

Arrested By God

Book of Acts

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Let's turn in our Bibles together to Acts chapter 9. We continue our study through the book of Acts, Acts chapter 9. Our text is verses 1 through 9, and I've entitled this "Arrested by God." You've often heard me testify about how I was climbing the ladder and thought I was doing work of the Lord as a missionary out in Africa, but the Lord arrested me and in my way, which I was pursuing, stopped me and turned me from it. We see that specifically here with the testimony of one Saul. People wonder why at this point he's called Saul and later Paul just like anybody's going to do, they're going to make a tradition out of that once you're converted, you need to have a Christian name. They considered Saul to be un-Christian and Paul to be Christian. Well, Saul was the Hebrew way of pronouncing his name and Paul was the Greek. Specifically as he was sent to the Gentiles to preach the gospel, that's how he was known in the Greek world. So nothing more than that, but you know his name was written down in the Lamb's book of life even before the foundation of the world; the Lord knows those who are his so we're not going to confuse the Saul and the Paul.

But here it says, "And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter," that's a strong word, slaughter. Paul later wrote about we are all as sheep that are brought in this world to die, just sheep to the slaughter. It's the word he uses here, "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord." This wasn't just against the 12, but against any who were identified as being, that word disciples means literally students. Like him going into a classroom of the school of Christ and calling out every one of them that was there identified with the Lord Jesus Christ. Such was his hatred for Christ.

And he "went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues." A lot of these, as of Acts 8:1, persecution had arisen and scattered in various parts of the world, some even into the enemy's territory there in Damascus among the Syrians. So as he journeyed, well, it says there, "that if he found any of," it says, "this way," this is in italics, it's simply of the way any that identified with Christ as the way of salvation apart from works, that they were targeted and had the legal authority of the priests. That's why he went to the high priests. Remember our Lord even before he was crucified spoke to his disciples and told them that the hour would come over in John chapter 16, that they shall put you out of the synagogues, it says in verse 2, "Yea, the time cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God's service. These

things will they do unto you because they have not known the Father nor me." Such was the hatred. What we have here is a true battle between a works religion and one of grace, against man's religion and that of Christ to the point that having found any, because they went into the synagogues, that word synagogue means the assembly places. This is where the Jews would go to hear the scriptures read and if any of them in that way were found in this way, in Christ, "whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem."

"And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly," here's the arrest, "suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven." Wherever you see that, put Christ. There shined round about him the very glory and the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And here's the response, "he fell to the earth and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" Interesting, he was pursuing those who were members of Christ's body, his church, but in so doing, Christ takes it personal because members of his body are his. So why persecutes thou me?

"And he said, Who art thou, Lord?" Very interesting question that he's asking here because he claimed to know the God of the Old Testament, the God of his fathers, claimed to be defending them, and yet, now when Christ addresses him, he has no knowledge of who he is. "Who art thou, Lord?" This was one that Saul of Tarsus, Paul, would have been part of the council that condemned him at Jerusalem and yet, it would take spiritual eyes to see and to acknowledge that this was that one whom you by wicked hands have taken and crucified.

The question is brought forth from his heart and who do you suppose is drawing this question out? It's the Lord. He will be persecuted because he says that. The Lord said, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." Paul would have been of those that spread the rumor that the disciples had come and stolen the body of Christ, that he didn't really rise from the grave, and now to keep this from going any further, he was all about killing everyone that still believed it, Christ and him crucified and risen again. So when he hears this word, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," this is how the Lord brings home to the heart of one of his own, even though Saul at this time would have been the last one to think in any way that when Christ died, he died for him, and yet Christ did. It didn't take Saul acknowledging it first. No, it was a revelation unto him.

"I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," and he said, "it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." That word pricks there is a goad. If you like to watch bull riding, you ever wonder why that bull comes flying out of that gate like he does, it's because they give him a little jolt. That's the word that's used here, a goad. It shows that this was not even the beginnings of the Spirit's work in him because at some point, the Spirit had already began to prick his conscience. A lot of people like to argue, well, you're dead up to a certain point and all of a sudden now you're converted. No, there is the workings of the Spirit even in ways those sinners that Christ has redeemed, they kick against the pricks of the Spirit. There's clear evidence in the word that this is the Christ and yet this rebellious

heart refuses to bow up to a point and that's where we see here in the work of salvation and conversion that none can continue to kick against these goals.

