

## **God Saves Us and Uses Us to Save Others**

**Acts 9:1-25**

**By [Dr. Robert \(Ric\) C. Cannada, Jr.](#)**

Turn in your Bibles now to Acts, chapter nine.

And as you're turning to Acts 9, let me thank you on behalf of all of us at Reformed Theological Seminary. This community and this church in particular birthed RTS in 1966. We started with 14 students in that White House on the other side of town on Clinton Boulevard. This year we will have over 2500 students taking class with us somewhere: one of our three main campuses in Jackson, Orlando, or Charlotte; or one of our three extension campuses in Atlanta, or Washington, D.C., or Boca Raton, Florida; or one of our three international programs in Korea, or Scotland, or Brazil; or, perhaps, through our "Virtual Campus", where we're offering courses now live over the Internet, literally around the world. We're one of the twelve largest seminaries in North America now, and we are so grateful for you for your continued prayers, and encouragement and support. The Lord is good.

Now let's turn to His word together. And this is a story with which we're all familiar. It's the story of the conversion of the one here called Saul. His name later was changed to Paul, the one whom we know as the Apostle Paul. And it's a story that is very familiar to us—in fact, I think it's one we've heard so often; it's so familiar we forget how amazing it is. It's a story actually that is detailed three times in the Book of Acts, and referred to on several other occasions in Paul's writings. It's obviously a very important story, and I say a story of amazing grace. Consider that now as we look to the word of God together, beginning in Acts 9:1.

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do." And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. And Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and

leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Behold, here am I, lord." And the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, 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." But Ananias answered...

[‘You’ve gotta be kidding, Lord!’ No, that’s not exactly what he said, but that’s what he was thinking. Here’s what he said...]

“...Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." And Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and arose and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened.

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is not this he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

And when many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul. And they were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night, and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

I say that is an amazing story...an amazing story of God's amazing grace, isn't it? It's such, again, a familiar story, and a clear story...not going to go into a lot of detail about the story, but I do want to mention a few things.

Again, Saul...Paul, was doing everything he could to stamp out Christianity. He was breathing murderous threats against the Christians. And they weren't just threats—he'd been involved in killing Christians. The previous chapters there in Acts, Acts 7 and 8, tell about the death of the first Christian martyr, a man named Stephen. Saul was there. It says that they who stoned Stephen put their coats down at the feet of a young man named Saul, and that Saul was "consenting to the death of Stephen." He was probably involved in the killing of other Christians, as well.

It's amazing, then, that that kind of man is converted, and converted in such an amazing way. The Lord Jesus Himself appeared to him on that road to Damascus. And then, blinded, he goes into the city, and the Lord tells Ananias (apparently one of the leaders among the Christians there) to go and see Paul, and...I know that's what Ananias was thinking: 'Lord, You've got to be kidding! I mean, he's come here to find people like us! We're hiding from him! You want us to go to him? You want me to go see him?' But he went.

And then it gets even more amazing. What does Ananias call Paul? Did you see it? He says, "Brother Saul..." And after he's converted, not only does Ananias accept him, but the other Christians do, too! And that's amazing! Certainly many of them would have had friends and perhaps relatives who had been imprisoned by Saul (or Paul), who was going after men and women, and some of them would have had friends and relatives who had been killed because of Paul. And now here they were accepting him, forgiving him, and protecting him when now the Jews (as he's preaching the gospel) want to kill him, and they have to help him escape—letting him down over the wall, and out of the city.

It is, isn't it, a story of amazing grace?

I want to stop and say to perhaps some here who are not in the family, who are not followers of Christ, who are not committed Christians. Perhaps you've come with a friend or a relative here today, and you have been without hope because of some of the things you've done and said over the years. Perhaps because of, like Paul, fighting against Christians and Christ you've felt hopeless, but you're not! The Lord could forgive and save and use Paul, who murdered Christians; He can forgive and save and use you as well, and I urge you to stop fleeing from Him and flee to Him, to Jesus as your Savior.

And for all here who are in the family, who know Christ, who seek to follow Him, I want to encourage you this morning with two things:

### **I. God saves us.**

First, God saves us. What better example could we have than this one, the conversion of Paul? God saves us. He was not seeking the Lord. He was

seeking to do everything he could to kill those who followed the Lord, to stamp out Christianity, and yet the Lord sought him and converted him. The sovereignty of God in our salvation!

But some of you are sort of saying, "That sounds like predestination...." Yes, it does! And we see that subject that comes up all through the Scriptures. We see it here in the Book of Acts, for instance, when Paul himself goes out on his first missionary journey. In Acts 13:48, all these Gentiles are converted, and Luke reports to us, "As many as were appointed to eternal life believed."

