

Grace Fellowship Church

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Series: Acts

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Where Was God?

Acts 9:1-17

If you're here this morning and you don't have a Bible with you, slip up your hand. I want to put a Bible in your hand, and I would like for you to open that Bible to Acts 9. The events of Acts 9 follow on the heels of the slaughter of Stephen, the stoning of Stephen, and much like 9/11 in what took place there, the question is...*What is happening here? What is really going on?* because crises certainly develop us. Things that happen to us impact us. They change us. They shape us. They have major impacts on how we see things from that point forward.

I want to propose to you something. Crisis and tragedy not only impact us and not only shape us; crisis and tragedy reveal us. They really show what is actually there, what is really, really going on there. These defining moments of truth where we look at a moment where we realize our life is going to be different, there is going to be no turning back from that point, and I want us to look at this Acts 9 passage, and if you have that handout sheet, there is a key question across the top, which is...*Where was God at 9/11?*

I would submit to you that you could actually put that "Where was God?" at a lot of different places and times in your life. Where was God when that car wreck took place? Where was God when your child had cancer? Where was God when your mother died? Where was God when you lost your job and your company downsized and the market collapsed?

I think for this generation and for all of us individually, there are moments that personally define us, and there are moments that define us as a family, and there are events that define us as a nation. I think among the older generation, you'll often hear people ask the question, "Do you remember where you were when Kennedy was shot?" How many of you remember where you were when Kennedy was shot? I remember it vividly, like it was yesterday.

Among the generation previous to that, a question like, "Do you remember where you were when you heard the news Pearl Harbor had been bombed?" How many of you actually are old enough to remember that? There are like five of us...*you*...I don't actually remember that. I remember where I was when the *Challenger* blew up. You remember Christa, the teacher, and that whole *Challenger* crew?

If you have your sheet there, there are some questions we're going to wrestle with here this morning for a few minutes.

1. *Why did it happen?*

2. *What we believe about God matters.*

3. *What we believe about God is evidenced by what and how we see.*

4. *Where was God?*

5. *Where are we now?*

Acts 9:1: "Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'"

(Acts 9:1-4)

"Why are you persecuting Me?" Now that question of why is an interesting question, and I'm not going to spend a whole lot of time on this particular issue of why, but when situations come into our lives that seem absolutely inexplicable, we often want an answer to why.

I remember in the days after 9/11 down at ground zero people asking that question, and I remember people going on TV speaking in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking for God, announcing why they believed it happened, and there was all kinds of stuff out there. Let me just show you a passage. Look over to Luke 13, and this is not a theoretical. This is a question that came directly to Jesus about tragedy.

Luke 13:1: "There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." (Luke 13:1) Now you understand what happened here is literally there were some people who came all the way down from Galilee. It would have been a journey of about two weeks, and they would have come all the way down to Jerusalem to worship, and as they were offering sacrifices and worship, Pilate, the Roman representative, went in there and mingled among these guys who were worshiping.

It would be no more different than if today people came into the church today with their Bibles open and down underneath the garments of these Roman soldiers who were pretending to be worshipers, all of a sudden they took out clubs and started beating the worshipers and beat the worshipers to death, and so the sacrifice of the blood mingled with the sacrifice of the worshipers. People were going, "Why did this happen? Were those Galileans not right with God? How in the world could this possibly happen?"

"And Jesus answered and said to them, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no...' look at this; this is really important, "...but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them..." (Luke 13:2-4)

Now this is just a random event. They're up in a tower. *Boom!* They die. Do you think somehow they deserved this random, crazy death? Here's what Jesus said: "...do you think that they were

worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:4-5)

Now the second point here, and I want to point out very, very clearly number two, is that what we believe about God really, really matters. The slaughter in Acts was at the hands of people who imagined they were doing God's bidding. Saul, when you look at that chapter of Acts, believes he is on a mission of God. He believes he is ordained by God. He believes he is authorized and sanctioned by God and the religious figures. I put a quote here from A. W. Tozer, and I think it's incredibly important.

"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God."

Then, "For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself... Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God..." Later in that paragraph, "Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, 'What comes into your mind when you think about God?' we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. Were we able to know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able with some precision to foretell where the Church will stand tomorrow."

In Acts 9, Paul falls to the ground. He hears a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Think with me a minute. *Why was Paul persecuting the Christians?* Why was he doing it? Was he sadistic and just mean? No! He actually believed he was doing the very bidding of God. He thought that.

