

I Once Was Lost—Really, Truly, Profoundly Lost!

Luke 19:1–10 (NLT)

Acts 26:4–18 (CEB)

- Read Acts passage. "The Word of God for the people of God. (Thanks be to God.)"
- "Let us remember that we are a community gathered together here to see how God's Word would form us to be God's people."¹ Let us pray.

Have you ever been lost? I mean, really, truly, no-idea-where-you-are or how-to-get-where-you're-going lost? Everyone has a story about this kind of experience, I think. Pastor Jordan shared one of his with the kids a few weeks ago, and the Coleman family memory book has whole chapters dedicated to these stories. When we first moved to Ecuador, we ventured out in our Chevy Trooper to explore Guayaquil, a city of three million inhabitants. After an hour, we realized we had no idea how to navigate the maze of one-way streets and giant overpasses to get back to our neighborhood. After several attempts to get directions from passersby, we learned an important cultural lesson—always ask directions from a woman, who will either tell you what she knows or admit she doesn't have a clue. If you ask a man who doesn't know, he'll make something up in order to save face (*¡Largo, largo!*), and you'll end up even farther from home! But oh, the relief, when something familiar finally comes into view and you know that your destination is near.

But there's another kind of lost that perhaps you've also experienced. Has there ever been a time when you were absolutely, supremely confident that you knew exactly where you were and that you were on the right path to your destination—only to discover suddenly that, despite your blithe confidence, you were really, truly, profoundly lost? This happened to me several years ago (think pre-GPS), when I was headed north from Kentucky to my mom's in northeastern Ohio. I've always been a backroads kind of girl—

¹ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 159.

unless there's a time constraint, why trade picturesque small towns and beautiful country roads for the concrete sameness of interstate travel? So that day I was meandering up US-68 and US-62 towards Columbus, intending to hop over to I-71 for the rest of the journey. But I happened to see the turn-off for OH-3, and I had a "brilliant" idea! My mom lives right off of OH-3, north of Loudonville and south of Wooster. Why not get off here and just head "straight through" Columbus and keep going north?? No matter that I'd never done this before—what could go wrong, if I just stayed on that road the whole way?? The problem is—OH-3 doesn't go "straight through" Columbus—unless you know what you are doing and are paying close attention, the route just seems to disappear south of downtown and then reemerge on the north side. I found myself desperately lost in a section of town that wasn't conducive to asking directions, driving in ever-widening circles until I finally saw a sign for I-71. Interstate or not, I took it! I was as completely lost in Columbus as we'd been that day in Guayaquil—it just took me longer to realize it!

So why am I telling you stories about being lost? It's because we are beginning a new sermon series today, with a focus on GRACE, and our opening question for the series is: "What *is* grace?" As John Newton, the composer of "Amazing Grace," understood so clearly, the only place from which we can really understand grace is that place where we recognize that without Jesus, we are lost—really, truly, profoundly lost!

And so we begin this sermon series by asking, ***what is grace? First, it's something that can only be experienced initially by those who are lost.*** The two Scripture stories we read—the conversion of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 and Saul's account of his conversion in Acts 26—embody the two kinds of lostness. In fact, we might call Zack and Saul "the lost boys" of the New Testament. The only difference between them is that one of them knew quite well that he was lost; the other, equally lost, was blithely unaware of his condition.

Who were these two "lost boys"? And what might we have in common with one or both of them?

Luke introduces **Zacchaeus** as a "rich man" and "a chief tax collector." We are almost certainly meant to interpret both of those tags as negative descriptions. Jericho was a customs station for taxable goods entering Palestine from the east, so there was a lot of scope for Zack's profession. As a "chief" tax collector, he supervised a whole network of

tax collectors, earning his profits from theirs. And the *only* way for a tax collector to make a profit was to charge more tax than what he had to report to Rome. So for this man to be rich meant there was a whole lot of over-charging going on! To put it in 21st-century terms, Zack was like “a corrupt subprime mortgage agent on steroids.” So this is a rich man whose fortune was built on cheating and swindling, and everyone in town knows it. Zack probably has no illusions about what other people think about him. As singer-turned-theologian Michael Card puts it, “The people don’t despise him because they are close-minded and judgmental; they despise him because he is a slimy, good-for-nothing thief. And he knows it.”²

What about **Saul**? Now he’s a very different kind of “lost boy”! You heard Saul’s self-description in the Acts reading. Saul had every reason to think highly of himself—and the same criteria led everyone else to hold him in high esteem. He had a superior education, a great religious pedigree, great social and political connections, and a reputation for personal piety. And Saul was totally convinced that he was on a God-ordained, God-approved path.

What was the attitude of these “lost boys” towards Jesus before they met him face to face?

Zacchaeus, fully aware of his need, is eagerly seeking to see Jesus. Despite his wealth, he obviously feels a pressing emptiness in his life, and he senses that Jesus is the One who can fill it. Despite his financial security, he recognizes that his life is built on shaky ground. He comes to Jesus with expectancy and hope. In fact, he is so desperate for what Jesus might be able to give that he throws appearances to the wind and climbs a tree—*not* acceptable behavior for a businessman, respectable or otherwise! Zack is wholly focused on Jesus. There is an inescapable sense of urgency in his story, as we watch him scrambling up that tree.