Now, why? Why did they believe? Were they smarter, better than others? No. It says it's because they were appointed to eternal life that they believed. Or we can see it in Acts 16, when we see there the first European convert to Christianity: a lady named Lydia. Paul is preaching the gospel, there were some ladies there...why did she believe and not the others? What was the difference? Was she smarter than the others? Better than the others? It says in Acts 16:14 "the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul."

Now, I grew up in this church, and I memorized *The Child's Catechism*, and I memorized *The Shorter Catechism*, and I learned about predestination. But I didn't think as deeply about it as I should have until I went away to college, to Vanderbilt, and there was a campus ministry with Christians from all kinds of backgrounds. And when they found out I was a Presbyterian they said, "Oh! You're one of those...one of those that believes in predestination." And the more I thought about it more deeply, I wasn't sure I believed it, and I was pretty sure I didn't like it. But as I read through the Scriptures, my own devotions...I had a blank page in the front of my Bible and I started putting down the references every time I'd come across a verse on the elect, or the chosen, or predestination. And pretty soon I'd filled up the whole page with these references and started on another page! Verses like Ephesians 1, where it says "we were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him in love. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons, through Jesus Christ, to the glory of His praise."

And so I saw it over and over again in the Scriptures. It was confirmed that this is true; it's what the Bible teaches. I believe it, but I still wasn't so sure I liked it! The Lord had to work on me with some attitudes. There were some questions I had, many questions about this and other truths we won't get answered until we get to heaven, I'm sure; but two in particular, that I found out as a pastor over the years, many people have these same questions, these same two questions. Not everyone. Some people get to this deeper truth and it makes sense and they just move right on.

But most of us have these similar questions, and one of them is this: If this is true, that God chooses some for salvation and passes by others, it just doesn't seem...what? What? It doesn't seem fair! I had that question. Many do. But as I

studied, I found, for instance, in Romans 1 that we're all sinners, deserve God's judgment, are under His wrath and curse. It's true of the Gentiles, He says there, [that] even though they didn't have the written word of God, they still knew enough about God through creation and their own conscience to be without excuse before Him in their behavior. And then he goes on in chapter two to talk to the Jews and say, 'You even have more information, the written word of God, and yet you don't live according to it.' And so he sums it up in Romans 3 and says we're all sinners, and we've all fallen short of the glory of God.

But it's not just that we're sinners. He goes on to say that none of us even seek after God, that there's none good, no, not one...that we're all unrighteous.

Not only that: the depth of our sinfulness. Does the Bible teach that we're sick in sin or dead in sin? We're dead in sin, doesn't it? Ephesians 2 says 'even when you were dead in your trespasses and sins, God made you alive together with Christ.' Now, what can a dead person do? Can a dead person hear? Or see? Or speak? Or smell? Someone said to me one time, "They can smell....bad!" But they can't smell themselves! A young person in a youth group I was teaching years ago really got the point. His father was a medical doctor, and he finally raised his hand and says, "I see it. A dead person can't even call out for the doctor." And isn't that true? If we're dead spiritually, we can't even call out for the doctor!

That's why Jesus says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Because we don't have ears until God has done something in our hearts to open up our ears. That's why Jesus says we must be born again, born from above, born by the Holy Spirit. Think of the illustration Jesus uses!

How much did you have to do with your physical birth? Nothing. How much do we have to do with our spiritual birth? Nothing. It's not something we do; it's something God does in us. The cry of a newborn baby...does it cause him to be born? No. It's the evidence that he has been born. And our cry of faith, does it cause us to be born again? No. It's the evidence that we have been born again, that the Lord has opened our ears and our eyes to the truth and drawn us to faith in Christ. God saves us! He must work in our hearts and lives.

One of the clearest passages on this subject in the Bible is Romans 9-11. It's not really that difficult to understand, but for some it's difficult to accept. I actually know of preachers who preached through the Book of Romans, and when they got to those chapters, they just skipped them because they thought they were too difficult. And basically, those chapters are answering one question: Romans 1-8, Paul has been explaining the gospel: Jesus died for our sins; we're to believe in Him; faith, justification before God comes through faith in Christ alone. And then he comes to chapters 9-11 and seeks to answer this question: "Well, if all this is true, why did so many of the Jewish people not believe in Jesus?" And his answer essentially in those chapters is this: They didn't believe because they

were not chosen.

For instance, he used the illustration of Ishmael and Isaac, and says Isaac was chosen and Ishmael was not...even in the Old Testament. Then he talks about the illustration of Jacob and Esau, and here's what he says...very specific...he says they were twins, and before they were born, before they'd done anything good or bad, so that it would be absolutely clear that it was only God's choice that made a difference, it was said of those two, "The older will serve the younger. Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated." How could you be any clearer than that?

And yet, what is our response? What's the question that wells up in us? "It doesn't sound..." What? Fair. You know what Paul's very next verse is? Is there any unfairness with God? Is there any injustice with God? He knows exactly what we're going to be thinking! And you know what his answer is? 'God forbid! Of course not!' But God says, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So it doesn't depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."

