doing to prove yourself, is a deadly thing.

Doing ends in death. Cast your deadly doing down, down at Jesus' feet. Stand in him, in him alone, gloriously. That's where Saul had to get to.

[18 : 51] He thought all his doing was walking in the light, but being confronted with the Jesus who was there. He had to lay that doing down and admit it's a deadly thing and look to the righteousness that outshines the noonday sun.

God's God's grace.

God's grace is really wonderful, and it can even save someone like Saul, someone as lost as him, but maybe you're listening to this and you just say this. It's too hard for me to accept that I'm too far gone. My conscience plagues me.

Doubt heals me. I want to consider what Saul had to do to receive his salvation.

What did he do to get Jesus' attention? Did he do anything to make Jesus take a step towards him?

[20 : 08] Did Jesus turn up and say, Hey, Saul, I just want to ask your permission to stop you in your tracks and reveal how glorious I am. Is that okay?

Saul did nothing. Jesus' grace is unstoppable. It is so free. There is nothing Saul did that warranted Jesus coming to save him.

It is that free. It has zero to do with Saul. I think that's a comforting thought if you're thinking grace is too much for me because it's not about me.

His grace is just so free. It's even for Saul. And that's what he says in 1 Timothy 1 verses 15 to 16.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. We need to fully accept what he's about to say. This is scripture. That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

[21 : 25] That I receive mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience, his long-suffering, as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

If you're thinking, yes, mercy is enough for Saul, but not me, you need to accept what God says.

Saul's conversion is saying, look at his perfect patience. It's even for you. It's even for me. So Saul's experience, it is unique.

Like, not even the other apostles get the risen, glorified Jesus coming to them like this, that we know of. His experience is unique, but he's given to us as an example of the grace of Jesus, of what it means to be changed by him.

So I think you can know you've encountered this Jesus, this same Jesus, if he's broken down your ideas of who you want him to be.

[22 : 39] If he's just confronted you, that he's there. You can know you've met this Jesus if he's humbled you to the dust, where you lose confidence in self and doing.

You can know you've met this Jesus if his grace is even enough for someone like Saul, even someone like me.

Because when you meet this Jesus, as Saul did, it can't help but change you. It removes self from the centre of our life and Saul becomes a willing servant who patiently suffers for Jesus' sake so that others might be saved.

Huge transformation, which we're going to come to a bit later as well. So unstoppable grace. But this unstoppable grace, it's wonderful for yourself, but it can be terribly hard to accept for others in the church.

Others who believe. I'm sure many of you have read or heard about Corrie Ten Boom. She's just so encouraging.

[24 : 01] I'm going to use her as an illustration again. I'm sure many preachers have. She lived through the Holocaust and after giving a talk on God's forgiveness in Germany in 1947.

So this is fresh, 1947. So after she gives this talk in the crowd, she says this, that's when I saw him.

It came back with a rush, the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the centre of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man.

I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsy, how thin you were.

Betsy and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland. This man had been a guard at Ravensbrook concentration camp where we were sent.

[25 : 10] and he comes up, you mentioned Ravensbrook in your talk, he was saying. I was a guard there. He did not remember me.

But since that time, he went on, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there.

And the hand came out, will you forgive me? Would you take that hand?

your sister having died there. Ananias, going back to the story here, Ananias is a follower of Jesus. He is ready to obey the Lord.

Here I am, Lord. He's ready. And Jesus says, go to Saul. He's expecting you. And he's got the guts to say, him, like, can I change your mind, please?

[26 : 22] I'm not, I've received your forgiving grace. Him? He's struggling to accept this.

And I'm not sure, I'm, I don't know whether the Lord's reply comforted him or made it worse. I'm not sure. Saul. Because not only is there no limits on his forgiveness, he says, I've chosen Saul to be my chosen instrument to bring salvation to many in my name.

I'm just putting myself in Ananias' shoe here, and maybe he's not as a proud man as I am. Him. He's your chosen instrument. So there's no limits to your forgiveness, and you've chosen him to be, to play this massive role in your plan.

To obey the Lord at this point, Ananias had to overcome his fear of Saul. Like, he's got legal authority to arrest him. He has to overcome any commitment to seeing justice done.

So he's got to overcome fear, it's got to overcome any desire for seeing justice done to him. And maybe it's got to even overcome a sense of inferiority, that Saul and not him would play a bigger part in Jesus' mission.

[27 : 50] He's got to let go of his own name, in a sense. And those in Jerusalem we hear, they had a big, they had a hard time accepting Saul as well.

And maybe it was extra personal for them because remember that great lamentation given for Stephen when he died and Saul was the one approving of his death.

Did Stephen have a family there in the church? They loved Stephen so much. It was their family members who were scattered.

out, they couldn't spend time together anymore because of this man's persecution. Could they allow him in?

Could they forgive? Let me go back to Corey. He says, as I stood there, I whose sins had every day to be forgiven and could not.

[28 : 50] Betsy had died in that place. Could he erase her slow, terrible death simply for the asking, asking of forgiveness? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

Jesus helped me, I prayed silently. And so, excuse me, woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretch out to me and as I did, an incredible thing took place.

