

The Breaking of Saul Acts 9:1-9

There has been a running debate between Arminians and Calvinists as to whether God's grace can be resisted. You all know the acronym Tulip. T stands for Total Depravity, U for Unconditional Election, L for Limited Atonement. I Stands for Irresistible Grace and P stands for Perseverance of the saints. That's the label they've given to us, and though we think it is somewhat inaccurate, we can live with that. That's slightly better than the acronym some have given for us Calvinists that is STUPID which stands for Sovereignty Of God In:
Total Depravity
Unconditional Election
Particular Atonement
Irresistible Regenerating Grace
Definite Salvation.

But name-calling is not unique to Arminians. Calvinists have unfortunately returned the favor by labeling partial Arminians as being the poisonous plant LILAC You know: Limited Depravity, I choose God, Limited Power in the Atonement, Arrestable Grace, Carnal Security. Some people even have a label for five point Arminians that I'm sure they don't appreciate. It's CHAFF. Cooperative Efforts...God + Man. He elects those He sees have faith, Atonement for all, Free to resist grace, and Free to fall from grace. But the problem with these acronyms is they put both Calvinism and Arminianism into the worst light.

And that is certainly true of the fourth point of Calvinism, Irresistible Grace. We don't deny that men resist God. We believe that all men resist God. That's their natural state. Apart from conquering grace, every person would resist God and go to hell. Isn't that what Stephen said in Acts 7:51? He said, **You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!** [There's the problem – and until that is changed the second part of the verse will be true. He says,] **You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.** And that is what is going on in this passage. Up until God's grace breaks Saul in verses 1-9 and then makes Paul in verses 10-19, Saul was resisting with all his might.

So today's sermon is a two point sermon. Point 1 shows the spiritual blindness of Saul. And he stands as a paradigm for all sinners. The outward call of the Gospel (in other words, that's what we preachers and evangelists give) – that outward call is always resisted by our flesh until God breaks us.

Point II is Spiritual Sight: that no one (not even an incredible enemy like Saul) can successfully resist the inward call of God to Salvation. The outward call he can resist, but not the inward call.

So, let me suggest a different acronym for Calvinists that more accurately reflects our theology. It is the word ELECT.

E - Extensive Depravity (every part of man is affected by sin). It doesn't mean that we can't get worse, but it means that our mind can't be trusted because it is affected by the fall (we call that the noetic affects of the fall – it even makes us make math mistakes); our will can't be depended upon because it has been ruined by the fall and is in bondage to sin. The body is affected as is our spirit, our conscience, our emotions, our sense of the law, our impulse to dominion, etc., etc. So, extensive depravity.

L - Lord-centered Election (election is based on Christ's conditions, not on conditions God sees in us). It is Lord centered. Christ provides all the conditions.

E - Effectual Atonement (All whom Christ died to save will be saved. His atonement affects everything it intended to effect. It's definitely not limited in power.

C - Conquering Grace (Though men may resist God's grace for a time, saving grace will always triumph. God will have his way.)

T - Triumphant Saints (We not only must persevere, we will persevere because of God's preserving grace. We progress from grace to grace and from faith to faith. He who has begun a good work in us will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.) No one can pluck you out of the Father's hand.

I. Spiritual Blindness: The Outward Call of the Gospel is Always Resisted By the Flesh (vv. 1-2)

A. Still hostile to God's people (vv. 1-2)

And so, with that as a background, let's look first of all at the resistance that Saul showed to the Gospel of grace. Verse 1 says, **Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...**

That word "still" implies not only that it is going to end, but also it implies a perseverance in unbelief to that point. And that is the natural state of the heart until God rescues it. Don't be surprised when people remain unbelievers despite seeing miracles, the love of the saints, the preaching of the Gospel and many great proofs that the Gospel is true. They don't seem to be phased by it. And Saul himself had seen it all. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, and had no doubt been a part of Christ's crucifixion. He had seen