Saul stands in stark contrast to Zack. Rather than seeking Jesus out with the expectation that he has something to offer, Saul is arrogantly dismissive of Jesus and sharply hostile to his followers. Saul

² Michael Card, *Luke*, 212.

is supremely confident in his own moral, spiritual, intellectual, and racial worth, sensing no lack that a crucified Nazarene preacher might fill. Unlike Zack's hopeful scramble up the tree, Saul's journey toward Damascus is not propelled by any expectation of "seeing Jesus."

So Zack and Saul come to their encounters with Jesus from very different starting points. Yet both are "lost boys," even though only one is aware of that reality. And it is their very lost-ness that positions them for a shocking encounter with grace.

And so we ask a second time, ***what is grace? Grace is being found by Jesus when you are really, truly, profoundly lost.*** The central affirmation of Jesus about his mission is found right in the Zacchaeus story: "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Interestingly, in Luke's Gospel, the whole long story of Jesus in ministry is framed by these same words spoken to two tax collectors—Levi in Luke 5, Zacchaeus in Luke 19. Finding and saving the lost, that's what Jesus is all about. That's what grace is all about.

The stories of both Zacchaeus and Saul begin with this seeking, saving grace. It is *Jesus* who initiates the finding of both these lost men—*he* sees, *he* calls, *he* invites, *he* transforms. Without Jesus' initiative to call him out of the tree, Zack remains just an anxious sinner, longing for a salvation that is out of his reach. Without Jesus' initiative that stops him in his tracks, Saul is just an arrogant, bull-headed zealot who doesn't even know he needs saving. Grace is the welcome extended by Jesus—not to those who deserve it, but to those who need it. Neither eager Zack nor unsuspecting Saul had the resources to escape from their lost-ness—the grace that found them and the grace that finds us, has its necessary starting point in the fierce love of God.

And so we ask for the third time, ***what is grace? It is invitation into newness of life, made possible by the death, and resurrection of Jesus.*** It is the invitation to exchange lost-ness for being found by Jesus, to exchange blindness for sight, to exchange emptiness for fullness. Jesus extended an invitation to Zacchaeus. "Come down off your perch in that tree, my friend! Come, have dinner with me! Come and be changed! Let me give you a new identity." Likewise, Jesus extended an invitation to Saul. "Come out of the deception of self-sufficiency and worthiness in which you are trapped. Come,

my friend, and find your true worth in relationship with me! Come and be changed! Let me give you a new identity.”

And the path into that transformation was the same for both Zacchaeus and Saul—the invitation came from Jesus and they had the choice to accept it. For all of us, for every single lost boy and girl, the path is the same, no matter our starting point. Whether we are like Zack, completely aware of our unworthiness, or whether we’re stuck like Saul in a false sense of self-sufficiency, the only path into newness of life is through Jesus. As Saul-turned-Paul would put it many years after his life-changing encounter on the road to Damascus: *“By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast”* (Eph. 2:8–9, NRSV). On another occasion, Paul referred to all the lost-and-found followers of Jesus as *“the chosen ones of God, holy and beloved”* (Col. 3:12). Theologian Marva Dawn reminds us of something important about that chosen-ness, a reminder that Zacchaeus and Paul would also give us if they were standing here: *“We are not chosen because we are great; we are not holy because we act like it; we are not beloved because we have earned it. God is the only one to call, to sanctify, to grace us.”*³

What is grace? It is a gift that can only be experienced by those who are lost—whether you know you’re lost or haven’t realized it yet. What is grace? Grace is being found by Jesus. What is grace? Grace is Jesus’ invitation to you to enter into newness of life. For those who have been found in our lost-ness, who have encountered Jesus on the road, that same grace that found us and welcomed us now invites us to be transformed. Neither Zacchaeus nor Saul remained the same after their encounter with Jesus. The corrupt, grasping tax collector became a generous, hospitable member of the community with a special compassion and care for the vulnerable. The arrogant, self-sufficient Pharisee became a humble servant of Jesus, a tireless ambassador of the good news of grace, and a willing relinquish-er of privilege and status on behalf of the church. Whatever your starting point, grace invites you today to newness and transformation.

(transition to the Table)

³ *A Royal Waste of Time*, 13.

And grace is what's embodied in the physical symbols of the Table to which Jesus invites us. The bread and the wine show us a grace that cost God everything in his quest to find and save lost boys and girls. As he sought out Zacchaeus and Saul, Jesus seeks us today, he loves us, he calls us, and he invites us to have this meal with him and be changed. Grace is present here. Grace is powerful here.

Sara Miles, a former atheist, activist, and journalist, tells of the “radical conversion” that took place in her life when, propelled by a hunger she didn't even know she had, she wandered into an Episcopal church in downtown San Francisco and was invited to share in the body and blood of Jesus. Listen to her story of being found when, like Saul, she didn't even know she was lost:

One early, cloudy morning when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans—except that up until that moment I'd led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything. Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. . . . Holy communion knocked me upside down and forced me to deal with the impossible reality of God. . . . [As we gathered around that table], someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying 'the body of Christ,' and handing me the goblet of sweet wine, saying 'the blood of Christ,' and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me.⁴

May Jesus happen to us today as we gather around his table, as we eat the bread and drink the wine that show us what grace looks like. May these physical symbols of grace become for us the body and blood of Christ, that we might be the body of Christ in a world longing to be found by grace. Jesus invites us today, as he invited Zack and Saul, “Come just as you are. Come, you lost boys and girls. Come and be found! Come and be welcomed! Come and be changed!”

Let us pray.

⁴ Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: The Spiritual Memoir of a Twenty-First-Century Christian* (NY: Ballantine, 2007), xi, xiv, 58.