



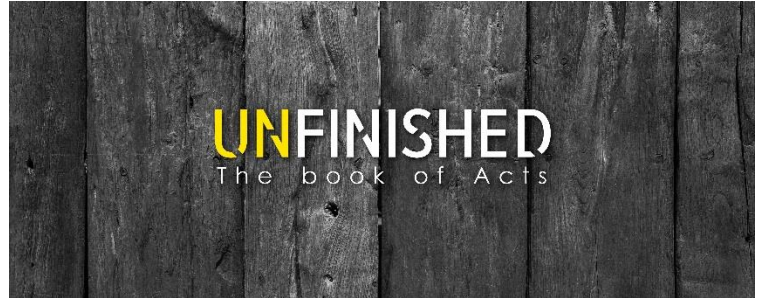
# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

## SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

## Unfinished

Part 16: God's Rescue Mission

Acts 9:1-19 | Tim Badal | January 7, 2018



Today we come to one of the most prominent, transforming and cataclysmic events in the book of Acts, and maybe in all of human history. Bible scholars say that this event, the conversion of Saul the Pharisee to Christianity, may be second only to the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nothing apart from a miracle could take a man hell-bent on destroying Christianity and in one fell swoop bring him to bowing his knee and trusting Jesus as his Savior and Lord.

This passage in Acts 9 reminds us that God is on a rescue mission. There's something about rescue missions in our world that captivate us. We make movies out of them, then are riveted by the stories as they unfold. Over the last couple decades we've seen some very notable and successful rescue missions that frankly take our breath away.

I wasn't born yet when it happened, but I've watched the rescue depicted in the movie *Apollo 13*. You may remember the astronauts on that trip were pretty much left for dead out in space. But with great thinking and teamwork—not only on the part of the astronauts but also by the technicians at NASA—our three astronauts eventually made it home safely. Stories were told over and over about all that made that rescue mission possible.

I am old enough to remember in the late '80s when our attention turned to Midland, Texas. There a group of kids had been playing hide and seek in a back yard when a little girl about 18 months old, Jessica McClure, fell into a well pipe about 15" in diameter. For 60 hours she was pinned 20 feet underground. The world was mesmerized, wondering how people would find a way to get the baby out alive. After 60 hours and some amazing work, she was rescued. Now in her 30s, Jessica reminisces with amazement about the rescue mission that saved her life.

Not too long ago we saw the rescue of Captain Phillips. He was part of the crew of the Maersk shipping boat that was taken by Somali pirates. For four days he was in a little boat in the Indian Ocean, off the coast of Somalia. It took the might of the U.S. military to rescue him unharmed while he was being held hostage by armed assailants. Again, that's been made into a movie, *Captain Phillips*.

Finally, it took 69 days for 33 Chilean underground miners to be rescued from hundreds of feet under a mountain. After a lot of trials and errors, we could see the capsule bringing them up, one by one.

What is it about search and rescue missions that captivate us? Right away, we know life hangs in the balance. If something isn't done, they will die. Our world almost stops, doing everything in its power to save those humans, because we know that's their only hope.

As we look at Acts 9, I want to remind you that God is on a rescue mission to save people. The Bible tells us Jesus' mission was to "seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Those are the two great rescue pillars: seeking and saving. If you are a follower of Christ, you did not come to Jesus on your own. You didn't make a decision that would then somehow compel Jesus to come your way. You were lost and blind and held captive by the evil one, then Jesus came to set you free.

The Bible says that when Jesus pulls us from the abyss of sin, out of the devil's clutches, and brings us into His Kingdom, a great party breaks out in heaven. In Luke 15, Jesus used parables—which describe us as lost sheep, a lost coin and a rebellious son—to illustrate how lost and broken and how much in trouble we really are. In Acts 9 we come to one of the most dramatic rescue events God has ever done, using means that go beyond what we ourselves have experienced.

I was found by Jesus as a young boy in a Sunday School class. Upon hearing the gospel message, I placed my faith and trust in Him. There were no lights. There was no persecution—as much as the Sunday School teachers might have disagreed about my behavior. Because of this, it might be easy for me to think I don't really have a conversion story. Perhaps you feel the same, but no matter where it happened for you, if you call yourself a child of God, you have been the recipient of God's seeking and rescuing you from your sin. For this reason, part of Saul's story is a story for us as well.

