

## EXPOSITION OF ACTS

### Message #20

### Acts 9:1-9

One of the most glorious and God exalting doctrines in the Bible is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. However, to some, one of the most perplexing doctrines pertaining to the sovereignty of God is the doctrine of election. Many people do not like the doctrine of election, but when you systematically study the Scriptures, you cannot deny the doctrine of election.

- 1) You cannot deny that God chooses some nations to have special privileges that other nations do not have. Israel has been chosen by God to have a special relationship with Him. The United States has been a blessed chosen nation and we have had the blessings of God on us far more than a third world country and you cannot deny that.
- 2) You cannot deny that God decides that some individuals have one gift and others have another gift. God chooses it, God decides it.
- 3) You also cannot deny that God chooses to allow certain unsaved individuals to have more external things than other unsaved individuals. God ordains political leaders and gives them their position and most do not know Him or honor Him; yet they are there by His choice (Romans 13:1).
- 4) You cannot deny that God chooses in this text to elect one to salvation who didn't want to be saved.

God literally chooses individual people to be saved who do not even seek Him. He tracks them down and He convicts them, and by His amazing grace He saves them. He does it all, just as Scripture says "salvation is of the LORD." When we come to **Acts 9**, we come to a chapter that clearly shows God's sovereignty in an amazing story of His election of one individual.

Now you cannot deny this is a text about election because the very word "election" shows up in this context. God says concerning Saul that "he is a **chosen** instrument of Mine" (Acts 9:15), meaning that this is a person who has been elected, selected, and chosen by God (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 140). As John Stott, of London, England said, Saul did not decide to choose Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ decided to choose Saul (*The Message of Acts*, p. 168).

If ever you want to see a classic story of God's election in salvation it is right here. **What you will certainly see is that saving elective grace is irresistible grace. Elective grace does not force faith in Jesus Christ; it actually creates faith in Jesus Christ.** Apart from God's elective grace there is no salvific faith in Jesus Christ.

As we come to **Acts 9**, we come to the full and dramatic account and story of a conversion of a man who will literally change the world. The story of Saul's election and salvation is an inspired story of God. This conversion is so critical that God will see to it that there are three full accounts in the Book of Acts (Acts 9:1-31; Acts 22:1-21; Acts 26:1-23), and three more accounts in Paul's own Epistles (I Cor. 5:8-10; Gal. 1:13-17; Phil. 3:4-11). **The reason why God repeats this conversion story so many times is because this is a critical event in the history of the Church. The expansion of Christianity to the Roman Empire and to the entire Gentile world, and the complete doctrinal development of God's Grace Gospel and God's Grace Doctrines will come through this amazing election and conversion of Saul of Tarsus.**

What makes this account in Acts even more riveting is that it is written by Luke, who was a very close friend of the one he writes about. Luke gives us a careful objective historical account of exactly what happened. What we clearly see in these verses is this:

**GOD SOVEREIGNLY ELECTED SAUL AND SAVED SAUL BY HIS GRACE WHEN SAUL WAS NOT EVEN LOOKING TO BE SAVED, AND WAS LOOKING TO DESTROY CHRISTIANITY AND ANYTHING CONNECTED TO JESUS CHRIST.**

It is no wonder that in many of his writings when Paul discusses salvation, Paul will stress over and over again the doctrine of the sovereignty of God and not the free will of man. Paul will fully develop a doctrine that says we are saved by God's Grace, by God's will, by God's election (Rom. 9; I Cor. 1:1; II Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1,4-5; 2:4-5; Col. 1:1). He personally experienced that in his own life and he never forgot this.

Now in this amazing story there are seven inspired facts God reveals to us:

**INSPIRED FACT #1 - Saul was out to threaten and kill Christians . 9:1a**

These opening words mean that Saul was not just threatening Christians, he was executing them. We often hear of the horrors of Anti-Semitism in which Jewish people are hated, mistreated and killed simply because they are Jewish. Well, there is a term called Anti-Christianism; when some Jews hated Biblical Christianity and they hounded, mistreated, and killed Christians simply because they believed in Jesus Christ. The one leading the charge was Saul.

Saul was right there when Stephen was being stoned and he was cheering them on in full support. Stephen's presentation of grace concerning Jesus Christ didn't put a dent in Saul's theology. Since the death of Stephen, Saul had not changed his mental perspective of Christianity in any way. In fact, he intensified his hatred.

**Saul was a ferocious enemy of the cross and a ferocious enemy of Jesus Christ.** He saw Christianity as a cult that exalted Jesus much like Islam exalts Mohammed or Mormonism exalts Joseph Smith. The big difference of course was that Christianity had a risen Savior and no cult has that. In Saul's day the Sanhedrin had the power, and they gave authorization to Saul to literally destroy and kill those that were false. **Saul was the last man on this earth that you would ever expect would believe on Jesus Christ and be saved; He was Christ's enemy.**

But as S. Lewis Johnson said, there are two ways God can deal with an enemy: 1) God can eliminate them like Stalin did Trotsky; 2) God can save them. That is precisely what God will do in this case with Saul (*Acts* 9:1-9, p. 3).