Look at verse 5: "And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?'" Look at this: "Then the Lord said, 'I am Jesus...'" (Acts 9:5) Now let me just encourage all of us to the realization if any of our words, if any of our actions, if any of our thoughts would not sound proper in the mouth and in the mind of the Lord Jesus Christ, do not let us kid ourselves we're doing the bidding of Jesus, amen?

What does God look like? Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. "Then the Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' So he, trembling and astonished, said, '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.' And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless..." see, he had this whole team with him, "...hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank." (Acts 9:5-9)

Now question number four is a very, very simple question. *Where was God in that tragedy?* I think this is incredibly important because every one of us here will at some time or another face our own personal 9/11. I promise you! You will come to a place, and it will absolutely shake you to your very core, and the question you need to wrestle with is... *Where is God in tragedy?*

Here is the very simple answer: *God is where He has always been.* God is on the throne. God does not abandon the throne. The Bible teaches God can even use the wrath of man to redound to His praise. That's the kind of God we have.

You say, *Well did God make this happen?* No, but God gives us free will, and even in the midst of absolute tragedy God can give beauty out of ashes. The question of where was God could be asked, "Where was God when mankind committed treason? Where was God when Joseph was sold into slavery? Where was God when Joseph was lied about falsely? Where was God when the children of Israel were thrown into the Nile? Where was God when Jeremiah was thrown in the dungeon? Where was God when Daniel was carried off to Babylon? Where was God when the temple was trampled over? Where was God when John the Baptist was beheaded? Where was God when James was beheaded? Where was God when Stephen was stoned? Where was God when Paul was beheaded?" The list could go on and on, and the answer is Isaiah 6.

In verse 1, it says, "In the year that King Uzziah died..." (Isaiah 6:1) Uzziah had had a long and fruitful reign, and this death of Uzziah was a frightening, scary time. Here's what Isaiah said in that tragedy: "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple." (Isaiah 6:1)

Did you see what happened? Here's tragedy. God opens the heavens. Isaiah looks into heaven. God isn't going, *Oh My goodness, what do We do now? This is the biggest mess I've ever seen. Wow. Guys, we need to come up with a plan B because I had no idea that was going to happen.*

He sees the Lord is sovereign even in tragedy. I'm going to tell you something; if you see God as a Santa Claus who just jumps in and solves every problem you have, and your faith is shaken in God in times of tragedy, it's because you had the wrong God. If your God is not a God who can see you through times of tragedy, don't blame God. God has never claimed to be that kind of God. It is your theology that is messed up. It is not God.

In the book of Revelation you find John, and John is in a place of suffering. He's in a place of isolation, and on Sunday he has gathered together to pray, and he would have every reason in the world to imagine the church was headed nowhere, and he's writing this book of Revelation on an island where probably he's thinking nobody is ever going to read it.

How many books have been written to know more about Revelation? How many times have we set down and read that book? John has no way of knowing that, and in the midst of that abandonment, God, in chapter 4, just opens the window of heaven, and he sees this same picture of the throne room.

"Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts...'" (Isaiah 6:2-3) I wish I had time to just dig into that. That just means unique, unique, unique. God is separate. God is apart. God is unclassifiable. God is *sovereign*.

Look at this... "The whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke." (Isaiah 6:3-4) Look at this: "So I said: 'Woe is me, for I am undone!'" (Isaiah 6:5) I want you to notice what happens. When Isaiah actually sees God, it changes the question from "God, where are You?" to "Woe is me!" Do you see this question change? There's this massive question change.

Go back to Acts 9 for a minute. Look at verse 10. "Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.'" (Acts 9:10) By the way, if you ever hear your name in the middle of the night, that's what you're supposed to say. "Here I am!"

"So the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go to the street called Straight...'" (Acts 9:11) Do I have a picture of that arch? There's an arch here. Do you see this right here? This is in Damascus. This is the street called Straight. That is the arch Paul walked under. We were there a few years ago and been there since then.

Tonight actually I'm going to do something different. We've never done this before. I'm just giving you fair warning. Actually it was on this trip I took this picture, Mike and I were arrested in Iraq and held hostage by the Mahdi Militia. Mike and I have completely different stories on that. He says it's my fault; I say it's his fault. This is going to be no live streaming. We're dragging out the pictures, and we're going to let you guys decide whose fault it is. If you hate home movies and slides, just stay away, but if you want to come to final decision point, was it Mike or was it Buddy, come back tonight. We're going to look at those.

Verse 11: "So the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas...'" (Acts 9:11) Now do you see this right here? Nothing about this sounds like a good idea. Does the name *Judas* ring a bell? You're going to the house of Judas. You're going to go talk to Paul. "Lord, I think Paul has a *fatwa*. I think this is a messy situation."