Some of you are thinking, "What kind of an answer is that!?" But it's a great answer, and particularly because it keeps repeating one word. What is that word? "*Mercy.*" That's the key to it all: mercy. The point is we really don't want fairness in a sense of strict justice, because if God is going to be fair in the sense of justice, what should He do? Send us all to hell! We want something other than that kind of fairness. In justice we want...what? Mercy! Our only hope when we stand before God is not merit—we don't have any of our own—but only merit through Christ. We want mercy! Whatever you think about the Pope and his person and his position and his life and accomplishments, his only hope before God right now is not merit, but mercy! And that's our only hope as well.

I love what Jim Kennedy says about this: "What we want...what the Lord grants us...is super-fair! It's beyond fairness." Mercy and grace...and yet the question comes to our minds—it just does—"Well, that's true; we all deserve His judgment. He's chosen some for salvation and showed mercy upon us.

Why didn't He do that for everyone?" And I don't know the full answer to that. We have hints of it right there in Romans 9, about God's justice and displaying it. But that's not the question ultimately that I think we ought to be asking. We're asking the wrong question when we ask why didn't God choose to save everyone. The question we ought to be asking is...what? "Why did God decide to save anyone? And especially me? That's the amazing thing!"

His amazing grace...wasn't that sort of the impact that we see in the life of the Apostle Paul? Who is it that talks more about predestination than anybody else in the New Testament? Isn't it Paul? And who is it that praises God more completely than anybody else in the New Testament? Isn't it Paul? There are

times he couldn't even wait until the end of the letter; for instance, there at the end of Romans 11 he breaks out in benediction and praise. He can't wait till the end! "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To God be the glory forever. Amen."

You see, if this is true, how much do we owe to God for our salvation? Fifty percent? Ninety percent? Ninety-nine percent? How much? A hundred percent! It's all of grace! We owe Him all the praise and honor.

And what this did in my life the more I understood it, rather than causing me to question God, to doubt God, it's caused me to praise God more than ever before, and I trust it will with you, too. God saves us!

## **II. God uses us to save others.**

But secondly, I want you to see from this passage that God also uses us to save others. Now, that's amazing, too. It sounds like a contradiction, perhaps, to some of you; but, not at all. See, one of the other questions that I had, as so many people have about this subject, is that if this is true, that God has His people out there, and this is His...He's going to reach out to them and save them, why bother with...what? Evangelism and missions.

As I began to think about that subject, I realized that God had not only chosen the ends, but He'd also chosen the means to the end, and the means to the end was using us to preach the gospel. And so I felt I needed to be obedient as a Christian to do that. I mean, He didn't have to use us, did He? He could have done it another way. I've often said through the years, if He wanted to He could get His gospel message out by arranging the stars in such a way, like a big banner in the sky...they'd just spell out the words, "Jesus saves." He didn't have to use us, but He chose to use us, and so if we're going to be faithful we need to do evangelism. But I thought, "At least this will cut down my zeal for evangelism, because if I don't preach the gospel to them, He's going to use somebody else." And that's true. If you don't do it, if I don't do it, He's going to get the gospel to His people some way, and we'll miss out on the privilege.

But it should not dampen our zeal. Think about Paul, the one who talks so much about predestination. Did it dampen his zeal? No, he was the greatest missionary ever! And he says rather than dampening his zeal, it is this very doctrine that encouraged him and caused him to be zealous. That's what he says in II Timothy 2:10. He says, 'Why do I do all this? Why do I even go to the point of imprisonment for the gospel?' He says, 'I do it for the sake of the elect, that they may have the salvation that's in Jesus Christ.'

You see, what drove him and what should drive us is knowing God's people are out there, and that this is His means of reaching them. No one is too far from His

gospel. He can change their hearts. If I thought it was all left up to me to try to convince my friends and relatives (some of whom are so far from the Lord), I think I'd give up before I started. But if I know God's people are out there and this is His means of reaching them, and He may have laid them on my heart because He's going to use....I mean, I'm encouraged! I don't care who they are, the Lord can change their hearts. It ought to encourage our zeal rather than dampening it.

I love what J. I. Packer says about this in his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Some of you have read it, and love it and appreciate it like I do. But he says Christians that disagree about this subject all agree, actually, in one place, in one position: when we're on our knees. You see, we preach the same gospel everybody else does: Jesus died on the cross for sinners. If you believe in Him, you'll be saved. Whosoever will may come. But we know when they do come, to whom to give the credit. We don't pat them on the back and say how smart they were to choose Jesus; we praise God for working in their hearts. And when we are on our knees, what do we do? Do we tell God, 'I sure am glad I was smart enough to choose You'? No! We praise God for working in our hearts, and if you have a friend or a relative who's far from the Lord, what do you do? Just try to convince them? No! What do you do? You get on your knees, and you plead with God to change their hearts and to draw them. Instinctively when we're on our knees, we know that God is sovereign in our salvation.

