

## “Chosen *but...*” Acts 9:19–31 // Mercy

What an honor... I love your pastor. So anointed; one of our country's best teachers; great leader.

- But so real and down to earth. Having dinner with them...

But for real; we made a commitment to send our best, and Spence was exemplar of that... very painful, but to see what God is doing here...

- Spence told me all about it, of course, but to see it with my eyes, and experience it--I feel a little bit like the Queen of Sheba--not the half has been told to me, and I feel such a certain assurance in my soul that you have no idea what is in front of you and how God is going to use you

And that's what I want to talk a little bit about this morning. What God has called you to, as a church, and the path you should expect in getting there.

### Acts 9, if you have your Bibles...

*I was once asked, “What are the hardest passages in the Bible to preach?” And I said, “Easy, the little blank spaces”--i.e. those little sections in the stories where nothing seems to be happening.*

I know you guys are studying the life of David; we did too. And there's so many wonderful things in David's story for us to learn from but the hardest section for me to get my mind around is the little white space that comes after David's anointing... (There David is, the oil of his anointing running down his head, and then... blank space. David doesn't run down to the palace to start trying on robes or start doing interviews with Judaism Today; he doesn't go down to Goliath training school. In fact, the next verse is not about David at all. The narrative switches its focus to someone else and David goes back to

the pasture. Scholars say for up to **7 years**. And I have to ask, “What were those 7 years like?” **All depicted in that little BLANK SPACE**. You get anointed to be king and then, NOTHING? You go back to the pasture to follow sheep around and shovel up sheep dung?

A blank space. **YOU EVER BEEN THROUGH ONE OF THOSE?** It seemed like God was at work in your life. You were following him, obeying him, and then God seems to ghost you. Something doesn't happen; some prayer doesn't get answered. Something you thought for sure was going to happen doesn't happen.

- The marriage partner didn't come along. Still single.
- The job promotion never came through.
- The ministry door didn't open.
- You never got pregnant.
- You didn't get the healing.
- \And you wonder, God, why have you forgotten me?

I'm going to try and **show you that those blank spaces are not there** because God has forgotten about you. **On the contrary**--those blank spaces are usually when he's most at work in you; when he's doing his best stuff in you.

**My goal this afternoon is to give you HOPE to press on**--because hope, y'all, is the most powerful, indomitable force on the planet.

- You might have heard about the **legendary experiment conducted** 60 years ago at Johns Hopkins university in which a researcher was trying to determine how long rats could swim before drowning.
  - He found that if you just dropped the rats in the water, they **could only last 10 minutes before...** But if he took them out 2–3 times during those first 10 minutes and put them back in, the rats could swim for more than **60 hours**.

- Changing no factor—except the introduction of hope—gave the rats the ability to swim more than 100x longer than without it!<sup>1</sup>
- My purpose is to give **God’s spiritual rats** hope this afternoon, to help you see that *even when you are confused about what is going on in your life, he is still faithfully fulfilling his call on your life.*

## Acts 9:15–26

**The CONTEXT:** Paul had just been converted, and God wanted one of the early church leaders, Ananias, to baptize him.

- **Ananias, however,** is timid to do so, because, up until this point, Paul has been **public enemy #1** of the church.

But vs. 15, God says to Ananias, [15] “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. [16] For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

- Chosen... to suffer? Those **two things don’t seem** to go together, do they?
- Suffering, after all, is what the **enemy causes**, right?
- Or isn’t suffering what happens when you’re **NOT being blessed**, or maybe even because you’re not doing things right and God wants to teach you a lesson?

**In the next 10 verses** you’ll see that Paul suffers, from the very beginning, all kinds of **hardship**. Here are my **3 points today**:

- **Paul was chosen, yet he was opposed.**
- **Paul was chosen, yet God took many years to prepare him.**
- **Paul was chosen, yet he suffered.**

**Paul’s experience, he tells us later in one of his epistles, was to give us a pattern for those of us who believe,** and I want you to see that in **opposition**, in **delay**, in **hardship**, even in the **boredom and tedium in your life**, God has a plan.