I think specifically about the testimony of Stephen. Paul heard his message because you remember when they went to stone Stephen, they laid it says in Acts 7:58, they laid their clothes at a young man's feet whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen calling upon God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Paul would have been a witness to all of this, heard it, and even then, we know not the secret workings of the Spirit in his heart but all the while, the more the conscience and heart of Saul was pricked by the Spirit, until it pleased God to bring him completely down, it only angered him further. It only made him want to kill every last Christian naming the name of Christ.

But here now, in verse 6, see when it's God's work, there's no resistance. We believe in what they call irresistible grace. It doesn't mean we don't resist, but we can't continually resist to his grace. He makes his Son to be irresistible by his grace. That's what we see here. Verse 6, "he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" This is the cry of one who has been completely stripped of any hope. He's not asking to be given some work to do, but it's a cry of despair, "What wilt thou have me to do?" What can be done would be another way of putting it.

"And the Lord said unto him," you notice the Lord didn't give him immediate peace and assurance like preachers try to do with people today. Well, if you just say this prayer, you can be as sure of heaven as your own name. He's going to cause Saul to languish under his heavy hand for some time, at least three days, because it says here, "Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do." I've used this example many times when there have been people under a certain duress about their own souls that have come privately to talk to me and say, "What can I do?" What it really means is what can you do for me? And my question is simply, "Well, why do you feel you're in this state of mind and heart right now?" Well, I believe it's the Lord. Well then, go your way. The Lord will, if it's the Lord, he'll direct you, he'll cause you to see Christ, but anything I do can't help you. It's not what people want to hear. They want to be able to go out and say, "Well, the pastor prayed for me, and I feel better about myself now." That's one of the worst things you can do.

Here the Lord was simply commending him, shutting him up to no man. When Robert was reading there in Galatians 1, that's the full testimony of Paul, Saul, that he didn't learn this gospel from any man but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. What the Lord was doing was shutting Paul up to himself. You know, that's the best place to be. Someone has said that there's two blessed positions in the life of a sinner, one is to be lost, in other words, completely undone, unable to find your way back, which is exactly where Christ had Saul right now. You say, well, what's the second? It's to be found, it's that the Lord when he brings you to this point does not leave you alone and he will speak that word of salvation to you. It's completely out of man's hands. The Lord did not consider anything that Saul was by degree, even though he had sat all those years at the feet of Gamaliel. None of that mattered. He was a sinner and had God purposed to leave him in the way he

was going, he would have certainly cast headlong into condemnation, eternal condemnation.

You can see here in verse 7, "the men which journeyed with him stood speechless." There's no way to explain that now this man who was leading them with all the strength and power that he thought he had now to be is nothing. It says, "hearing a voice, but seeing no man." Now some people think that there's a little contradiction, but there's not. If you look over in Acts chapter 22, when Paul was giving his testimony before this mob that would have taken him and stoned him because of the gospel of Christ that he proclaimed but he raised his hand and silenced them and began to speak to them in their own tongue, Hebrew tongue. When they heard him speaking in Hebrew, they got quiet and listened. And Paul, you can see in Acts 22:3, speaks of who he was as a religious, "brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day." And notice, "I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished. And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me." This was a light that was brighter than the sun. "And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And I answered, Who art thou, Lord?" Now here Luke by the Spirit adds Jesus of Nazareth, but it still was the same thing. To say Jesus was to speak of that one that was hated, that word they hated. "And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest." Now here's the part I want you to see, "they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid," God says, "they heard not the voice of him that spake to me."

Some will say, "Well, aha, there's contradiction here in scripture because over here in Acts 9 it says hearing a voice but seeing no man. So how do you reconcile those two because we know there's no contradiction in scripture?" What they heard was a sound. I liken it to when I preach the gospel people are hearing a voice through the preaching of the gospel, that's the general call of the gospel, but unless the Spirit of God causes any sinner to hear the voice of him that speaks, that's talking about a spiritual hearing. They heard a noise as in a voice, but it wasn't addressed to them. As far as we know from that point forward, none of those that accompanied Saul were the object of God's revelation, it was to this one out of the middle of them all. That's why Paul says, "They heard not the voice of him that spake to me. They heard not his voice as I heard it, or as any hear it, that are the Lord's."

I can't tell you how many times you get into these religious conversations and everybody has given their testimony about how they came to the Lord, and when it comes around to you and you start talking exactly as Paul here saw, declared that I didn't learn it from man, but I learned it from Christ, his word, and him opening up my heart, causing me to see that the wretched way in which I was was a false way, that I was trusting in my own righteousness, not that of Christ, that he came and earned and established from God and

put to my account even before I was born. It's not based upon my decision. We don't find here anywhere where Saul's being asked to make any kind of decision. He's being acted upon.