"...for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias..." *Oh no! He already knows what I look like!* "...coming in and putting his hand on him..." *Can't I just like whisper in the window?* No, you have to go in. You have to put your hand on him, "... so that he might receive his sight.' Then Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.'" (Acts 9:11-14)

Now do you understand God is saying, "Ananias, I want you to go in and pray for him in My name"? "But the Lord said to him, 'Go...'" look at this, "...for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.'" (Acts 9:15)

Okay, I want to say something really clear. What we believe about God is evidenced by what we believe about Saul. What we believe about God is evidenced by what we believe God believes about Saul. That's really important to understand. See, it's fairly comfortable for us to go, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty! You're the mighty, sovereign God. We just trust you," but when that sovereign God says, "By the way, I'm kind of fond of Saul," *Whoa! I'm not fond of Saul!* Well then you don't know God.

If we do not love Saul, we do not love God! When we hear that voice from God, when we see God is sovereign on the throne, when Isaiah looks up into heaven and he sees the majesty of God, the words that resonate from that throne are, "Who will go for Me?" You know what Isaiah says? "Woe is me!" Not, "Woe is them!" "Woe is me! I'm the one messed up. I'm the one who truly doesn't know God. I really don't know this God who loves Saul."

"I don't know this God who loves the Assyrians." That's what happened to Jonah. "Go up there. I want you to go to Nineveh. I want you to preach to them. I want revival to break out in Nineveh."

"No, I'm not going to go up there. I'm going to go the other way." Then when he goes over there and revival breaks out, Jonah gets absolutely mad and says, "I knew You were going to do that. I didn't like those people. I still don't like those people." Well God does.

What we believe about God matters. It matters beyond our understanding. My concern is at the very time we face a spiritual war, we find ourselves spiritually bankrupt. Do you understand? Listen carefully to what I'm going to say to you. I know it's not politically correct. We don't like to hear this. We were not attacked by a nation; we were attacked by a spiritual, religious ideology. If we think we can land this plane by changing and government regime change, we're wrong. The regime change that has to take place is a spiritual regime change.

If we think by just rearranging who sits in what presidential palace and who pulls the powers of the political orders, and we think by doing that we're going to solve the problem, we have not come to grips with the reality these actions of 9/11 were not conceived, they were not cared for, they were not carried out by a nation or a government. They were carried out by a religious ideology. We find ourselves at the same time we're facing a spiritual war in a position of spiritual bankruptcy, and my concern quite frankly is not whether *they* know God; my concern is do *we* know God?

I want to say, because I know this is true, there are people who download this all over the world. I have Muslim friends all over the world. We have Muslim friends who download this, and I want to say very, very clearly, if you are unmerciful, do not say you believe in a God of mercy. If you say you believe in a God of compassion, and you do not have compassion, you do not believe in a God of compassion. If we believe God is a merciful and a compassionate God, and it does not reflect in how we treat one another, we are only lying to ourselves and everybody else.

I read this story, and I look at Simon who was a trickster, and I look at the Samaritans who are tied up in their religion, and I look at Saul who was spiritually arrogant, and I would love to go, *I never see any of that Saul stuff in me, and I never see any of the Samaritan stuff in me, and I never see any of that Simon stuff in me.* The simple reality is I would love to say I'm never possessed by religious arrogance, but I know in my heart that is not true, and I would love to say I'm never governed by materialism, but I know in my heart that is not true.

The only hope I have hung upon the cross, and the only power I know is the One who raised Jesus from the grave, and the only hope we have who went and met a bunch of cowardly traitors on a pebbled beach in Galilee, and the question He asked was simply, "Do you love Me?" My answer is, "I don't love You like You loved me, but I want to." I don't. I wish my love were deeper. I wish my love was broader, but I find times in my life that my love is like a child's love.

The first thing we must confess as a nation and as a people and as a church that at times we are stricken with a spiritual paralysis, and I know something about physical paralysis. I know what it looks like when your brain cannot find the nerves to tell your body how to move. If we find it easier to hate Muslims than to love them, then we do not know the God of the Scriptures. We might know the God of America, but dare we not claim to know the God who laid down His life for those who crucified Him.

I don't have any doubt about our nation's ability to war...none whatsoever. There's no nation on the face of the earth equal to the war machine of the United States. Our war machine is the finest, most-equipped, best-trained war machine that has ever existed on the planet. No people no place have ever existed that could beat our armies. The war machine of the United States is superior, not only to all others, it's superior to all others combined. That's not just naïve patriotism; it's just reality.