## **God's rescue mission shows us the reach of His grace.**

I want you to see three things today. First, God's rescue mission shows us the reach of His grace. With every one of those four stories I just mentioned, you would be in awe of some of the things people did that enabled the rescue to take place. One of the great things I love about the movie *Apollo 13*, which describes getting the astronauts out of a broken-down spaceship and back to earth, is how NASA literally had to reinvent the spaceship so it could be used for a completely different task than that for which it was originally made. New technology was then built based on what NASA had done.

This tells us that in a situation where someone needs to be rescued, we have the capacity to go in directions we've never gone before. When we consider how Saul was such a great persecutor and rebel against God, we can see how infinite God's grasp for us is. None of us stand hopeless or helpless outside His grace. If God could save Saul of Tarsus, He could save everyone in this place. Saul was about as bad as it gets, so we can know that God is able to save any person alive today. So take heart. Maybe today you feel broken. Maybe you feel you're outside the reach of His grace. But you're not. Or maybe you are thinking of someone in your family or community, wondering if they're too hard-hearted for God's grace to reach them. But they aren't.

In our story today we will realize how far His grace can extend.

## **In Paul we see that God rescues those who mask a spiritual relationship with religion.**

In Philippians 3:4–6, Paul gives us his biography, and his pedigree is pretty glowing. He says, "When it comes to zeal and to following the rules of my religion, I'm faultless and blameless. I did everything by the book. I was so zealous for the festivals and the other practices, I nailed them with 100% accuracy."

But nowhere does Scripture say that Saul was ever in love with God or that he had a growing relationship with God. You might wonder if the Bible ever speaks of someone that way? Well, a little later in Acts we'll see that Cornelius—a Gentile who had converted to Judaism—considered his faith to be a matter of the heart. God saw that not only was he God-fearing, but he also was generous and served God gladly. God then brought someone to Cornelius who could tell him about Jesus.

Yet nothing like this is said of Saul. He had zeal for religion, but not zeal for Jesus. So listen carefully. It's still possible for someone today to only have zeal for an institution called the church and not for Jesus Himself. While Paul had the pedigree, he missed the Person of Jesus Christ. We need to see if that same situation applies to us. Are we involved in something that makes us feel good, or are we radically transformed by the Person of Jesus Christ, Who has forgiven us of our sin?

Saul shows us that we can go through all the rituals and be public enemy #1 of Christ and His Kingdom. Saul looked really good. Saul was a Pharisee, climbing the religious ladder, and we too can be deceived into doing the same thing. Some of us are masking any kind of relationship with Jesus—any kind of change Jesus might bring to our lives—with religion.

## **In Paul we see that God rescues those who are marked by ruthlessness.**

Saul was a ruthless man. Remember, we've met Saul before Acts 9. In Acts 7, Stephen was about to be stoned for preaching the gospel in a local synagogue. In fact, the men in this particular synagogue came from Saul's birthplace. In other words, there's a good chance that Stephen and Saul not only went to the same temple, but they probably knew each other. Saul probably knew Stephen before Stephen's conversion to Christianity.

But as you recall, the people became angered by the message Stephen was preaching—that Jesus was the Messiah Whom they killed and that He had been raised from the dead. We read in Acts 7:58–60:

*Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

Then we read in the next verse, "And Saul approved of his execution..." This co-participant with Stephen in temple worship hated the movement of Christ so much that he wanted anyone who was loyal to Christ to die. Luke goes on to tell us in Acts 8:1–3:

*And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*

Saul was “*ravaging the church*” like a wild animal ripping apart its prey, men and women alike. Luke mentions men and women again in the beginning of Acts 9. Saul’s hostility was so intense that he included women, which was unusual in that day. For the most part, if a man was forced into submission by someone, the women would also submit. Saul was not content just to pursue the men, but went after the women as well.

It gets worse. In Acts 9:1 we read, “*But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...*” Before he had been taking believers to prison, but now murder was added to his goals. He considered these people to be blasphemers, an offense he believed to be worthy of death. So Saul “*went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus.*”

Damascus is 150 miles north of Jerusalem. How many of you are passionate enough about something to walk 150 miles over rough terrain to pursue that goal? Saul was resilient. He was willing to travel as far as needed to kill whomever he had to in order to silence faith in Jesus Christ once and for all. He was a ruthless man.

Each of us probably has someone in our life who seems ruthless. It might be someone in your family, or in your workplace, or in your school. There are people who hate the name of Jesus and hate our Christianity. But none of them can compare to Saul, who personified public enemy #1 of Christ.