the miracles of Christ and the other disciples. He was probably there in chapter 4 when the man who had been lame ever since he was in his mother's womb was interrogated. The Sanhedrin said in chapter 4, **that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.** Saul could not deny it, but he continued to threaten them. It is a spiritual blindness that is upon every human heart apart from saving grace. He heard the preaching of Peter and John. He saw Stephen's face glowing like that of an angel's. In fact, it's probably why *Luke* knows about it. His friend Paul no doubt told him what Stephen looked like, and how amazed he was. He heard Stephen's incredible sermon, saw him forgiving him when he agreed to Stephen's stoning. This was all a part of God's preparatory work that made Saul feel so guilty inside. I think that is what is meant by the phrase, "**It is hard for you to kick against the goads.**" Though that is not in the Majority text here, Paul later in the book of Acts says that God had said exactly that to him. His conscience was hurting. And yet he remained an unbeliever. He continued to be hostile to God's people. Can you see extensive depravity written all over this? He didn't need more evidence. He had tons of evidence. The heart of the problem was the problem of his heart.

And I have seen the same phenomenon to this day. Unbelievers sometimes have to work hard at it, but our minds are so creative, and we can always think of ways to justify our unbelief. Here's probably how Paul did it. He knew that Deuteronomy 21:23 says, **he who is hanged is accursed by God.** Galatians says, **Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.** Well, Saul knew that Jesus died by crucifixion, on a tree, therefore, He was under the curse of God. How *could* He be the Messiah? The Jews reasoned that it would be blasphemy to call Jesus Messiah when it was obvious that God had cursed Him. And they reasoned that Jesus couldn't have risen from the dead, because that would have been a contradiction of God's curse. So all that Saul was doing was imposing the Old Testament sanctions against blasphemy. He might have been a little more rigorous than the Old Testament, but that just reinforced in his mind how devoted he was to God. Our minds can rationalize and make us comfortable in our religion.

B. Still trusting man's authority more than God's authority (v. 1- 2)

A second way in which he resisted God was more subtle. It can be seen in the last words of verse 1 and the first words of verse 2. It says, **he went to the high priest and asked letters from him ...** Where did he go for permission? What was Saul's authority for doing this? Was it the Bible? Well, I'm sure there were some Scriptures that he was able to use, but it was

ultimately the authority of the high priest and the Sanhedrin. He was seeking to please them and to climb the corporate ladder. Turn with me to Galatians 1 to see this dynamic working in Saul's life. In Galatians Paul is arguing with Christians who are governed by man, and he uses himself (in his pre-conversion days) as an illustration. Galatians 1:14-17.

Galatians 1:14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. [There's where his heart was at: man's traditions, man's praise and competition to get man's prize. But look at the difference that happens at his conversion. Verse 15.]

Galatians 1:15 ¶ But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called *me* through His grace,

Galatians 1:16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, [prior to salvation that was his first impulse – to confer with flesh and blood, and to get his sense of approval from flesh and blood. And the reason was that man's authority meant far more to him than God's authority. Verse 17]

Galatians 1:17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those *who were* apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. And verse 18 says that 3 years later he went to Jerusalem to see the apostles.

This is what keeps so many people from believing the Gospel. I've talked to several Roman Catholics who agree that everything I have argued with them appears to be what the Scripture says, but they respond: "I can't disagree with the church. The church is the infallible interpreter." And when I press them on that and ask, "Which Pope and which council? They have contradicted themselves many times, and I can appeal to older church councils that teach exactly what I am teaching." But they are unwilling to look to the authority of the Word alone. It scares them. Ultimately their trust is in the church, not in Jesus Christ. There are many "good people" who do not believe because they resist in a socially respectable way.

C. A system versus the way (v. 2)

But it's not just an institution that gets in the way of genuine conversion. Saul held to a system that came from man instead of *the* way that came from Christ. There were several systems that were being taught in Jerusalem: that of the Essenes, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Hasmoneans, the Herodeans, the Zealots, the Therapeutae, the Qumran society and other minor sects. And these guys would argue vigorously with each other over doctrinal, philosophical and practical differences. Paul later said that at this stage he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees. He could hold his

own in debate. His goal was to defend a system, not the Bible. But he was completely missing out on life. It's one thing to have a dry system, and it is quite another to live life to the fullest. And I don't think that it is by accident that Christians are here called "**the Way.**" Christianity is not just a system; it's a way of life. It *is* a system, but it is also a way to life and a way to live life. Jesus said that HE was the way, the truth and the life. That implies relationship and living, not just thinking.

