

Merry Christmas!

I. Intro

- A. It's the year 1750; a young man, Captain Newton, newly appointed boss of a slave ship
  - 1. Transported African men and women to be sold into slavery.
  - 2. These people suffered and some died under the hand of Captain Newton.
- B. In 1788 a tract called "Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade" was published and became largely instrumental in the abolition of the African Slave trade in Britain.
  - 1. "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was, once, an active instrument, in a business at which my heart now shudders."
  - 2. This instrumental tract was written by the same man. Captain John Newton, now Pastor John Newton. *Same man, different person.*
- C. Reflecting on his grievous past, John Newton wrote the words to a song, now sung across the world in many languages: "Amazing grace ..."
- D. Can a person really be so evil, yet become so transformed? Does God the Father see someone who is so opposed to and far off from Him and truly have mercy in His heart for them? So much mercy that He'd offer him a home? The message of Christmas is "Yes, yes, yes!"
- E. Transition
  - 1,700 years before John Newton, there was a man named Stephen; follower of Jesus; entrusted with caring for the poor and helpless; preached about Jesus. Religious elite hated his message.

Acts 7:58

**58** Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Acts 8:1-3

*And Saul approved of his execution.*

*And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. **2** Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. **3** But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*

- F. Saul was a truly evil man. He not only went out of his way to stop the cause of Jesus, but was willing to kill the innocent and tear families apart to accomplish it.
1. Reading this story of Paul and his ransacking of homes, I couldn't help but be reminded of what happened in Germany on November 9, 1938: Kristallnacht, night of broken glass.
  2. Saul was no different. He was a full-fledged terrorist, a murderer, a destroyer of homes
  3. And here is an undeniable truth that we see from the life of Saul but is echoed in the life of every person who every lived:

## II. My sin took me away from home.

- A. Ephesians 2 describes us as "separated from God" and "without hope" because of our rebellion.
1. And the scary part is that Saul sincerely believed that he was doing God's work as he persecuted and even approved of the murder of these Jesus followers.
  2. So not only are we lost and separated from home, but we are completely blind to our lostness.
  3. But just when you think it is darkest ... Just when you lose hope that a person could ever be changed ... be careful to never, ever underestimate the love and great mercy of God!

*But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest **2** and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. **3** Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from Heaven shone around him. **4** And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" **5** And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting. **6** But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." **7** The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. **8** 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. **9** And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

***10** Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." **11** 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, **12** and he has seen in a vision a man named*

Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." **13** But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to Your saints at Jerusalem. **14** And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." **15** But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. **16** For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." **17** So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul ..."

- B. Because of the amazing grace and mercy of God, Saul-murderer, terrorist, home destroyer-was transformed into Brother Saul. Or you may know him better as the Apostle Paul, the pastor and writer of much of the New Testament.
  - 1. Same man, different person
  - 2. It would have been so easy for Paul to remain in the shame of his past, but, reflecting on his past, he writes this in 1 Timothy 1:12-17 ...

1 Timothy 1:12-17

**12** I thank Him Who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because He judged me faithful, appointing me to His service, **13** though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, **14** and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

- C. Here's what's striking to me about what Paul says...in almost every other epic turnaround story that is portrayed in our culture, the evil person who's had a heart change, in one way or another, says "Because of the damage I've done, I'm going to spend the rest of my life doing as much good as I can in the hopes that I might be able to right what I've wronged and earn acceptance."
  - 1. On the surface, this seems so noble.
  - 2. And while I would never discourage anyone from doing as much good as possible, I would ask you to consider "why" you're doing "good"? Because:

### **III. Trying to save myself by my own "goodness" is just running faster away from home.**

A. Let me explain: **Home Doodle**

- 1. Home: needing and trusting Dad
- 2. Sin: rejecting dad and trusting myself. The root of sin is SELF. Exchanging trust in God for self-sufficiency.
- 3. Saving myself: rejecting dad and trusting myself even more!

- a. If self-sufficiency is what alienated us from home in the first place, why in the world do we think continued self-sufficiency—trying to earn our way back home—will do any good? You're just running faster in the wrong direction!
  - b. Reversal of the lostness that I caused CANNOT be found in me!
  - c. I have to have outside intervention.
  - d. Have you ever noticed that when heart surgeons have heart attacks, they don't perform their own bypass surgery?
  - e. I can no more save myself by doing good than a heart attack victim can perform their own open heart surgery.
4. So where is the hope? What is the road back home? The mercy of God through Jesus.

1 Timothy 1:15-16

**15** *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, **of whom I am the foremost.** 16* *But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, **as the foremost,** Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life.*

- B. Paul, this evil man turned Apostle, sees only ONE road home.
1. A savior who would be born into this Earth to save sinners.
  2. And knowing that there would be countless people who would argue "But you don't know what I've done, the damage I've caused, the people I've hurt. I'm too far gone for God to save me", Paul makes this point very clear:
    - a. I, Paul, am the worst of sinners. No one has opposed God more than I have.
    - b. And if I can be saved, ANYONE CAN BE SAVED.
  3. How? He answers that in the very last words of v. 16: *believe in Him [Jesus!] for eternal life.*

#### **IV. God's patient mercy through Jesus carries me home.**

##### **A. Jesus is the road, Jesus is the guide, Jesus has the key to home's door.**

1. Illustration: When my sister and I were kids, our dad took us camping in the sierras. We took a walk in the woods and he wanted to teach us some woods safety.
2. As we walked, he explained to us that if we ever got separated from him in the woods, as soon as we realized we were lost, we should stop in our tracks and stay put until he found us.
3. He explained that because we wouldn't know the way back, if we tried to find our own way back, we would just get ourselves lost even worse. But he,

as an expert woodsman, would be able to trace our steps and track us down.

4. Not long after he explained this to us, he let my sister and I walk ahead of him and secretly slipped off the path and hid behind a tree.
  5. After some time, we noticed we were alone. In my heart, I panicked as I realized we were lost.
  6. We immediately began to argue about what to do. I thought we should try to go and find dad.
  7. But my older and wiser sister remembered my dad's words: "If you ever get lost, stay put. I'll come and find you."
  8. So we stayed put and soon enough dad came out from behind the tree. He came to me, knelt down at my level and said "Son, I know that was scary. But even when you're scared, you have to remember what I tell you and do it."
- B. And your Father in Heaven, here in the busyness of Christmastime is kneeling down at your level and saying the same thing to you.
1. When you realize that you're lost, stop running. Trust Me, call out to Me. I'll come to you and I'll take you home.
  2. You can't be good enough to get home and you can't earn this. All you can do is trust me and I promise, what Jesus did in dying on the cross for you is enough to bring you home.