If Saul could be changed, so can your enemy. That person you might have consigned to hell, thinking there’s no way they could ever experience the redemption of Christ—they’re too hard or too hostile toward God—we must remember that just as God reached out and met Saul, so too this person is within the reach of His grace. So we should be loving them and pursuing them. We should never think there’s a hopeless case among us.

### **In Paul we see that God rescues those who are moved toward rebellion.**

I’m going to take a little artistic license for a moment here. Acts 9:3 says, “*Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus...*” What is Saul “on his way” to do? He’s going to do what he can to stop Christianity, against the will and word of God, but what he considers to be right. Essentially, Saul is taking on himself the role of God, determining who will live and who will die. He is forcing people to worship the way he believes is proper. In short, Saul is going to Damascus in direct rebellion against God.

Maybe today you’re not hiding behind religion. Maybe you’re not a ruthless individual. You can honestly say you’ve never even thought about killing someone. But we read in Isaiah 53:6 that all of us like sheep have gone astray. We’ve gone our own way. Scripture sees this as much more than being distracted. Rather, this is called rebellion. Just like Saul, we’re heading our own way and doing our own thing. We’ve not asked God what He thinks about our choices. If Saul was a true God-fearing God follower, he would have prayed and asked, “God, am I fighting against You?”

Remember when Peter and John are before the Sanhedrin, and Gamaliel—who, by the way, was Saul’s mentor—says, “Let this go. If Jesus has truly died, the people will quit and go home. But if you fight this movement, you may find out you’re not fighting against people, but against God Himself.”

Saul is going against the direct orders of his teacher, and he has come to the point—without asking God—of deciding that Christianity needs to be destroyed. Little does he know that although he thinks he’s doing what is right, in fact he’s one of God’s greatest enemies. He’s rebelling against God.

Later, Paul would say in Romans that he wasn’t the only rebel. In Romans 1 he says that in our sin, we’re at enmity with God. We’re warring against God, because we are choosing to go our own way. Even as followers of Christ, we struggle every day to say, “Not my will but Yours be done in my life.” That hostility is rebellion.

But even as rebels, God continues to give us grace. Romans 5:8 says, “*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” While we were religious fakes, while we were ruthless creatures, while we were rebellious people, Christ died for us. No one is outside the grasp of God’s grace. No one.

### **God’s rescue mission stops us in our tracks.**

You would have thought it would take all the might of heaven to stop this wild boar, this savage animal Saul. You would have thought God would have worked Himself up into a lather, sweating as He tried to deal with this aggressive and angry opponent. But He didn’t. How long did it take for Him to change Saul? Years? Months? Days?

Look at Acts 9:3. How long did it take? *“Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.”* “Suddenly”—all at once, and “flashed.” These two important words do not indicate a long process or an arduous journey. All at once, in a flash, this hater of God became a lover of God.

This tells us a couple things. First, it is God Who is active and we who are passive in salvation. While no doubt we carry a responsibility, the sovereignty of God rules the day in our salvation. Saul did not see this coming. He wasn't looking for Jesus. He wasn't hoping for Jesus. He was on his way to kill Jesus' followers. By His sovereign grace, God chose to illuminate the eyes of this man, stopping him dead in his tracks.

Second, this tells us that while Saul's conversion took place all at once—conversion is an instantaneous change of heart that happens in the life of a believer—there was a process involved. Paul tells his conversion story three times in Scripture and each time we're given a little more information. In Acts 26:14 we have added details. After the flash comes and after Jesus says, “Why are you persecuting Me?”—which are things we find in today's text—He goes on to say, *“It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”* What's He talking about? What is a goad?

In the first century, and even in agricultural situations today, a goad was a stick to which was attached something sharp—perhaps a fragment of a bone. This was used to poke the oxen to get their attention. We've heard it expressed this way: “I'm going to goad you until you do what I say.” No doubt, an animal who was being goaded, not liking what it felt, would respond by kicking against the goad.

### At conversion, God captures our attention.

Jesus told Saul he was kicking against the goads. What might these goads have been? These goads were what captured Saul's attention here—and God captures our attention at the moment of conversion—but He's also done this along the way. Some believe that the goads Saul was kicking against were the life and teaching of Jesus Himself.