So in this case, those that stood with him stood speechless. That's really what happens with most people you talk to, they've got like the deer in the headlight look. Explain to them, endeavor to talk to them about the work of grace in hearts, they can't comprehend it. They hear a voice, but notice, seeing no man. To hear the voice of God by grace is to see the man, the one who came, lived, died, rose again, and is sitting on high. That's who Saul saw whereas these others, they didn't because this revelation was to him. It was for him. That's why you can have two people sitting there listening to the exact same gospel message and one gets up thinking, "I'm glad that's over. I didn't get anything out of that." And another can hardly get up, their heart is bowed before the Lord in wonderment that God should be merciful to a sinner such as they are. You say what makes the difference, it's the same message that was declared? Well, one the Lord opened the heart, the other he left to themselves.

It says, and so "Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man." In other words, he was blind. His eyes were open, but God had struck him with blindness. This is the part where I told you that when the Lord does his work, it's not all this whoop-de-doo and I've seen the light type of profession that you see in men here. It wasn't that profession of joy and peace and believing that you hear people talking about today in their profession, a lot of distress and sorrow of heart and conscience. Here we have the Lord by his Spirit with Saul in his grasp engaging Saul's soul in eternal matters and it wasn't something that was necessarily at this point joyous for him, on him weighing where he had been, where he was, where he was going.

This was the Lord, "he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus," rode out of Jerusalem on his high horse and now he's got men leading him in like a blind man. Then it says, "he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink." Such was the heavy hand of the Lord upon his heart that there wasn't even any appetite left. Shut up to God. We have a great example here of the truth that salvation's of the Lord. It's not dependent upon man. In fact, later he doesn't send Ananias to tell Saul, "Well now, Saul, here's some things I want you to do and if you agree, then I can give you sight back." No. He sent him to declare unto him the very Christ that up to that point he had been denouncing.

But here's the irony of all of this, that here's this man, Saul, headed to arrest any who named the name of Christ, not just any Christ, but that Jesus of Nazareth, that hated name, who in turn is arrested himself by the very God he's fighting. I can't tell you how many people write and tell me that they have a loved one or somebody that's in just abject rebellion against God and they're praying for him, "What can we do?" The best thing you'd probably do is just be quiet before the Lord. It's not gonna be by the will of man or the flesh or of blood but of God. If God's going to do a work in the heart of any soul, it's going to be on his terms, not ours, not theirs.

And this is what Paul gave as his testimony. We read already Galatians 1. Paul, whenever given the opportunity to testify, kept coming back to how it was that God was merciful and gracious to him, the sinner, through the Lord Jesus Christ. If he spoke at all of his pre-life up to this point, it was only by way of denouncing it as dung. There's some people you listen to, they they go all the way back from the time they were born and try to show how they've always been a Christian. It's like one old preacher told a lady after meeting one time when he asked the lady, he said, "Well, how long have you been a Christian?" The lady said, "Well, I've been a Christian all my life." And the preacher said, "Well, that's too long." You don't just morph into this faith. It's just like we have before Christ and after Christ. BC and AD, year of our Lord, there is a time where if you're the Lord, you can look and see, "I was blind but now I see. I was lost but now I'm found." If there's not that distinct divide between what I was and who I am, then you're still in darkness. I know people get upset, they say, "Now you're judging people's..." No, the word is.

I used to think that Paul's experience of conversion here was extraordinary, unusual, until it pleased God to arrest me and now when I read it, I can't read it but I'm thinking this is exactly how God mercifully dealt with this wretched sinner standing before you. And so every time given the opportunity, he could but testify of the grace of God. We heard it in Galatians 1 when Robert was reading it, but over here in 1 Timothy chapter 1, and verses 13 through 16, notice in verse 12, he said, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord." There was a time when he would have just said generically, "I thank Jehovah God and my fathers." But specifically here, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord," what a change, "who hath enabled me." So even here, I didn't sit down and learn this through study but he, Christ Jesus, enabled me. He that arrested me on the road to Damascus enabled me for that he counted me faithful.