I know one individual who is so preoccupied with picayune details, that he has been unable to find any church in America that he can fellowship at. It is so sad to see how this system has dried up his bones. You can't argue with him from the Bible – He keeps going back to the system. But this approach has not only robbed Christians of joy, it can keep unbelievers from even considering the life more abundant that Christ came to give.

D. Religion versus relationship (vv. 1-5)

Another subtle way of resisting true conversion is to hide oneself behind the skirts of religion rather than entering into relationship. Christ's questions in verses 4-5 show that Jesus is concerned about a broken relationship. **Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me...** [there is a *relationship* that has been broken here. He goes on and says,] **I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.** Goads were sharp sticks that herders used to keep the cattle moving. And this term goads implies a *Person* who is goading Saul, and that Person is Jesus. Jesus is concerned about a broken relationship, while Saul is concerned about keep the rules of religion. How many times do Christians subtly fall back into religion rather than relationship? Religion is more comfortable because we can feel in control. A relationship is not as predictable or comfortable, because you never know what Jesus will do with you. And yet, it is worth it because a relationship is glorious whereas mere religion is empty and dry.

E. Still closing his physical eyes (cf. v 8 – “when his eyes were opened”)

It's interesting that Saul closes his eyes, perhaps to protect himself against the light, and it is not until verse 8 that he opens his eyes, only to notice that he can't see. But how many people close off their eyes and their senses because they don't want to know the truth? They close off their eyes by not reading convicting books. They close off their eyes by not going to church. There are all kinds of ways that we can try to shut out the light.

F. Still spiritually blind (cf. 26:18)

And when he tells others his testimony of what happened here in chapter 26 he speaks of spiritual blindness. Only, now he says that his job is to preach the Gospel to others who are just as blind as he was, **to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God.** His physical blindness was a symbol of the spiritual blindness that he had been in, and of the bondage that this religious man had really been under to Satan.

So there is one sense in which we do *not* believe in irresistible grace. The natural man does nothing but resist. And he comes up with all kinds of creative ways to resist God's light.

II. Spiritual Sight: No One Can Successfully Resist the Inward Call of God to Salvation (vv. 3-9)

But the second point of this sermon shows that when God's right timing has come, God will irresistibly bring people to Himself. As he said about Lydia, **The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.** What's he saying? The Lord gave the inward call so that she would listen to the outward call. And we can see evidence of this irresistible grace all through this section.

A. A new awareness of God (vv. 3-4; v7 with 22:9)

First, Saul now has a new awareness of God that he did not have before. After seeing the bright light, verse 4 says, **Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice ...** According to Acts 22:9, the others didn't hear the voice. For the first time in his life he is confronted with *the living Person of God*, not just some theories about Him. And it stops him dead in his tracks. He could not argue with what he was experiencing because it was not just a theory – it was an awareness of God Himself who lined up with what He said in the Scriptures.

And many of you have experienced a time when God was irrelevant to your life one moment, and the next moment you could not get Him out of your thoughts. He confronted your mind, will, emotions, conscience. You knew that He had grabbed your life by the collar and that you would have to deal with Him. This is called regeneration, a new heart, and new eyes, hearing ears. And the irony is that prior to being given this new awareness of God, people are often oblivious to the fact that they don't hear or know God. In fact, people like Saul thought that they knew God, but they didn't. Jack Miller said that he was a pastor in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church for a

number of years before he realized that he was not converted. He had been preaching the Word without hearing ears or seeing eyes.

Let me try to illustrate that. An elderly man was having real difficulty communicating with his wife, and he was beginning to become convinced that she was going deaf. So he decided to conduct a test without her knowing about it. One day he sat on the far side of the room, and as soon as her back was turned to him he quietly whispered, “Can you hear me?” There was no response. He moved up a little closer and asked, “Can you hear me?” Still no response, so he edged a little closer and asked the same question. Finally he moved right behind her and asked, “Can you hear me now?” His wife with obvious irritation in her voice said, “For the fourth time, Yes!” For the first time he realized that he was the one going deaf. But he had attributed it all to her.

