**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS (#5)**

***Paul’s Amazing Grace***

Superman.

That’s what most of us think when the name of Paul is mentioned. We immediately envision this giant of the faith high up on a pedestal, possibly seated in a special place next to Jesus in heaven. Just as John did not feel worthy to hold Jesus sandal strap, we feel unworthy to be mentioned in the same breath with Paul. Like his namesake Saul, who was head and shoulders above all his peers, so this great apostle is seemingly God’s MVP, while we are somewhere down the page on his “Honorable Mention” list.

Just as the Witch of Endor was allowed by God to call up Samuel from the grave to talk with king Saul (I Samuel 28), what do you think Paul would tell us today if he could be called up and learned the religious world of our day had elevated him to god-like status? We don’t have to wonder what he would say for he already said it. Some in Corinth had promoted Paul to special sainthood when they said, “*I am of Paul*” (I Cor. 1:12). He was beside himself with such blasphemy! He loudly protested, “*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul*?” (I Cor. 1:13). Those rhetorical questions are meant to be answered with a resounding, “No! No! No!”

Why would Paul be so agitated and worked up into a lather over this praise and adoration? Why wouldn’t he just accept the pat on the back and the congratulatory applause of men? After all, he had worked his head off for over three decades, wearing himself out (“*I will spend and be spent*” – 2 Cor. 12:15). All he seemed to get in return for his heroic life was a long list of tortures and a thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 11-12). So why not bask in a little well-deserved glory now?

To answer those questions we need to go back to the beginning of Paul’s life that led up to his famous close encounter with Christ on that Road to Damascus. It is there his life took a 180-degree turn. If you wish to dig deep into this story I ask you to read Luke’s inspired account of that personal encounter (**Acts 9:1-22**), followed by Paul’s own first-hand account in his defense before the Jewish mob (**Acts 22:1-11**), and then before king Agrippa and governor Festus (**Acts 26:1-19**). They are as spell-binding to me today as they were when I first read them 60 years ago. I still get goose-bumps hearing this story. I hope you will too. Go ahead and read them, I’ll wait … … …

Are you back already? Good. What did you think? What was your favorite part?

Reading those accounts of his conversion leave me with a one-word summary: Grace! Paul’s personal encounter with the resurrected Christ was not meant to be an example of his special elite status before God. On the contrary, it was meant to shine forth God’s willingness to save anyone, even a “*chief of sinners*” like Saul of Tarsus, and like me. It was meant for us to read I Timothy 1:12-16 with the purpose of inserting our own name into God’s grace. Try it.

*12 And I* (Rick) *thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me* (Rick), *because He counted me* (Rick) *faithful, putting me* (Rick) *into the ministry, 13 although I* (Rick) *was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I* (Rick) *obtained mercy because I* (Rick) *did it ignorantly in unbelief. 14 And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I* (Rick) *am chief. 16 However, for this reason I* (Rick) *obtained mercy, that in me* (Rick) *first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.”*

Did you see that? Paul was only meant to be “*a* ***pattern*** *to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life*.” That means his salvation showed that God would save anyone, even a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent man like Saul. It was as if Paul was saying even Jeffrey Dahmer can even be saved.

Who was Jeffrey Dahmer? To save space I have posted at the end of this article a story written by Bobby Ross in a magazine published by Christians called *The Christian Chronicle*. I had often heard the story of this notorious serial killer for years, wondering if they were true. Dahmer had savagely murdered, butchered, then kept the body parts of his 17 victims as souvenirs, even cannibalizing some of them! The human depravity that Dahmer had sunk to is beyond description. He has gone down in history as one of the most infamous serial killers in America, rivaling Jack the Ripper, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy and other depraved murderers. Could such men as Dahmer be saved? Read the story below (\* reader discretion advised due to the gruesome details).

Paul’s face-to-face experience with Jesus on that Damascus road led to his gut-wrenching self-examination about what he had done against the Lord. He tells us very plainly what he had to deal with in his conscience during those three days of blindness and fasting at the home of Simon while waiting for Ananias to show up.

*“I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”* (Ac 26:9-12).

Is it any wonder that he must have been stunned beyond belief when Ananias knocked on the door and offered God’s forgiveness by saying, “*Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord*” (Ac 22:16). Twenty years later he was still talking about God’s grace when he told the Corinthians, “*I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain*” (I Cor. 15:9-10).

No, Paul would never in a thousand years think of himself as a spiritual Superman. He would only see himself as a horrible, despicable sinner that was mercifully saved by the amazing grace of God. Which leads this discussion to you. God doesn’t care what your past is, He is only interested in your present spiritual state, and your eternal future. If Paul, or Jeffrey Dahmer, can be saved, so can you. I’ll echo again the words of Ananias, “Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”

God loves you. Jesus died for you. Now, they are waiting for you.