But what a privilege it is not only to understand more about His amazing grace in our salvation, but also to understand how He uses us to reach others. He used Paul, didn't He? But He used others to reach Paul. You know, we often think he was just sort of isolated with Jesus on that road to Damascus; but remember he was there and saw Stephen. We see it described there: when Stephen was stoned to death, it says his face was like the face of an angel, and he prayed that God would forgive those who were stoning him to death. Don't you know that Saul/Paul remembered that? And how many other Christians had he imprisoned and killed witnessed to him, wondering if he would ever hear, and died thinking their witness perhaps had failed. But Paul remembered.

We saw on that road, when Jesus appeared to him he didn't have to wonder who it is. He says, "Who are you, Lord?"

I graduated from Murrah High School here in 1966, and at our tenth high school reunion Bo Bowen and Charles Waterloo and a few others did a prayer breakfast the next morning after that event the night before. And they did it at the twentieth, as well. I didn't get to the tenth or twentieth, I was a pastor in other states, couldn't get away for the weekend. By the thirtieth I was with the Seminary and was able to get away for the weekend and came. It was a special time—fifty or sixty of us crowded into Bo's living room.

Johnny Ragsdale shared his testimony. Johnny had been through a couple of divorces, drug and alcohol problems. He had come to the twentieth prayer

breakfast because he thought it was a joke. He heard that this prayer breakfast was being sponsored by Bo Bowen? And Charles Waterloo? He knew what they were like in high school! He thought it was a joke. He came over with a hangover the next morning, though 'this is going to be a hoot.' Found out it was for real. Lake Speed was sharing his testimony. He'd been through one marriage, soon another, alcohol problems...and the Lord had changed him marvelously—converted him. Lake shared his testimony at that reunion, Johnny Ragsdale was converted; he came back at the thirtieth sharing his testimony...now not a drug addict, but a drug counselor. Amazing grace!

But one of the things that happened that was very special at that reunion just happened spontaneously. Some of those who had not been Christians in high school began to speak up and thank those who had been Christians in high school for their witness. They said, 'We laughed at you, we made fun of you; but we heard and we saw, and we remembered. Will you forgive us? And we thank you for your acceptance that now we're part of the family, too.'

You never know...we won't know until we get to heaven the full impact of the little things we do or say here. That subject, "God Uses Us and Uses Us to Save Others", so clearly portrayed, I think, in a song I want to conclude with now. The words of this song...I first heard them, I was driving in the car and I had to pull over alongside the road because of the tears. I couldn't drive any further. It's a song some of you know called *Thank You*, by Ray Boltz, where he says this:

I dreamed I went to heaven and you were there with me.  
We walked upon the streets of gold beside the crystal sea.  
We hears the angels singing, then someone called your name.  
You turned and saw this young man, and he was smiling as he came.  
And he said, "Friend, you may not know me now,"  
And then he said, "But wait.  
You used to teach my Sunday School when I was only eight,  
And every week you would say a prayer before the class would start,  
And one day when you said that prayer, I asked Jesus in my heart.  
Thank you for giving to the Lord.  
I am a life that was changed.  
Thank you for giving to the Lord.  
I am so glad you gave.  
Then another man stood before you and said, "Remember the time  
A missionary came to your church and his pictures made you cry?  
You didn't have much money, but you gave it anyway.  
Jesus took the gift you gave, and that's why I'm here today."  
Thank you for giving to the Lord.  
I am a life that was changed.  
Thank you for giving to the Lord.  
I am so glad you gave.  
One by one they came, far as the eye could see,

Each life somehow touched by your generosity.  
Little things that you had done, sacrifices made  
Unnoticed on the earth, in heaven now proclaimed.  
And I know up in heaven you're not supposed to cry,  
But I am almost sure there were tears in your eyes  
As Jesus took your hand and you stood before the Lord,  
And He said, "My child, look around you. Great is your reward."  
Thank you for giving to the Lord.  
I am a life that was changed.  
Thank you for giving to the Lord.  
I am so glad you gave.

Let's pray together.

*Father, amazing grace that You gave Your Son, our Savior, to die on the cross for our sins; and further, You by Your Spirit reached in our hearts to draw us to faith in Him. How we praise You; and further amazing grace that You give us the privilege of sharing that gospel and being part of the salvation of others coming into Your family. Encourage us to be more hopeful, to keep praying, to keep sharing, and to be part of bringing Your precious gospel around the world and to our neighbor next door. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

*And now may the amazing grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the everlasting love of God our Father through Him, and the comforting and encouraging and empowering presence of God the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.*

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