He counted me as one of those who Christ had paid their debt, and therefore, you know when it says faithful, I read that in a sense of full of faith. He gave me the faith that I might be full of Christ, "putting me into the ministry." There's that word again that I mentioned before, it's the word deacon. Today they have titles for deacons and elders. A deacon, just like Paul here, was one in whom Christ was revealed and went forth to declare him and to preach him. But he owns it. He says in verse 13, "Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor." People want to know where I went to school, what kind of education I got. I still get people writing to me and saying, "Where can I go to get my degree to be a preacher?" You can't go anywhere. That's not how preachers of Christ are degreed. All the years I spent in preacher school or out at the highest level, I was a blasphemer. I was a persecutor. I had an acquaintance of mine that out of the blue this past week went out here to the box and there's a big old package in the box and I saw it was from him and I opened it up and here's a big old thick Master's thesis degree that he found that had been put in the library of the very congregation that booted me out. In fact, he was one that also voted against me. Without any comment, here it is, sitting there, Master's Thesis and I started reading through it, and I thought to myself, what a blasphemer, what a persecutor. With all that degree, with that committee of men sitting there and questioning you just so you could get a degree, but counting it as dung. I thank the Lord. I didn't know Christ at that time. I wasn't, there wasn't anybody preaching him

to me. We were studying the scriptures, the Hebrew and the Greek, and you could see the notations in Hebrew and Greek all the way through it, but it's dung. Why? For the excellency of the knowledge of Christ.

That's what Paul says here, "Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious." I know a lot of people that don't want to own that. "Well, I'm not as bad as others." Well, then you haven't seen yourself as you are. I don't care if you take dung and put it under a microscope and how you divide it, it's still dung. That's what we are sinners.

So he says, here's the key, "I obtained mercy." He didn't earn it. He didn't merit it. "I obtained," which means God was merciful. Now when he says "because I did it ignorantly," he's not just pleading ignorance here because if he's been arrested and now, "Well, I didn't know," look at what he says, "in unbelief," anti-faith is what that word is, anti-Christ. I hear very few today that profess to be Christians that would ever confess that they were anti-Christ. "Oh, no, I grew up in church. I went to Sunday school. I learned the Bible. Eventually, I got to the point where I realized I needed to give my life to Jesus." I, I, I. All of that's the voice of unbelief. There's no testifying of what they are before a holy and just God as being a blasphemer, a persecutor, injurious.

It says in verse 14, "the grace of our Lord [Jesus] was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus." In other words, he gave me the faith and he caused me to love him, else I never would. That's why he concludes there with verse 15, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation." It's worthy of all acceptation. Not all will hear it unless the Lord gives them ears to hear it, "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," and notice he doesn't say, "of whom I was chief." He wrote this to Timothy toward the end of his ministry when he was in prison. He says, "of whom I am chief." He couldn't stop acknowledging what he was before God. Such is the work of the Spirit of God, calling himself to be nothing but Christ to be all.

That's a testimony of the work of the Spirit of grace in the heart and such was the change that took place by God's doing not Saul's. So we'll come back here to our text in Acts 9:1-9 to sum this up. I put first of all in verses 1 and 2, he was arrested from a way of rebellion and antagonism to Christ and his church, arrested from that rebellious way. There was no going back. We don't find anywhere written where once Saul was given back his sight and given his commission to go now and preach Christ to the nations, that he ever said, "Well, let me go back and shore up some things first of all in Jerusalem so I can say proper goodbyes." No, such was the arrest, the separation, there was no going back. We've seen cases of this where somebody walks into a courtroom waiting for the sentence, waiting to hear the verdict, and when they walk in, maybe they, someone had paid their bond and they're coming from home, and they go into the courtroom, and when they sit down there, but if that verdict is guilty, that person is not given the opportunity to go back home and clean up and get things ready, and then... No, there's an immediate separation. That arrest, that conviction, that sentence is final coming from the court. That's the way it is here when God is pleased to do a work to separate out any one of his own. There's no going back. There's no trying to build a bridge so that these can

understand and somehow we can still get along. The separation was complete. In fact, from this point forward, the very ones that Saul represented in that religion became his worst enemies now to the point where they pursued him all the way to death, requiring the Roman government to execute him. Why? Because he preached the hope of Israel, which was none other than this Jesus of Nazareth. I'll tell you, when the Lord opens your heart or mind to the Christ of scripture, and we begin to declare him and his distinction from what men profess. You see, these Jews even as Paul, looked for a Messiah, it just wasn't this one. They still are today. They completely denounced Jesus of Nazareth as being the Messiah, but they're still looking for one that's going to rise up and give them prominence. They look blindly.