-Rick

# INSIDE STORY: Did ‘jailhouse religion’ save Jeffrey Dahmer?

[*Bobby Ross Jr.*](https://christianchronicle.org/author/bobby-ross-jr/) *The Christian Chronicle August 2010*

Nearly 16 years ago (now 26 years ago – rick), one of America’s most notorious serial killers­ was attacked and killed while cleaning a prison bathroom. Few mourned the gruesome end for Jeffrey Dahmer, who strangled and dismembered 17 boys and men and cannibalized some of them. “Most people wanted Jeffrey Dahmer to fry,” Episcopal theologian Kendall Harmon said after Dahmer’s Nov. 28, 1994, slaying at a Madison, Wis., prison.  
“Now that he’s dead, they’re celebrating, and they’re absolutely sure he will burn in hell, because that’s what happens to people like him,” Harmon, whose doctoral work at Oxford University covered 20 centuries of teachings about hell, told Scripps Howard News Service religion columnist Terry Mattingly.  
  
But did Dahmer go to hell? Or is there a chance that we’ll see him — *brother* Dahmer, that is — in heaven?  
How you answer may depend on whether you believe God can work miracles in hearts and minds — even behind bars — or if you brush aside prison ministry (the subject of a [Page 1 story](http://www.christianchronicle.org/article/faith-behind-bars-ministries-shine-christs-light-inside-prison-walls) in *The Christian Chronicle’s*[August print edition](https://christianchronicle.org/issue/august-2010/)) as “jailhouse religion.”

When Dahmer died, I was a staff writer for *The Oklahoman.*I’ll never forget talking that day with Curt Booth, a member of the Crescent Church of Christ in Oklahoma, about his role in Dahmer’s conversion. “I know Jeffrey was ready,” Booth told me. “Today, all the angels in heaven are rejoicing because Jeffrey has come home.” Booth said he had no doubt about the sincerity of Dahmer’s conversion.  
  
“On the great resurrection day, I’m expecting to see him right along there with Abraham, David, Isaac, James, John and all the saints that have lived right up to the modern day,” Booth said. Booth usually ministered to inmates at prisons closer to home. But in April 1994, he caught a glimpse of Dahmer on television. Dahmer mentioned that he wished he could “find a little peace,” Booth said.  
  
The Oklahoma church member sensed what he considered the hurt in Dahmer’s voice and eyes. Booth said he thought: “I know somebody who can give you that peace. His name is Jesus Christ.” Booth sent Dahmer a Bible correspondence course teaching the steps to salvation. Dahmer mailed the answers back and thanked Booth for the course. “But I still have one problem,” Dahmer wrote. “This prison does not have a baptismal tank and Mr. Burkum the prison chaplain is not sure if he can find someone to bring a tank in and baptize me? I’ve taken all the other steps.”

Booth contacted Roy Ratcliff, minister of the Madison Church of Christ in Wisconsin. Ratcliff set up weekly Bible lessons with Dahmer and baptized him on May 10, 1994. Ratcliff later shared that Dahmer told him he had been fearful of the minister’s visit.  
  
“He dreaded that I might say, ‘No, you’re too evil. You’re too sinful. I can’t baptize someone like you,’” Ratcliff said.  
Booth said he contacted other preachers besides Ratcliff, “but they were kind of scared to go in.”  
Booth himself served more than four years in a Kansas prison for what he called “thievery.” Behind bars, he studied the Bible. However, he did not obey the Gospel until years later.  
  
After prison, he drank, abused drugs and ended up in a ditch after a drunken night hunting raccoons. When a doctor told him in 1987 that his life was almost over, he remembered all the promises he had made to God in prison and began to contemplate his eternal salvation.  
  
Booth called his nephew, a preacher named Phil Sanders, and asked what to do. Booth, his wife, Jenny, and three others studied with Sanders. All five were baptized in a pond behind Booth’s house.  
“An amazing change took place in Curt,” Sanders, a speaker for the “In Search of the Lord’s Way” television ministry in Edmond, Okla., wrote in a tribute after his uncle’s 2005 death. After his baptism, Booth led more than 1,000 inmates to Christ, including Dahmer.  
  
Upon hearing of Dahmer’s conversion, David Hartman, a member of the Wilshire Church of Christ in Oklahoma City, wrote to congratulate him. Dahmer sent Hartman $5 worth of stamps, asking him to mail him 25 copies of a Bible correspondence course for distribution to other inmates. In one letter, Dahmer mentioned being attacked in July 1994, months before he was killed.  
  
“I don’t know if you heard, but last Sunday I was attacked while in the chapel,” Dahmer wrote. “Some guy tried to cut my throat open with a razor but didn’t succeed. The razor broke, and my neck was only slightly scratched. I believe that it was only the protective grace of our Great Lord & Savior Jesus Christ that saved me from serious injury or death!”