**INSPIRED FACT #2 - Saul received legal documents enabling him to arrest men and women who believed in Jesus Christ. 9:1b-2**

Jesus was the one who first called Himself "the way" in John 14:6 in which He taught that belief in Him was the only way to a relationship with God. This title contains an article "the way" (της οδου), referring to something very specific. This title is used often in the Book of Acts in reference to Jesus Christ and in reference to those who believed in Him (*Acts* 16:17; 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

It was an early title given to first century Grace Age Christianity because the title emphasized the true teaching. The title “the way” stresses the truth. **The stress of this title “the way” is that Jesus Christ is the only way to have your sins forgiven, and the only way to have a relationship with God that will give you the righteousness necessary for heaven. The only way to God is faith alone in Christ alone.**

The way to God is not law, not works, not merit, not human effort, not religion, not catechism, not baptism, not emotionalism, not mysticism. The only way to a relationship with the Holy God is by faith in Jesus Christ. Faith plus nothing is exactly what that early church taught.

Saul was on a mission to track down and to round up any man or woman who believed that and taught that. He was out to put a stop to all of this talk about the grace of God and Jesus Christ being the only way.

Saul wanted “extradition papers” that would enable him to legally arrest and bind believers, and haul them back to Jerusalem for believing and teaching such a doctrine. So he went to the high priest to get them. The Sanhedrin was the high court power of the land and the high priest had complete authority and he gave Saul the proper legal papers to make his arrests. G. Campbell Morgan said that when he got to heaven he would like to know what actually happened to those papers Saul was carrying. He sure didn’t end up using them.

Before we move on, I want to be very clear on what this teaching says. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to God. Biblical Christianity is “the” way, not “a” way. This is not arrogance; this is absolute truth. There is one exclusive way to having a relationship with the God of Creation and the God of the Bible, and that one exclusive way is through faith in Jesus Christ.

**INSPIRED FACT #3** - Saul was on his way to Damascus from Jerusalem. **9:3a**

Damascus, the ancient capital of Syria, is one of the oldest cities in the world. It was located about 150-160 miles NE of Jerusalem. If one travels twenty-five to thirty miles a day, the trip would take about six days. In Damascus were several Jewish synagogues and apparently many Christians were known to live there. There was and still is a gate which led outside of Jerusalem called the “Damascus Gate.” If you leave Jerusalem through this gate you must travel on a road that would actually walk you right by Golgotha, where Jesus Christ had been crucified. We cannot help but wonder if Saul glanced east from that road to the very spot where Jesus had been crucified and said “I’ll put a stop to any who are believing in You.” What he didn’t know is that God was about to stop him.

**INSPIRED FACT #4** - Saul is stopped by a flashing light from heaven. **9:3b**

We learn from Acts 22:6 that the light was flashing all around Saul, and it was happening at mid-day noon and we learn from Acts 26:13 that this light was brighter than the sun. Now typically at high noon the sun is bright, but this light that surrounded Saul was brighter than anything he had ever seen. This light, as Horatio Hackett, the Biblical scholar of the 1800s said, “exceeded the splendor of the noon-day sun” (*Commentary on Acts*, p. 118).

**INSPIRED FACT #5** - Saul falls to the ground, hears a voice from heaven, and has a conversation with the Person speaking. **9:4-6**

**The words “heard” (ηκουσεν) and “voice” (φωνην) indicates that this was a real voice with real speech.** This was no dream or hallucination or epileptic seizure, this was very real, articulated speech coming from a real Person.

**(Verbal Message #1)** - The voice repeats Saul’s name twice and asks why he is persecuting Him. **9:4**

There are only about fifteen times in the Bible where someone’s name is repeated twice. Thomas Walker says that whenever Luke uses a double repetition of names in the speech of Jesus Christ it seems to always imply a rebuke or warning; Martha, Martha (Lk. 10:41); Jerusalem, Jerusalem (Lk. 13:34); Simon, Simon (Lk. 22:31); (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 237). In each instance there is a very personal, pastoral, and emotional appeal. By repeating Saul’s name twice this is a personal, pastoral, and emotional rebuke that will actually be used by God to save him.

Now of course Saul is persecuting believers in Christ. He is not Jesus Christ Himself, because Jesus Christ is at the right hand of God. But a deep theology is being formed here about the Church and that is the Church is the Body of Jesus Christ and if you hurt one of His body parts, you hurt Him. Those who do hurtful things to God’s people will answer to Jesus Christ.

**(Verbal Message #2)** - The voice identifies Himself as being Jesus. **9:5**

Saul asks who is the one speaking to him. He must have been shocked to hear the words “I am Jesus.” The words “I am Jesus” (Εγώ ειμι Ιησους) is the “I AM” formula that indicates Jesus is God. He is the great I AM.

Think of what this means to Saul at this moment. Think of the ramifications of what is going through Saul’s mind as he lays there with his face in the dirt:

- 1) Jesus Christ is alive.
- 2) Jesus Christ is God.
- 3) I have been completely wrong in my theology and belief.
- 4) I am persecuting God’s real family who knows the truth and believe the truth.