Let’s just read the passage first. Vs. 19 picks up **right after Paul is baptized:** [19] ...For some days (Paul) was with the disciples at Damascus. [20] And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues (he knew the core of his calling), saying, “He is the Son of God.” [21] And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” [22] But Saul increased all the more in strength and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

[23] When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, [24] but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, [25] but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. [26] And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.

### 1. Paul was chosen, yet he was opposed.

- Probably the worst thing about this for Paul was that **most of the opposition came from his fellow Jews.**
- They were supposed to understand! He thought if he could just explain it to them, and they would get it!
- **But they didn’t.**
- **Even the church** didn’t have Paul’s back! Vs. 26 says, “They were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.”

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.psychosomaticmedicine.org/content/19/3/191.full.pdf>

Sometimes the **hardest thing in Christian ministry** is when those whom **you expect** to recognize what God is doing in your life don't.

- People in your **church. Friends. Your spouse. Other pastors.**
- I think the hardest thing to face over the last couple of years has been the friendly fire I've taken from those I thought were on my side—It's always been an issue, but especially bad the last couple of years.
- **Like many of you, I faced people who had been at our church for 15 years...** I'd married their kids; walked with them through tragedy; done life with them for a decade... **tell me they were leaving**, and leaving loud because we...
  - Asked people to wear their masks for too long... or because we let people take them off too quickly
  - Because we said too much about GF; because we said not enough
  - Because we were too supportive of Trump; not supportive enough of Trump.
    - I'd have people, in the same afternoon say, "You're too positive about Trump." Another says, "You're too negative...!" I'd respond, "To my knowledge, I haven't said anything about Donald Trump." And they'd say, "It's just your posture. We can tell. It's what you didn't say."
    - What was revealed was that for many of our people, they were Repub and Dem before they were followers of Jesus
    - **It's odd that**, as Evangelicals—for a group so known to be against cancel culture, how quick many of us were to cancel our church over something non-essential.
    - In the **midst of all this I asked**, "Am I doing something wrong?"
- **God gave me this from 1 Peter:** Talking about suffering, "You were called to this." You were chosen **to suffer**. It's all part of the plan.
- **Maybe for you, it's opposition from a spouse**; or your parents; or your boss... **you just weren't expecting, and you've thought**, "Am I doing something wrong?"

**CAN I ASK YOU A QUESTION? Are you ready for this**—to be **criticized, belittled**--to have your **motives impugned**? To feel like you are all alone? To **suffer for doing the right thing**? And when it happens, **will you keep preaching**?

**Paul, through the opposition**, KEPT going to the synagogues and KEPT preaching boldly...

**NOTICE in the next few verses** how often the word "**boldly**" is used: [27] At Damascus Paul... preached boldly in the name of Jesus. [28] So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. [29] And he spoke and disputed (and the implication is 'boldly') against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.

- **Question for you: What if Paul had not continued to preach like that?** What if their opposition had shut him down?
- **Humanly speaking**, you and I would not be sitting here. Our presence HERE depended on his faithfulness **THERE**.

**So, we have to keep preaching. Are you ready for this kind of opposition in the Christian life?**

- I'm **not sure we are ready for this**, TBH. We've grown accustomed to a culture that affirms us and appreciates us and rewards us with success
- **Rod Dreher's book, Live Not by Lies...** In every age, our enemy creates a tyranny that keeps the gospel from being proclaimed. Pagan tyranny; religious tyranny; atheistic tyranny; political-correctness tyranny
- But we have to keep preaching... because, humanly speaking, the eternities of others depend on our faithfulness.
  - **At the end of the day**, we don't preach for the approval of the critics or the accolades of our friends, we preach for the **salvation of the lost**.
- **Bridge illustration**

## 2. Paul was chosen, yet God took nearly two decades to prepare him.

Something you don't immediately see here... there is a lot of time that passes in these verses. In vs. 23 it says, "After many days had passed he escaped from Damascus and went to Jerusalem..." (vs. 23).

