

“The Insanity of God” // Acts 9:19–31 // SENT #15

Announcement

MF

Introduction

I’ve been re-reading a book recently called *The Insanity of God...* It’s the story of a guy we’re going to have here later in the year who followed the call of God to Somalia. He talks about how **after he’d answered that call** everything in his life seemed to start going wrong. He found himself staring into heaven and saying, “This is what you’ve called me to?” **I love the title**, *The Insanity of God*, because it captures how we feel sometimes. How I feel.

Curt Alan, who serves as our missions pastor here, talks about how **after he had resigned** his executive job in corporate America to go live overseas in a Muslim UPG, their son developed a medical condition. He wrote this (from their book *SENT*):

“Wait! Lord, this isn’t what is supposed to happen. We’re submitted to your will for our lives, we’ve sold just about everything we have, we’re disassembling the American Dream, leaving everything and everyone familiar, and moving our family the medical capital of the Southeast to a place with little to no healthcare and hostile to the gospel to be YOUR witnesses ...and then you do **this?**”

Every serious Christian I know has asked the question at some point in their life, “God, what are you doing?” Because what you thought God was supposed to do, he didn’t do.

And God’s apparent absence left you confused, disappointed, frustrated—maybe even doubting God altogether!

I want to show you **a few things that happened to Paul right after his conversion** that probably left him asking those same questions.

- You see, Paul would say in **1 Timothy 1:16** that his conversion and calling was a pattern for all of us... which means there are things about his story that should help you make sense of yours.

Acts 9:15–26

God was telling Ananias not to be scared to go and talk to Paul, because, remember, Paul had been public enemy #1 of the church. God says,

[9:15] “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.”

- Those two things don’t seem to go together. Chosen... *to suffer*?
- Suffering is what the **enemy causes**, right? Or isn’t it what happens when you **do stuff wrong**?

In the next 10 verses you’ll see that Paul suffers, from the very beginning, all kind of opposition, hardship... Here are my **3 points today** (last week I had 12, so we should be out of here in about 10 minutes):

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

This is, in some ways, a pattern for you. My goal: I want to give some of you hope regarding what God is doing in your life...

Hope, you see, is one of the most powerful forces on the planet, and I want some of you to grasp it.

- **Illus.** There is a legendary experiment in which a researcher was trying to determine how long a rat could swim. If you just threw 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!¹
- My purpose is to give God’s rats hope this weekend, so life won’t drown you. To see that in opposition, in delay, in hardship, God has a plan...
- **If you’re not a Christian, to see how God works...**

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

1. Paul was chosen, yet he was opposed.

- People rejected his message; impugned his motives, and tried to kill him.
- Sometimes this is your biggest surprise: people are supposed to listen!
 - I’ve experienced this: **God started to do a lot of things in my life in college** and I started to share it—and some people listened, but a lot of people didn’t. **Started a Bible study on campus...** while it grew, we started to get all this criticism. **Labeled a cult** in the school newspaper. We got **called in to the administration offices** several times. Asked not to teach Bible on the campus.
 - **College student (fraternity):** At first they laughed. Then they got mad.
 - We have some **rejected by parents**.
- Probably the worst of this for Paul was that **most of this came from his fellow religious Jews**. They were supposed to understand! He was supposed to help them see the clear reasonableness of his position! “But it makes sense!” Yet they rejected!
 - The **worst names** I’ve been called around here have come from other so-called religious people.
 - It was the **religious studies department...**
- **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.*”

CAN I ASK YOU A QUESTION? Are you ready for this—to be criticized, belittled, to have your motives impugned? And when it happens, will you keep preaching?

Notice in the next few verses how often the word “boldly” was 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 against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.

- Question for you: **What if Paul had not continued to preach boldly?** You and I would not be sitting here.
- *Whose life is depending on you being bold?*
 - **Woman who threw herself** under car for kids...
- **There are some things so important that they are worth extreme actions.**
- Is not the gospel one of those things? It's about eternity; life and death!
- Isn't it worth being mocked, used as a punch line in your family?
- God give us more people to study and learn to defend the faith. Who can dispute, like Paul... who can withstand the mockery and keep going!

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! What did he do during those 3 years? Spent time with Jesus; brought Jews to Jesus one by one.

Then, **after 3 years he got his first introduction** to the pastor, Peter... then he left again. **For fourteen years**. How do I know that? Paul explains in Galatians:

[1] Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem 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: he had **some visions** in which God clarified his calling and gave him some **crucial insights** about Jesus;² and we know he **was persecuted**, a lot.

2 Cor 11:24–27, Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ("minus one": Jews didn't want to break law... During the last half of Acts he suffered at the hands of Gentiles, not Jews... which means that these happened in these first 14 years!) [25] Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. (Not "stoned," like, "got drunk to help him deal with the pain," but pelted with baseball sized rocks until people think you are dead. Although Raudel said, "If all this was happening to me, I'd probably be getting stoned a lot, but the other kind").

Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; How many times would that have to happen to you before you'd quit getting back on the boat? [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.

² Acts 22:17–21; 2 Cor 12:1–4.

Never make the mistake of asking Paul, “How are things going?” But what a blog this guy would have. His autobio would have been called, *My Worst Life Now*

Most of that happened... in that little WHITE SPACE in your Bible between vs. 26 and 27.³ And **even after vs. 27**, Paul really fades out of the spotlight until chapter 13, when he’s given his first official assignment.

There is **some question as to what happened exactly when**, but we **know that there are 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.** “But God,” I’m sure he said, “why are things moving so slowly?”