Notice when the Lord did give Saul his strength and sight back, and we're going to see this more next time in verse 19 of Acts 9, "when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus." The very ones that he had their names written with certificates of authority to drag back to Jerusalem bound as wicked people. Where do we find him? Eating and drinking with them whose names were written in the Lamb's book of life. Some might see that as an irony. It's not. It's a work of salvation.

You notice verse 20. Let's say straightway he returned to renew fellowship with his former colleagues. No, "straightway he preached to Christ in the synagogue, that he is the Son of God." Everybody marveled. All that heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests? But Saul increased the more in strength." Who was strengthening him? That was the very one who called him. "And confounded the Jews." They were confounded. "How could this be that this one who was the persecutor now has become the proclaimer?" "And found the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ."

So this arrest by God was an arrest from a way of rebellion and antagonism for Christ and his church. Oh, to be arrested from that way, I'm so thankful. Having you drive by one of these buildings, and you see the parking lot packed full, and you see some of the slogans on these marquees that they put there and you shake your head, just thank God that he delivered you, otherwise you'd be the first one pulling in that parking lot, I guarantee it. Thank God for a place that the Lord's given us here, a synagogue of Christ, not of men, but an assembly. That's what this is. This is an assembly house, a meeting house for us to hear of this Christ.

Arrested from that way but secondly, arrested on the way. A little play on words here, but one that helps us see the whole story. Arrested from the false way, arrested on the way, but that according to God's will. It says there in verse 3, as he journeyed, his full intent was to arrive and to accomplish what he purposed to do. If you want a good example of how God rules and overrules, that he's not sitting there waiting for man to make his decision or for him to be able to save him, we don't see any of that in scripture. As he journeyed, as I said, this could be any one of our testimonies, "I was in this way that I thought to be the good way, and then suddenly there shined round about him a light from

heaven." That's the revelation of Christ in the heart. It causes one to see, whether others see or not. The only one that this struck was Saul.

All the others went their way, but arrested on the way, but that according to God's will or in Galatians 1 that Robert read for us just a little earlier, this is how Paul testified and gave the glory. He's not giving glory to himself. Verse 1 where he says, "an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead)." I can tell you the name of the man that I heard preaching the first time the Lord opened my ears, but I'll be the first to tell you it wasn't that man that opened my ears. The Lord purposed that he point me to the word. I've often mentioned Isaiah 6 as being the message that was preached. I can't tell you a thing the man said. In fact, years later I got a hold of a copy of the message and I went back and listened to it and tried to figure out what was it exactly that the Lord may have used to turn on the light, and what a foolish venture that was. I came away hearing nothing other than the word and that's when the Lord brought it onto my heart. It's not him, it's the word, the light of his word shining in the heart.

You can see the word that he declared in verse 4, "Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world." There's the arrest from the evil way, according to what? "The will of God and our Father." And further on down, verse 11, "I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man." I didn't hear it from man. I didn't receive it from man as he says there in verse 12. I don't preach up man and declare, "For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, And profited in the Jews' religion." People profit in false religion today. There's money in it. There's glory in it. He said, "above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers." He doesn't say zealous of Christ. "But when it pleased God," there's the question right there, when will a man see Christ and hear him, be brought low at his feet? When it pleases God. That wouldn't be me doing it.

"When it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb." He's acknowledging that all this time he was in ignorance, yet according to God's eternal purpose, he was already set apart, to this end, from his mother's womb, he says, "called me by his grace." Verse 16, there's an important word in here, "To reveal his Son," not just to me. A lot of people, that's the way they say, "Well, I had Christ revealed to me." Really? How about in me? Christ in you the hope of glory. You can take a blind man and turn the brightest lights on in his presence, but they're not gonna see anything. They might feel a little warmth but they're not gonna see unless they're given eyes to see.

That's what Paul says here, "To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen," the nations. Now notice, "immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood:." One of the worst things you can hear a person say is, "Well, I hear what you're saying. Let me go talk to my pastor." You're in trouble. Right there, your mind is trying to get some kind of human comfort but you can't. It's from the Lord.

But in all this, Paul is arrested on the way according to God's way. The final point I bring out is the rest of this verse, that he was arrested in the way. That way, though it was his own pursuit in which he was going, yet he couldn't deviate right or left from what God purposed to be accomplished. And I'm thankful it's that way. I'm thankful that it's his will that determines my will. He makes me willing against my will in the day of his power. That's the way it's written there in Psalm 1, makes his people willing in the day of his power. Thankfully it's so because left to ourselves, we never would stop and even consider these things. Thank God that he arrests sinners in a way to draw them to Christ.