"Many days" is **3 years**. **How do we know that?** Paul tells us himself in **Galatians 1:15–18**: [15] (Right after I was saved) [16] I did not immediately consult with anyone; [17] nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. [18] Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas (Peter) and remained with him fifteen days.

### 3 years passed before Paul met the first Apostle!

- 3 years where he was treated as a nobody. 3 years where nobody paid him any attention.

What happened during those 3 years? Paul tells us in Galatians he spent time with Jesus; kept going to the synagogues and brought Jews to Jesus one by one.

Then, **after 3 years he got his first introduction** to the church brass, Peter. Then he disappears again. **For 14 years**.

**How do we know that?** Again, Paul explains in Galatians: Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem (this time) with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. (**Galatians 2:1**)

**Well, what happened during THOSE 14 years?** Again, we're not sure, though we get clues in his epistles: we know **Jesus gave him some visions** of himself and what his church was supposed to looklike;<sup>2</sup> and **we also know** that in these 14 years he **was persecuted**, a lot.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 22:17–21; 2 Cor 12:1–4.

Scholars say that this passage in 2 Cor Paul likely refers to those 14 years:

**2 Cor 11:24–27**, Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. (They say this refers to those first 14 years because all persecution we read about in Acts has him suffering at the hands of Gentiles, not the Jews, so this is in those pre-Acts 13 years...) [25] Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. (Pelted with baseball sized rocks until people thought I was dead.)

Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; BTW, how many times do you have to be shipwrecked before you stop choosing sea travel as a transportation option? I feel like if I'm on a plane wreck more than once, I give up on flying. [26] on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; [27] in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Friend, **NEVER** make the mistake of asking Paul, "How are things going?" His autobiography would have been called, **My Worst Life Now**.

**BTW, most of that happened... in that little WHITE SPACE** in your Bible between vs. 22 and 23 of chapter 9.<sup>3</sup>

- As pastors, we are trained how to exegete fine tenses of Greek verbs: but the hardest parts of the Bible to interpret are those little white spaces

<sup>3</sup> Scholars disagree as to whether the 14 years are between vs. 22 and 23 or between vs. 27 and 31. Either way, the point is the same. God took a long time preparing him. I here follow the timeline laid out by Matthew Henry.

And **even after vs. 31**, Paul **really fades out** of the spotlight **until chapter 13**, when he's given his first official assignment.

- Now, there is **some question as to what happened exactly when<sup>4</sup>**— but, bottom line:

**All scholars agree that there are at least 17 years** between the time God called him in Acts 9 and when he is officially commissioned as a missionary in chap. 13. **God took a minimum of 17 years to prepare him.**

I'm sure he said during that time, "God, why are things moving so slowly?"

**And yet, this kind of delayed preparation is so common in Scripture** I'd almost say it is par for the course:

- **I've already told you about David...**
- **God called Moses** to lead Israel out of Egypt; then had him tend sheep for his father-in-law for 40 years. Talk about a life-fail. You go from being a Presidential candidate to being a farmhand for your father in law.
- **God told Joseph** he was going to use him to save Israel... and then sent him off to slavery and prison for two decades.

**Moses: 40 years. Joseph, 20 years. David: (15 years) Paul: 17 years.**  
Are you complaining about how long God is taking with you?

**Chuck Swindoll** says 3 words characterize these kinds of spaces— particularly for David

- 1st word: **Obscurity**: Think about David's white space: no one paid any attention to him.
- 2nd word: **Monotony**: "David... what did you do today?" "I watched the sheep. They walked from here to there..."
  - I practiced on my harp. I even wrote a couple of songs. Want to hear one?