Here's the thinking. Jesus and Saul were contemporaries, both residing in and around Jerusalem. Both were high profile individuals. Saul was growing in his role as a Pharisee, while Jesus grew as an itinerant preacher and rabbi. No doubt at least Saul knew of the renown of Jesus around the time of His ministry and death. We know Jesus spent a lot of time in the temple and we know the Pharisees invested a lot of time there. So it's very possible that Saul was aware of both Jesus' message and His miracles—and these might have begun to affect him.

But there's a problem with that theory. The Bible doesn't ever mention that Saul and Jesus ever met or had any connections before the Damascus Road meeting.

The second thought is that the goads could have been the love, sincerity and passion of the early Christians. As Saul continued to persecute them, he must have seen that they were kind and devout people who were even able to forgive their persecutors. Still, Paul never mentions this in his recorded conversations.

So even though we don't know what the goads were, most scholars believe it was the impact of Stephen's death that began to wreak havoc in the heart and mind of Saul. Remember that just as he was dying, Stephen prayed for Saul. In Acts 7:60 we read, *“And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’”* Who was included in that “them”? Saul was.

Stephen's prayer in Acts 7 is answered in Acts 9. God forgives Saul for the death of Stephen and all of Saul's other sins. If you've been saved—especially as an adult—you probably can see, if you think about it, how God has goaded all along the way up to the point of your salvation. He's put certain people in your life. He's brought His Word into your life. He's even allowed difficult circumstances to impact you in such a way that when Jesus appeared to you, you were ready—and you just didn't know it. God captures our attention.

### At conversion, God convicts of sin.

Jesus appeared to Saul and the first thing He said was, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”* He didn't say, “Hey Saul, how's the weather down there?” He didn't say, “Hey Saul, where are you going?” He didn't say, “Hey Saul, you want to do dinner?” He went right to the issue. “Listen Saul, we've got a problem. You're fighting Me. I'm the holy God Who calls the shots, and I do not stand idly by allowing a little piece of mud, like the human being you are, to tell Me you're going to try to destroy Me and My Kingdom work here on earth. We've got a problem. You're a sinner.”

What God does at conversion is what He did to Saul—He convicts us of our sin. “Hey Tim, you’ve got a problem. You can’t live that way. You’re not God. I am.” That’s what God is saying. “I’m holy. I’m righteous; you’re sinful and broken. You’ve got the problem. I don’t. And you’ve got to come to a place where you realize that.” One commentator said it wasn’t so much a conversion for Saul as it was a surrender.

Recently I was watching a World War II documentary on Netflix. At the end of this documentary, which was some 15 episodes long, they dedicated time to the inevitable surrender of the Axis powers in that war. This was new to me, but both surrenders were not instantaneous; they happened over a long period of time. You might wonder how we could drop two atomic bombs on Japan and Japan not surrender right away. Well, they did kind of surrender. But their surrender always included a “Yeah, but…” They said, “Okay, uncle. We give up. You’ve decimated our cities, and your President has said this will continue until we surrender. So we give up. But—we want sovereignty over our people. We want a standing army. We want our emperor to stay in power.” And on more than seven different occasions, the Japanese people came to the Allied Forces and said, “We will surrender, yeah, but…this or that.” Until finally they got down on their knees and said, “No ‘yeah buts.’” Unconditional surrender.

Listen, some of us have thought we surrendered to God, but we have a bunch of “yeah buts.” “I surrender to You, God, but make sure my life goes well, because if it doesn’t, I’m out of here.” “God, I’ll surrender to You if you allow me to keep that pet sin.” “God, I’ll surrender to You if you allow me to keep those acquaintances that I know are wrong.” “God, I’ll surrender to You, but I get to keep my money.” “God, I surrender to You, but I get to have prerogative over my life.”

Let me tell you something: only under the terms of total surrender does conversion take place. Have you utterly and completely surrendered to Jesus? If you haven’t, then you’re not saved. Saul surrendered. “*Who are you, Lord?*” He answered, “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.*” So God convicts us of sin. And while these sins might be against other people—Saul’s sins were—Jesus took them personally. When we sin against our fellow man, we sin against God first and foremost.

### At conversion, God commands our obedience.

How do we know whether Saul was being converted? We must watch to see if he will obey. The conversation seems quite short—at least in Luke’s account. Saul is given a set of orders: “Go to Damascus and wait. Don’t pass GO, don’t collect \$200, go to Damascus and wait for Me.” What does Saul do? He obeys.