And this was the experience with Saul. He was a man who considered himself faithful to God and the Christians as apostates. He considered himself as holding to the truth and the Christians as blasphemers. Have you known people with similar blindness? In Philippians 3 Paul described himself before his conversion as thinking that he was blameless concerning the law, zealous for God and an advocate of the strictest sect of Judaism. It's not until after his conversion that he recognizes with a shock (or as verse 6 words it, with astonishment) at how much of a blasphemer he really was, as he testifies in 1 Timothy 1:13. He has a brand new awareness of the reality of God in his life, of the reality of his lack of relationship to God, and how his life did not measure up. Has God brought that change to you? Do you have a new awareness of God 24-7?

B. A conviction of sin (v. 4)

The next thing that God does in Saul's conversion is to convict Him of His sin and show Saul how incredibly heinous it was. **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”** Notice that he doesn't just say that Saul was sinning against the saints. He was doing that, but Saul was doing something that made his sin infinitely worse – he was persecuting Christ. Saul had thought that he was serving God and doing God a favor, and here was God turning it around and saying that it was the most heinous sin imaginable. God is saying, “you are fighting against Me. You are a rebel against My cause.” And Saul is astonished. He had never seen his sin in this light before. A sign of genuine conversion is that our conviction becomes God-centered and not merely man-centered conviction.

When you were converted it may not have been your persecution of Christ that was highlighted, but for the first time you began to recognize that

all your sins were against His holy majesty. Your rebellion was not just against husband or parents, but also against God. Your grumbling and kicking of the tire and the dog was not against the creature, but against the Creator and the governor of history. With David you began to be conscious of the fact that it was **against You, You only have I sinned**. It is a good sign of conversion when our conscience is far more stirred with its rebellion against God than it is with how we have sinned against man. Many people have a fake conversion because they have a social conscience that is troubled when other people look down on them. They repent of anything that others may notice, but are not troubled over sin that is secret. Romans 7 says that for the first time Saul recognized that he was a sinner; that he had inward corruptions of envy and lust. And it grieved him that he had been caught as a rebel against Christ. There was conviction. And it is a God-centered conviction.

C. A willingness to hear (v. 5,6)

Third, there was a sudden willingness to hear. Prior to this confrontation with Jesus, Saul had stopped his ears to the truth. Remember what it said in Acts 7:57? It says, **Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord**. Saul was one of those who stopped his ears because chapter 8:1 says that he was consenting with the rest on the Sanhedrin. But now there is an instant change. This is what regeneration does. As Paul later worded it in 2 Corinthians 4:6, **it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ**. This change was a creative act of God. Verse 5. **And he said, “Who are You, Lord?”** That shows a willingness to hear, rather than to justify himself. Verse 6. **So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?”** No longer is Saul calling the shots. His ears have been opened and he is willing to hear whatever God speaks to him.

D. A Change in our understanding (v. 5)

Verse 5 also shows a change in understanding. *Before*, Jesus was the enemy. Now Saul calls him Lord. That’s a radical change in understanding. Before, Jesus was a curse word, now Jesus is spoken to reverently. Before Christians were a nuisance to him and a problem to be removed, now suddenly he sees them as the body of Christ, loved by Christ, and protected by Christ. It’s a totally different perspective, and it immediately leads Saul to seek out the church in Damascus. When Jesus says that Saul is persecuting Jesus, it means that Christ so identifies with the believer that

what is done to the believer is actually done to Him. And what is done to Him is actually done for the body. That's a radical new understanding. The moment a person is converted God instills within the heart a new love for the brethren. And 1 John 4:20 says, **If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?** We can forget that truth as we move along in the Christian life, but Christ hates persecution against other believers now just as much as he did back then. When you gossip against a brother, you are gossiping against Christ. When you hold lack of forgiveness and bitterness in your heart against a fellow believer, Christ treats you as being bitter against Him. When you are angry against a brother, you better remember that you are angry against Jesus. We have this change of understanding at conversion, but we need to continually remind ourselves of its truth. So we have seen that there are several ways in which the understanding is changed. Second, there is a change in the will.

