

**Text: Acts 9:1-19**

**Title: “Unstoppable Love” Pt.1**

Let's open our Bibles to Acts 9. I'm looking forward to our Leadership Summit this evening. If you're involved in any level of leadership or service in SBS this is an important time for us to rally. But we also have some key opportunities for volunteers. I encourage you to take a look at the list in your worship folder and see if God might be leading you to explore one of those. You can come tonight to get more information.

Here in Acts 9 we read for the first time of the salvation experience of one of the most important figures in the Christian faith ... Saul of Tarsus, later to be known as the Apostle Paul. In Acts 7 we read about the death of the bold witness Stephen who was stoned to death for proclaiming Jesus ... the first Christian martyr. And in one simple sentence we're introduced to Saul for the first time when it says that the men who killed Stephen laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul, meaning he's personally involved. Acts 8 says that this so stirred up Saul that he launched a one-man crusade to destroy the church as he found believers and dragged them off to prison. There are three different accounts in Acts of Saul's conversion and here in Acts 9 we have the first. Let's read Acts 9:1-9.

My aim this morning is for God to use this tremendous testimony to stir your heart to great love and gratitude to God for His unstoppable love for you. Do you recall when you were saved? Some of you are like me; I came to Christ in a worship service like this as a teenager. Some of you were saved as a child in VBS or at a camp. Some of you received the gift of eternal life sitting in your house with your parents helping you. Some of you were at a Youth Camp or in an evangelistic crusade or revival service. Maybe a pastor or Sunday School teacher came your house and shared the Gospel with you and you put your trust in Christ. I heard the testimony this week of one of our men who was converted in prison. Or perhaps you've come today and you're not certain if you have really put your trust in Christ for the gift of eternal life. Maybe you wonder if God could ever save you. Well one of the reasons God includes this conversion experience in the Bible is to give us all hope that we can be saved.

There's a fascinating paradox here. Saul is aggressively pursuing Christians, seizing them and arresting them for following Christ. Little does he know that he, himself, is being pursued and is about to be “arrested” by Jesus.

You see, the Christ-life is a converted life. It's not just a new outlook on life. It's not just a new philosophy. It is a conversion to a new way of life. You become a totally new person.

**ILLUSTRATION** – I came home the other day and found a bowl sitting on our kitchen table. It's filled with the shells of locust. My grandkids of become fond of collecting these shells in our yard. Those shells are just dried-up remains of locusts that have shed an old life and have becoming something new. The Bible says that about the Christian life. If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation; the old has passed away and all things have become new.

And Jesus is relentless as He pursues souls who are lost and perishing. The conversion of the Apostle Paul shows us how Jesus goes about “arresting” a person, drawing them to Himself, and giving them a new life. What do we learn about the love and the power of God from one of the most remarkable conversions in history? We learn...

## **1. GOD LOVES US WHEN WE LEAST DESERVE IT (vv.1-2).**

God’s love can overthrow His opponents, and make His enemies into friends.

**Acts 9:1 - Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest**

**Acts 9:2 - and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.**

His life as a Jewish scholar and Pharisee was absolutely threatened by the message of the Gospel these Christ-followers preached. If, as they say, a person is saved by faith in Christ alone and not by the keeping of the works of the Law, then Saul’s whole life falls into shambles. So Saul is filled with incredible hatred toward the Christ and Christ-followers. He’s so filled with rage that he had no qualms with the slaughter of these followers of Jesus. It was the consuming passion of his life. Love was something absolutely foreign to him.

Now if this had been a Hollywood movie and you were watching this unfold, what would you be hoping for? You would be pulling for the bad guy to get what’s coming to him. And that’s where most of the movie plots would take this. But the hero of this story is God and His unstoppable love. This man who is filled with such hatred and rage is loved by the God of the universe. His love comes to us when we least deserve it. The Bible says that God commends His love toward us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Let your heart be filled with the awe of that statement. God loves us when we least deserve it. But also...

## **2. GOD PURSUES US IN WHEN OUR HEARTS ARE HARDENED (v.3).**

When you think about Saul at this point he’s the kind of person that no one expects to be converted. His heart is so hardened to Christ. Again, so much of his life would be threatened if the message of Christianity were true! He had been so vocal in his opposition that it would be absolutely humiliating for him to change his mind and embrace what he had so viciously opposed. But God’s love is unstoppable in Saul’s life.

**Acts 9:3 - As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.**

I want you to notice that Saul’s conversion was sudden and unexpected. There’s no evidence that he was a seeker or that his heart was being gradually won over. It happened as suddenly as

a flash of lightning from heaven. That's the miracle of conversion. And this shows us that we should never give up on those who show no signs of sensitivity to Christ. Your friend may not be open or interested or spiritually sensitive, but neither was Saul when he was converted. Suddenly through the love of God he saw the light.