- "What else?" I worked a little with my slingshot...
- **While David is telling you this** your eyes are glazing over; it seems so insignificant... **Obscurity and monotony.**
- 3rd word: **Reality**:
  - In the pasture, David learned the themes that would one day become Psalm 23, the world's most famous worship song.
  - **He developed courage by fighting the lion and the bear**; one day he'd look at Goliath and say, 'I experienced God's power enabling me to defeat a lion and bear. I know that same power can handle Goliath.'
- **The desert is where Paul really came to know Jesus.**

As pastors, we are trained how to exegete fine tenses of Greek verbs: but the hardest parts of the Bible to interpret are those little **white spaces—and yet**, that's where God does his best writing:

- **Billy Graham**, "If I had it to do over again... I would speak less and study more. I would spend more time in spiritual nurture, seeking to grow closer to God so I could become more like Christ. I would spend more time in prayer... I would spend more time studying the Bible and meditating on its truth, not only for sermon preparation but for life."<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Paul was chosen, yet he suffered

**If you have to choose one word** to characterize those first 17 years, it is "suffering."

**That's what God had said**: "He is a chosen instrument of mine... and I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (9:15)

**Suffering is one of God's primary training tools** for his people.

- Suffering **doesn't mean something is wrong**. Hardly. God is preparing you to be an instrument of his power. A channel.

<sup>4</sup> Some say these 14 years took place between vv 27–31 not 22–23.

<sup>5</sup> <http://billygraham.org/story/notable-quotes-from-billy-graham/>

- The word he uses in **9:15** literally means “vessel.”
  - **Vessels have no power or worth of their own;** vessels are conduits for power.
    - *The value is not in the pot;* but in what the pot holds.
    - The power is not in the wire; it’s in what runs through the wire.
  - **In order for Paul to become a vessel,** he had to be stripped of all self-reliance; a sense of his own value.
  - It’s why AW Tozer said, **“It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.”** A. W. Tozer
- You see, up until his conversion, Paul had seen himself as a **capable tool** for God. But God wanted Paul to become a vessel of his power.
  - You can see it in the transformation of his name: Saul was a strong Jewish name. King head and shoulders above everyone. Paul literally means “small.”
  - **Saul the mighty needed to become Paul the small.**
- **Kintsugi (PIC)**
  - Before you are broken, you can’t be filled with Jesus.
  - **Saul the accomplished Pharisee couldn’t help the churches.** God was sending him to people with problems, people with pain.
  - **Saul the perfect Pharisee** might impress them, but he couldn’t help them, but **the Paul that had walked through pain** and failure—the Paul who believed he was the chief of sinners, who could testify that God will be faithful even in our darkest days—**that’s a guy who can help me.**
  - **The best parts of Jesus** you can only see in the valley of pain. **God has to turn you** from Saul the Mighty into Paul the Small.
  - Again: **“It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.”** A. W. Tozer<sup>6</sup>

Or write this down: **If dependence is the objective; then weakness is your advantage.** *Suffering helps you get in touch with your weakness.*

Martin Luther famously said that 3 things make for a good theologian: **Study, prayer, affliction.**

- **Suffering PURGES you of self-confidence**
- **Suffering is also where God PURIFIES your heart, stripping you of your idols.** I think of **ABRAHAM:**
  - **Abraham had left everything** to follow God.
  - **God had told Abraham** that if he followed him, he’d make of him a great nation that would bless the world. **Problem was that Abraham, at the time, was childless**—he and Sarah his wife **had always wanted a son,** but he was about 90 years old and she was 80, and **they had, understandably, given up.**
    - **But God kept his promise** and gave him a son in his old age. **This son, Isaac, was the most precious thing** to Abraham: Abraham’s greatest earthly treasure. It was also **the locus of all his hopes** for the future. At 90, he ain’t having no more kids. This was it!
    - Gen 22, an **angel appeared to him** and said, “God wants you to sacrifice your son.” No explanation.
      - **Imagine being Abraham:** I left to follow you... what had he done wrong? God, why are you punishing me?
      - To all of this God gave **no answer.**
    - **This came AFTER Abraham left to follow...** Many years into ministry God may put you through a test to see if you’ve formed a ministry idol, because ministry is a great place for people with the idol of success to hide, because we can cloak our service of our idol as zeal for Jesus
    - Abraham **obeyed,** but the angel stopped him, and said through him: “Now I know that you love me... (There is nothing you prioritize or depend on more than me.)”