E. A change from rebel into servant (v. 6)

Verse 6 also shows a change from rebel into servant. Saul's instant impulse is to see how he might serve the Lord. **"Lord, what do you want me to do?"** [That's a question that we need to ask, isn't it? "Lord, what do you want me to do?"] **Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.** Notice that there is no option for servanthood here. Jesus doesn't say, "Saul, you can be saved without submitting to my lordship. It would be nice if you did, but you do have an option." No, that carnal Christian theory does not fit the text. This passage makes clear that Jesus is Lord of Saul, and he doesn't give Saul any options. He says, **"you will be told what you must do."** Must. True conversion always results in a genuine change from rebel to servant. There is no such thing as accepting Jesus as Savior but not accepting Him as Lord. Every time Lord and Savior are linked in the Bible, it is Lord and savior. There is no saviorhood without lordship. In genuine conversion God changes your heart to submit to Him as He is. And He is Lord.

I think you can see in these verses that this conversion affected Saul's mind, emotions and will. He has a new understanding. He trembles with a new fear. His will is engaged to serve the Lord. And I think it is important to realize that true conversion (which is made up of repentance and faith) always involves all three.

F. A new humility (vv. 8-9)

But these changes to mind, emotions and will naturally lead this arrogant man to have a new humility. Verse 8 says, **Then Saul arose from the ground** [that's a good place to be isn't it? Unfortunately Christians sometimes regain some of their pride and arrogance, and they no longer know what it means to kneel in prayer. They have not only lost their first love, but they have also lost their first humility. And that is a sad thing to see. It's important to remember that God is honored when we are humbled. And ironically, God humbles the proud but lifts up the humble. When we start in a place of humility, we are in a good place.

Paul is forced into a new humility not only before God, but also before men. This proud leader of men is now blind, and he has to be led around helplessly. **And when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.** How humiliating. But you know, the amazing thing about a genuine convert is that he is no longer concerned with defending the idols of pride and free will. That is the Philistine god Dagon that falls before the Almighty and the head falls off. You see, the newly regenerate man is quite willing to be humiliated and to be honest before God and man. He is willing to admit that he was a rebel, a sinner and in need of grace. It no longer bothers him to humble his pride before men. This is one of the evidences that Nebuchadnezzar's conversion was a genuine conversion. He wrote the whole sordid story down, how God humbled him, how he repented and acknowledged God to be his master. And then Nebuchadnezzar published his testimony throughout the whole empire. What a gracious work of God to humble us before earth and heaven. Can you see how this is quite different from the modern false Gospel of Self-Esteem?

Verse 9 shows how he willingly continued this humbling of himself. **And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.** He had three days of blindness to think about his previous life of rebellion and to wait for God's mercies. Those who are converted do not demand anything of God. They come in humility and beseech God, but they know their place because they recognize that they are worthy of nothing but hell fire. This blindness was God humbling Saul and the fasting was Saul humbling himself and agreeing with God's work. And whether God picked three days so that it would symbolize a raising to new life or not, we are not told. But certainly every idea that Saul had of God was challenged in those three days.

This was the breaking of Saul. Next week we will be looking at the making of Paul. But when you think of conversions, there is always a breaking down before there can be a building up. There is always repentance

that leads to faith. And that's one of the reasons why the Scripture consistently puts repentance first. I know many people theorize that faith has to come first logically. But what was Jesus message: "Repent and believe."

As we have gone over this message of the breaking of Saul, I hope it has stirred up your thanks to God for having broken you and restored you. I hope it renews a thankfulness for the Gospel within your heart. What an awesome thing God's sovereign grace really is. On the other hand, if your conversion looks nothing like Saul's, I hope it will stir you up to seek God in true conversion. Saul's life is a wonderful testimony to the acronym TULIP or the acronym ELECT.

The E shows that Saul's depravity was extensive.

The L shows that Saul's election was not based on any condition in Saul's life. There wasn't any faith for God to see. God had to give him faith. There wasn't anything in Saul's life that warranted election. This was a Lord centered election.

So Extensive Depravity, Lord-centered Election, thirdly Effectual Atonement. Christ had died to redeem Saul from his sins, and redeemed he was.

The C in ELECT stands for Conquering Grace (or as TULIP says it, Irresistible grace) and I think you can see that God's grace conquered Saul. It was not that Saul sought God. In fact Romans 3:11 says, **there is none who seeks after God.** God's grace must first conquer our hearts.

The T in Elect will have to wait for next week – it's Triumphant saints. God prophesies that Saul will indeed persevere because His grace will sustain him through enormous difficulties. From start to finish, our salvation is of grace. Amen? Let's go to the Lord in thanksgiving.