**ILLUSTRATION** – Hank Williams, Sr. recorded a song in the 1940s that the David Crowder Band performs sometimes called “I Saw the Light.” When Hank Williams first recorded this song he was the last one anyone would have expected to sing these words: “I wandered so aimless life filled with sin. I wouldn't let my dear savior in. Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night. Praise the Lord I saw the light! I saw the light, I saw the light; no more darkness, no more night. Now I'm so happy, no sorrow in sight. Praise the Lord I saw the light.”

Now everyone's story is a bit different. Christ uses different ways to bring us to Himself. Sometimes it's through a drastic need in our lives. Maybe it's through an experience of failure, or through the realization of God's blessings. Or sometimes it's like a bolt of lightning like it was for Saul. It just came out of nowhere. But praise God that He pursues us when our hearts are hardened.

But also in His unstoppable love...

### **3. GOD REVEALS HIS SON TO US IN OUR REJECTION (vv.4-5).**

**Acts 9:4 - He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”**

**Acts 9:5 - “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.**

Now skeptics have done their best to explain away the supernatural nature of this encounter. One of the earliest was to suggest that Paul was suffering from epilepsy; that on the road to Damascus he was suddenly seized by an epileptic seizure and as he fell to the ground in this seizure he imagined that he heard voices. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great British preacher, responded to that by saying, “O blessed epilepsy! Would that every man in London could have epilepsy like that!”

There have been others who have suggested that Paul was hit by a bolt of lightning in an electrical storm. As he fell to the ground in his dazed condition he thought he heard a voice. That may explain the light flashing brighter than the sun, but it doesn't explain what happened to Paul later.

Paul's testimony is utterly consistent throughout his whole life as to just what he heard and saw on this occasion. This is about a relationship with Jesus Christ. Saul heard his voice, he knew what it said, and what it said had great effect upon him. The only explanation is that God revealed His Son Jesus Christ in Saul's rejecting heart. That's what changed everything. And

this started long before Saul ever knew about Jesus. Later in a letter to the church in Galatia the Apostle Paul would explain it this way:

**Galatians 1:13 - For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.**

**Galatians 1:14 - I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.**

**Galatians 1:15 - But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased**

**Galatians 1:16 - to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man,**

This is unstoppable love. God has plans and purposes for Saul's life even before Saul was born. And at the right time God revealed His Son Jesus to Saul.

Now back to Acts 9, notice the question Jesus asks Paul:

**Acts 9:4 - He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"**

This is powerful. Jesus doesn't ask Saul, "Why do you persecute the church?" Jesus asked, "Why do you persecute Me?" Saul's problem was not with church; it was with Jesus. If you would have asked Saul, "What's your problem?" He would answer, "It's the church; I can't stand the church." The real problem he had was that he was running from Jesus.

Praise God that in our rejection God reveals Jesus to us. That happens through the preaching of the Gospel and by the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

**Acts 9:5 - "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.**

Aren't you grateful God did that for you? But also...

#### **4. GOD CAPTURES US FOR HIS PURPOSES (vv.6-9).**

When we are saved God has more in mind than just forgiving our sins and securing us for heaven. That's great, but there's more. God has a purpose for us. I remember when I was saved as a teenager for the first time I felt like I had a purpose in life. I wasn't just waiting around to go to heaven; I had a reason to live every day. And that was true for Saul.

Acts 9:6-9 describe how Jesus told Saul to go into the city of Damascus and there would be someone there who would help show Saul what his new purpose in life would be. When Saul gets up from the ground he's blind, so this head-strong, zealous man has to be led by the hand into the city.

The Lord Jesus intends to have Paul in his service and there is no question but that he will succeed. God captures us for His purposes. And this will be explained to Saul by a man he meets in Damascus ... a man named Ananias. God speaks to Ananias in a vision and explains to him what has happened to Saul. Ananias knows the hideous reputation of Saul; he knows about Saul's murderous intentions. But God has higher intentions for Saul. And He tells Ananias...

**Acts 9:15 - But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.**

**Acts 9:16 - I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."**

We don't have a record here of Saul praying the sinner's prayer. All he can say to Jesus is, "Lord, who are you?" He simply comes to a place of total surrender. He can run no more. And that's the point where salvation takes place ... where God's unstoppable love meets our total surrender.

Now there's a reason we have Saul's conversion experience told three times in the book of Acts. There's a reason God saved Saul. And Saul, now Paul, explains it to his young preacher friend Timothy in a letter.

**1 Timothy 1:15 - Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.**

**1 Timothy 1:16 - But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.**

In other words God had you in view when he saved Paul. God saved Paul for your sake ... so that you would see His grace, mercy and unlimited patience ... God's unstoppable love.