What if that is some of what God is doing in your life? *What if he was just testing you to see what YOU love and trust the most?*

<sup>6</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous*, 144.

You see, **sometimes I think we do wrong** when we **try to find a silver lining** in everything: (Oh, things didn't work out to be at this church but that led me to *be at this bigger church where I made more money...*)

- **Some things God does simply to prepare** your heart more for himself...
- **Reminds me of the story of the little bird flying south** for the winter. But he got a **late start**, so he got caught in a snowstorm. The storm was so bad that ice formed on his wings and he couldn't even fly. He went down for a crash landing, and couldn't get back up. He thought, "Great. Now I'm going to freeze to death." But then suddenly a cow came and took a dump on him. At first, the little bird thought things had gone from bad to worse, but then he realizes that the manure has warmed his wings and is thawing them. He got so excited that he started to **chirp and sing**. But **this attracts a cat**; who comes along and eats him. And the lessons from this great little parable are 3: Lesson 1: Not everyone who drops manure on you is your enemy. Lesson 2: Not everyone who digs you out is your friend. Lesson 3: When you're in manure, sometimes its helpful to keep your little chirper shut... and see what God is up to.<sup>7</sup>

Because God is at work *in you*. See that phrase in vs. 15? **"He is a chosen instrument of mine."** (9:15)

- OF MINE. God **calls you first to himself**, and only secondarily to ministry.
- **YOU UNDERSTAND THIS?** God's primary call on your life is not to spread Christianity, but to know Christ.
  - God can handle the spread of Christianity. He calls you first just to know him.
  - If you think spreading Christianity or creating good in the world is your primary calling, you're going to be frustrated. But if you recognize that God's primary calling on your life is

for you to know him; well, that's going to make some of the pain and opposition and suffering you go through make a lot more sense.

- **The point of the Christian life is not to spread Christianity but to KNOW CHRIST**
- **And if that's true, that means: What God is doing in you is just as significant as what he is doing through you.**

**RIGHT NOW, he's preparing some of you for himself through your pain; your disappointment. In your obscurity. So quit fighting him on it.**

**Paul was chosen, yet he was opposed. Paul was chosen, yet God took many years to prepare him; Paul was chosen, yet he suffered.**

***YOU ARE CHOSEN, yet you are... opposed; delayed; suffer.***

**Let me end this by reflecting for a few minutes on that word: CHOSEN.** Because it's the key to grasping everything else.

**A friend of mine**, who went through a moral failure in ministry, says, "The **sweetest doctrine in all my life is that God chose me.**"

- Not trying to turn you into a Calvinist... just that at the heart of everyone who knows God is the awareness that he started the process. I don't care how you dot the i's or cross the T's, but you know **your being a Christian was his idea, not yours.**
- And your being on mission and in ministry was his idea, not yours.
- And that means that what God started, he'll finish

**God chose you! That sustains you in failure and setback.**

**I love the words of Spurgeon here: "I have no questions that God chose me, because I am quite sure that if God had not chosen me I should never have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I**

<sup>7</sup> Craig Groeschel, "The Making of a Man of God," 1 Kings 17

was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards; and he must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why he should have looked upon me with special love. So I feel like I am forced to accept that doctrine."<sup>8</sup>

What God started, he will finish. He didn't choose me because of my righteousness, and that means he won't give up on me when I fail.

[9:15] "Go, for he is a *chosen* instrument of mine... [16] For I will show him *how much he must suffer* for the sake of my name."

**Friend, don't give up... you are chosen.** Chosen to know him. To be owned by him--fully his, and then used by him to point others to Jesus in this world.

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures, book 2, page 47*