We have the biggest and best of everything. America is the sole superpower in existence, but the question we need to come back to is...*Do we know God?* If this is a spiritual war, then where are our spiritual warriors? There were times in American history and armies against which we fought

that we were not adequately matched, and in those days we as a nation got on our face before God and called our nation to prayer. I do not know we have the courage to do that again.

Psalm 20:7: David cries out, "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; But we will remember the name of the LORD our God." (Psalm 20:7) Abraham Lincoln, in some of the deepest, darkest parts of the Civil War, not only called upon the nation to call upon the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, here's the words he said: "I invite the people of the United States to invoke the influence of His Holy Spirit to guide the counsels of the government with wisdom adequate so great of a national emergency."

Then during the dark days of the war with Nazism, when it really did not look whether we would win or whether we would not win, when the war machine was not on our side, the war machine was against us, in the day as D-Day entered and so many people were slaughtered, the President went on the radio nationally, and listen to these words. "Last night when I spoke to you, I knew at that moment the troops of the United States and our allies were crossing the Channel and in another operation, so at this hour I ask you to join me in prayer."

Listen to this prayer. "Almighty God, our sons, the pride of our nation, this day has set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our republic..." listen to this, "...our religion, and our civilization, to set free a suffering humanity. Lead them straight and true. Give strength to their arms, stoutness to their heart, and steadfastness to their faith. They will need Your blessings. Their road will be long and hard, for the enemy is strong. He may hurl back our forces. Success may not come with rushing speed, but we shall return again and again."

Now listen. "We know that by Thy grace and by Thy righteousness, our cause, our sons will triumph, for these men are lately drawn from the ways of peace. They fight not for a lust of conquest. They fight to end conquest. They fight to liberate. They fight to let justice arise and tolerance and goodwill among Your people. They yearn for the United States the battle to end, for their return to their homes. Some will never return. Embrace them, Father; the heroic servants into the kingdom, and for us at home, fathers, mothers, children, wives, sisters, brothers, the brave men and women overseas whose thoughts and prayers are ever with them..." listen, "... help us, Almighty God, to rededicate ourselves in renewed faith in this hour of great sacrifice.

Many have urged that I call the nation to a single day of prayer, of special prayer, but because this road is long and this desire is great, I ask that our people devote themselves to continuous prayer. As we rise each new day and again when each night is spent, let the words of prayer be upon our lips invoking Your help to our efforts. Lord, give us faith; give us faith in Thee. With Thy blessings we shall prevail over the unholy forces of our enemy. Help us conquer the apostles of greed and of racial arrogance."

Winston Churchill said, "Upon this battle depends the survival of the Christian civilization." Did you hear what I said? "Upon this battle depends the survival of the Christian civilization. Upon it depends our way of life, the continuity of our institutions. The whole fury and might of the enemy must soon be turned upon us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island to lose this war.

If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free, and the life of the world may move forward into a broad, sunlit uplands, but if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, and including all that we have known and cared for will sink into the abyss of the new dark age, made more sinister and perhaps more protracted by the lights of perverted science. Therefore let us brace ourselves to our duties and bear ourselves that if the British Commonwealth should last a thousand years, men will say this was their finest hour."

Now let me tell you something; in looking back over 10 years, I am deeply concerned we have a nation of people who do not know God. I don't mean the God of our cute, little churches on the sides of the hill. I'm talking about the God of the book of Acts who loves Saul. Here's what I would like to do: I would like for us to do what Isaiah did. I think it's time we prayed. I think it's time we prayed for revival, that the Word of God go forth powerfully, and revival starts with the house of God, and it requires first the repentance of His people.

It requires for us to repent of our prayerlessness. It requires for us to repent of our arrogance. It requires us to repent of God as being a hobby. It requires us to repent on the behalf of our nation to imagine that just because we are superior in our military power we will prevail. Listen, Egypt was the superpower of its day. Assyria was the superpower of its day. Babylon was the superpower of its day. You could just start naming them off. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor labor in vain. We can sit around and talk about people who don't pray, but the question we have to ask is...*Are we going to be the people who do?*

Let's pray: Father, thank You for You. Lord, we pray You will give us a heart of understanding, that we will understand You, that we will know You. Lord, we pray for the soldiers who are involved in the longest war America has ever seen. Lord, we pray for the forces of darkness, that they will encounter the light of Your eternal Son. Lord, we pray we will rise up and first, before we decide we're going to rise up and tell anybody what they should do, we will get on our knees and confess our need for You, to have truly Your heart, in Your name we pray, amen.