There is nothing more chilling in life than what happens to Saul right here. There is nothing more humbling than to realize that everything you have believed and worked for your whole life means nothing and was all wrong. This is especially true in religion. That is exactly the way Paul sees it as he lies there in the dirt. In fact, he would say in Philippians 3 that everything about his former religious beliefs he counted as nothing and dung, except for Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:4-8).

There will be many who will admit that one day when they are about to go into eternity. They will probably be lying in a hospital bed and all of a sudden it will dawn on them I spent my whole life striving for power or working for wealth or trying to accumulate stuff and I have been all wrong. I left out Jesus Christ. I didn't go to a church to be carefully taught God's Word. I never faced my sin. I didn't live sacrificially for the Lord. I didn't deny myself anything. I have been all wrong in everything.

**(Verbal Message #3)** - The voice commands Saul to rise, to go into Damascus and wait for future instructions. **9:6**

**There is a lesson to see here, and that is God does not give us His total plan for our lives all at once.** As we obey God by following His Word, He will lead us to future ministries and opportunities. The further instructions Saul would receive would be an amazing process:

Jesus Christ would actually appear to Saul at least four times:

- 1) On the Road to Damascus - **Acts 9:3-6**
- 2) In the desert of Arabia - Acts 20:24; 26:16; Gal. 1:12-17
- 3) In the temple of Jerusalem - Acts 22:17-21; 9:26-30; Gal. 1:18
- 4) In the prison of the Sanhedrin - Acts 23:11

**INSPIRED FACT #6** - Saul's traveling companions heard the voice but did not see Jesus. **9:7**

Dr. Luke is showing that there were other eye and ear witnesses to all of this. The men with Saul saw the light and they heard the voice, but they could not understand what Jesus Christ was actually saying to Saul (Acts 22:9), and they did not see Jesus Christ.

This would prevent someone from saying Saul has lost his mind and made this up. They could not say that this was some emotional trauma that caused him to invent some fictitious story. Those other companions with Saul were there and they saw light and they heard the voice sound, but they could not understand the words. Why? God was not electing them; He was electing Saul.

When God elects to save someone at church, they come to church see the Word, hear the Word, and are saved. Sitting in that same service are others who see the Word and hear the Word and they are not saved. Why can one see it and another cannot? There is only one answer to this question; the sovereign election of God.

**INSPIRED FACT #7** - Saul got up from the ground and could not see and was led into Damascus. **9:8-9**

Saul is obedient to his new master. All of the future things Jesus Christ will do with Saul hinge on this important factor. He starts off by obeying what he was told to do. Saul was led by the hand into Damascus. The one who had gone there to arrogantly persecute the Church was now humbly led by the hand as a captive of Jesus Christ.

For three days and nights Paul could not see anything and he did not eat or drink anything. God had not told him to do this, but this is what he voluntarily did. He was waiting for further instruction. Saul was probably overwhelmed with what Jesus Christ had just done and for three days and three nights he pondered this, not even taking time to eat or drink. It may be that he thought about the fact that Jesus was in a grave for three days and then arose.

Certainly one of the things that would have gone through his mind was the fact that in spite of all of his sin and guilt and blasphemy against God, God had saved him. God stopped him and in pure grace gave him the gift of salvation and had made him a servant of Jesus Christ. That is the greatness of grace. **But this greatness of grace was not only extended to Paul in his life, but it has been extended to each of us in our life.**

There are two critical questions that need to be asked by every person here.

**Question #1** - comes from **verse 5** and the question is “who is Jesus Christ?”

This is the key question of your life. You need to ask it and you need to answer it.

**Question #2** - comes from **verse 6** and the question is “Lord, what do you want me to do?”

One of the main theological questions that come from this text is whether or not Luke wants us to view Saul’s conversion as typical of any Christian conversion or exceptional only to Saul’s conversion.

Many people are quick to dismiss this as saying; I have had no real Damascus Road experience. But the fact is, as H.A. Ironside said, “Every conversion is a miracle and nobody becomes a Christian apart from conversion” (*Acts*, p. 201).

We would agree that there are things here such as a voice from heaven, bright lights, blindness, and actual appearance of Jesus Christ that are exceptional. However, the same doctrine of election and grace is applicable to every true believer.

Each one of us needs to ask the question Saul asked: “Who is Jesus Christ?” Do you truly believe that Jesus Christ is the only God/Savior/Messiah who can save you from your sins? Do you truly believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to God: faith alone in Christ alone?

Each one of us needs to ask “Lord, what do you want me to do?” That has not changed one bit since this conversion story on the road to Damascus.

God loves to take a great sinner and make him a great saint. If God can sovereignly save Saul, He can also sovereignly save anyone, anywhere. He can save those in your family who are hard hearted in a rebellion against God. God has power to stop your son or daughter, your brother or sister, your husband or wife, dead in their tracks. Don’t give up. Don’t stop praying. Don’t stop sharing. God is a sovereign God. He can create a faith in Jesus Christ where none exists. That is exactly what He did with Saul of Tarsus.