We often wonder how we can be sure if a person is saved. I will tell you this: Don’t look at their prayers, don’t listen to their words, but look at their obedience. Saul is told what to do and he does it. God in His grace doesn’t leave Saul broken, lying on the ground, blinded by the light on the road to Damascus. He says, “Get up. I want you to go in this direction.”

## God’s rescue mission sends us in the right direction.

And that’s what God does for us in our conversion. He sends us in a new direction. For Saul, he was to go to Damascus. But his journey now was very different from a few moments earlier.

### The road to obedience can be humbling.

Saul’s heart has been changed. No longer is he fighting against the goads of God. No longer is he going to persecute Jesus and His church. But there has also been a physical change. Saul is now blind. So this man who was the leader of the group, excited about persecuting believers, now is a humbled and broken man who must be led by the hand into the city of Damascus, a city he had planned to conquer for his religion.

Some of us have experienced the humbling work of God where, in a moment of transition, we went from being proud and full of ourselves, with lots of dreams and plans, to being so humbled that someone else has to lead us.

### The road to obedience can be daunting without help.

God could have left Saul by himself. For three days, God left Saul in the dark. But then we get to verse ten:

*Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of 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.”*

Saul needed someone to come and heal him from his brokenness. Saul needed someone to help him understand what God wanted him to do next. Saul needed someone to encourage him in his new Christian faith. So Ananias came to Saul. Verse 17, “*So Ananias*

*departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said...*—and these are two of the most tender words Saul could have heard: *“Brother Saul.”* Brother Saul.

You see, we’re part of a family because we need one another in our walk with Jesus Christ. When we’re here in our worship service, there are a bunch of Ananiases serving our kids. They’re showing little kids their need for Jesus and what it means to live like Jesus; what it means to follow Him. You have an Ananias who’s leading your small group. You have Ananiases who are leading you as elders. You have Ananiases who are ministering to you as spiritual mentors. These are people who have taken you under their wing and said, “Walk with me as I walk toward Christ.”

It’s a word to each of us, if we have been saved for any length of time, that we should take up the mantle of Ananias and mentor others. Without this, the Christian walk is really, really hard. But God, by His grace, gave us the church through which we can grow.

### The road to obedience can be harrowing.

Now, if you’re Ananias, this is a harrowing calling. We see in the text where Ananias receives the call, then in verse 13 he answers the Lord: *“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.”*

I wonder if his voice quivered. “L-L-Lord, are You serious? Are You sure? Wouldn’t it be better if I went and killed him while he’s blind? Wouldn’t it be better if we beat him up so severely that he’d never think about attacking Christians again?” Ananias shows us how many times what we think is the best plan really isn’t the best plan.

Sometimes God wants us to step out in faith and love, ministering to people we never thought we’d ever have to. I suspect Ananias hated Saul—and rightly so, from a human standpoint. The early church had to struggle with the temptation to hate Saul. He was their worst nightmare. But Ananias was reminded that Jesus had said to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. So he goes to Saul and shows him compassion.

### The road to obedience can be hard.

Finally, we see that the road of obedience is not only harrowing, but it’s hard. We’ll look at this more later, but let’s go quickly to verse 15: *“But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’”*

Ananias does exactly what he’s been told to do. He goes to Saul and lays hands on him. Saul regains his sight, is then baptized and begins the journey of a changed life. But that life wouldn’t be easy.

Some of us have bought into Christianity because we think if we follow God, all will be good in our lives. But we’re told that the road of obedience for Saul meant that he was going to leave the frying pan and be thrown into the fire. In the next verses, as we’ll see next week, he will have his life threatened for preaching the gospel. The hunter will become the hunted.

We’ve seen a life change take place. In his book *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis reminds us that God is on an all-out rescue journey. He uses a couple illustrations to describe what God is doing to sinners right now. “He’s the fisherman, reeling in the fish. He’s the hound dog in pursuit of a fox.” And finally, “He’s the divine chess player, maneuvering and positioning all of His pawns into the most advantageous positions, until His opponent finally concedes ‘Checkmate’ and gives his life to God.”

Like Saul—the rotten, filthy sinner that he was—there was another sinner named John Newton. Newton experienced a profound and earth-shattering conversion from being a slave trader to being a slave to Jesus. He uttered these words, chronicling not only his own life, but the conversion of every one of us.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me  
I once was lost, but now I’m found  
Was blind, but now I see

If you have never experienced that amazing grace of God, don’t leave this place until you have. Come talk to me or one of our leaders saying, “I want to know what it means to be rescued by God.” It will be the best thing you’ve ever done.