The current started in my shoulder and raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth and love for him flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

I forgive you, brother. For a long moment, we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner.

I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. Ananias, he doesn't go begrudgingly.

[30 : 12] He lays his hand on him. I think it's a similar scene and he says, brother. He embraces Saul.

Brother. He could have just said, oh, I don't want to be here but Jesus sent me, I have to do this. There's warmth here.

Brother. When his life is threatened, twice, they don't let him get what he deserves.

They save him. Wow. They embrace Saul as their own. There might be someone, can you think of someone you just, you're struggling to forgive or you're struggling to embrace?

Maybe there's someone at church you avoid. You avoid eye contact. You avoid talking to them after the service. maybe it's a group of people from your past.

[31 : 32] I don't think we have the resources. I didn't tell the story of Corrie and she says herself, I'm not saying that we have the resources to forgive. The point is we don't. The point is his grace is sufficient for us to forgive.

He's got the power to overcome that fear and that demand for justice, that protection of our own name. We've got to love his grace even more than those things.

And there's a powerful witness, isn't it? Saul going in and out in Jerusalem. Wow. You can testify to the grace of God as an individual.

You can testify even more, I think, when this is a place of forgiveness, grace. Jesus' unstoppable grace turns Saul into a suffering servant.

It even overcomes the most difficult, perhaps the most difficult thing in the world to do, forgiving others and giving grace to others. And Saul's transformed life and his teaching is undeniable.

[32 : 48] people. Imagine that scene when he goes into the synagogue and he stands up there and his reputation, they all know him. He's come with license, with a letter to take people to prison in Jerusalem.

Later he says he had beaten many of the believers, men and women. Imagine their shock when he stands up. I don't know if there was a pulpit or not, a historian has to tell me later.

He is the son of God. Sorry. And then he's filled with the spirit so much and he increases with strength that he confounds the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving, I assume by proving from the Old Testament scriptures, that Jesus was the Christ.

They can't argue with him, with his words, and even more than that, they can't argue with him. How do I account for this change?

He embodies the gospel. He's not just saying it, he embodies it. Jesus says to Ananias that he must suffer.

[34 : 08] He must suffer for the sake of my name. I don't think that must there is for the sake of punishment.

I think it's a willing must, that grace has gripped him so much that he willingly chooses this way of suffering. He chose to enter that synagogue and proclaim Jesus boldly.

He has threats against his life and he goes to Jerusalem. This guy knows firsthand. He led the way of persecuting. He knows the kind of hatred and he does it again.

He's willingly choosing this path. I'm going to use his own words in chapter 20 when he's calling the Ephesian elders, follow my example.

That's the context here and he's saying, I'm going to Jerusalem, this is at a later point, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

[35 : 20] But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself. If only I may finish my course in the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Like in that situation a prophet comes and uses a belt to bind him and says, this is what's going to happen to the man who owns this belt. And still he goes. He's going willingly.

I'm ready to die in Jerusalem. This must suffer for my name. I don't think it's punishment. I think it's a willingness. He's seen the risen Lord.

He's seen that true glory, true righteousness is willingly choosing to suffer so that others live. That's greatness.

This grace has changed him. And those who saw him and listened to him, they couldn't deny it. What do they do with him?

[36 : 29] His words are just so reasonable. His life is even harder to explain. How do we explain a man who was so self-righteous and violent and violent, who loved his own name, now denying himself, becoming tender and putting, risking his own name so that others might live.

We can't deny him. We've got to kill him. testimony of the grace of Jesus is just so in their face.

Well, we read in verse 31, So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.

And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. This Jesus is unstoppable.

His grace is unstoppable. He uses persecution to spread his word so that others have life, Samaritans, eunuchs.

[38 : 01] And we hear now he removes the threat and gives a time of peace. And in that peace he builds up the church. You can't stop him. Persecute, spread.

Give peace, build up. How are you going to stop this, Jesus? A group of people following this way who believe that suffering for him for others' sake is greatness.

How do you stop that? They kill Jesus and he rises three days later.

They kill Stephen and I love the detail here that Saul is now speaking and disputing with the Hellenists, the ones who got Stephen in trouble in the first place.

You kill Stephen, Saul takes his place. this Jesus is the same today, yesterday, today and forever.

[39 : 14] He is gathering every lost sheep, even the most desperate runs like Saul. So I hope, I hope you can admit you're a lost sheep.

You're desperately lost. lost. Because Jesus came for people like you. I'd like to do something a bit different to finish, to try and help what we've heard today just sink in and have the Lord's Supper as our application.

We're remembering our suffering servants. the suffering servant who was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities.

As we eat and drink this, let's remember what we've seen in our passage today. Lay your deadly doing down, stand in him and him alone, gloriously complete.

God's love. He is our suffering servant and he's calling us to the honour of suffering with him so that others might share in the peace and fellowship that we have with God and one another.

[40 : 37] And may we, as we eat and drink this, may we give the grace that we so richly feast on to one another as well. So let's eat and drink.

come amen for our life, God said, pray, to many UFOPR Arch