This kind of delayed preparation is so common in Scripture I’d almost say it’s standard:

- **God called Moses** to lead Israel out of Egypt; then had him tend sheep for his father-in-law for 40 years.
- **David was anointed by God** to be the king of Israel, but then was sent back to the pasture to shovel sheep dung. Later, when he got his **first big break** in the palace, he was falsely accused and would spend the next decade running for his life as a fugitive.
- **God told Joseph** he was going to use him to save Israel... and then sent him off to slavery and prison for two decades.
- God called Elijah... Brook **Cherith**
- **Moses: 40 years. David: (15 years) Joseph, 20 years. Paul: 17 years.** Are you complaining about how long God is taking with you?
- **Billy Graham**, “If I had it to do over again... *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*

³ Scholars disagree as to whether the 14 years are between vs. 26 and 27 or between vs. 27 and 11. Either way, the point is the same. God took a long time preparing him. I here follow the timeline laid out by Matthew Henry.

would spend more time studying the Bible and meditating on its truth, not only for sermon preparation but for life.”⁴

- **Don’t waste your white space!** It’s where you learn character; it’s where you learn patience.
- I know it’s hard. That white space is singleness/joblessness/the remainder of a prison sentence.
- It’s hard, but it’s where God teaches you. (It’s like Miagi and the Karate Kid.)
- ~~Bruce’s pain~~

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 one of God’s primary training tools for his people.

- Suffering doesn’t mean something is wrong. Hardly. He is preparing you.
- The word **“instrument”** that God used (“he is a chosen instrument of mine”) literally means “vessel.”
 - (It is the same word used in **2 Corinthians 4:7** where Paul writes, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”)
 - **Vessels have no power or worth of their own**; they are conduits for power from something else. They hold something valuable.
 - Up until his conversion, **Paul had seen himself as a capable tool** for God. God wanted Paul to become a vessel of his power. **Saul the mighty needed to become Paul the small.** So God *took time to humble* him.

⁴ <http://billygraham.org/story/notable-quotes-from-billy-graham/>

- **MESOPOTAMIAN poetry.**
 - As I read Paul's epistles, I see this **humble dependence** on God's power... I see a guy not who is always there to condemn me, but to whom I can relate? **Where did Paul learn that?** Not through triumphs and successes. He learned them through suffering.
 - Remember this statement? **"It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply."** A. W. Tozer⁵
 - Or this one: **If dependence is the objective; then weakness is your advantage.** *Weakness is how you learn to operate in the power of God, and suffering helps you get in touch with your weakness.*
- **Suffering is also where God purifies your heart, and strips 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. At that age, not even the **blue pill** offers much hope.
 - **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 says, *"God wants you to sacrifice your son."* No explanation.
 - **Imagine being Abraham:** what had he done wrong? God, why are you punishing me?

- To all of this God gave **no answer.**
- Abraham **obeyed**, but the angel stopped 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?*

You see, **sometimes I think we do wrong** when we try to find a silver lining in everything: *(Didn't get into med school at UNC but got into Elon and met my wife...)* Some things God does simply to prepare your heart more for himself...

See that phrase in vs. 15: **"He is a chosen instrument of mine."** (9:15)

- He **wants your heart** to belong fully to him. To love him. To trust him.
- God **calls you first to himself**, and only secondarily to a task.
- **That means: What God is doing in you is just as significant as what he is doing through you.**
- ***Because we glorify God, see, not just by what we do for him but who we become in him.***
- **He's preparing some of you for himself through your singleness;** in your pain; in your disappointment. In your obscurity. So quit fighting God on it.
- **It's painful**—Tim Keller says the most painful times of our lives are usually when God is taking out some cherished idol.

He's chosen you for himself... and you have to trust him. **And sometimes it is not about you at all!** Job—never knew about Job 1-2. His suffering was about God glorifying himself before heavenly hosts. Why would we think Job is the only one that happens to?

You see, **LET ME TELL YOU ANOTHER BIG MISTAKE WE MAKE: WE demand to always understand.** *(We're like, "God, I'm willing to suffer if you're willing to explain." It's like a contract: "God, I'll suffer*

⁵ A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous*, 144.

anything, but you have to tell me in advance why it's happening!" He may not. Sometimes you just have to trust him.)

- **Reminds me of the story I told you in the Elijah series last summer:** 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 this 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. **You can learn 3 lessons about your life from this story: 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 just wait it out.**⁶

2 SIDES of this audience. Theologians. You got it at the beginning. The rest of you are like, "Oh, now I get 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...

CHOSEN

Let me end this by reflecting for a few minutes on that word:

CHOSEN. Because it's the key to grasping everything else.

- **The concept of being "chosen" by God is hard to understand and raises a lot of really difficult questions...** but it's **EASY TO LOOK at Paul's life** and see that Jesus chose him. (Paul was not looking for Jesus... he hated Jesus. Not on a divine quest with unanswered questions. Jesus knocked him off his horse and Jesus chose him.)

- **Your conversion may not have been that dramatic,** but the same patterns were at work. **If your heart belongs to Jesus,** it's because he chose you. Paul's conversion was a pattern for ours.
- **Now, again, I realize that raises some really difficult questions:** "If God chose me, did I not have free will?" "Why doesn't God choose everybody?"
 - I'm not going to unpack all those things here, and I'm not even sure I'm smart enough to unpack it...
- But two things I know: **a. God doesn't owe mercy to anyone (REMOVE THE IDEA OF LECTURING TO GOD); b. the sweetest doctrine in my life is knowing that God chose me.**
 - You say, **"Well, how do you know you're chosen?** Because I believe in and love Jesus, and Scripture says there is no way you can do that apart from the Holy Spirit [1 Cor 12:3, Phil 2:13; John 1:13 says I was born...]. Ephesians 2:8 says even my faith is a gift of God.)
 - **That means I'm not here because there was some good in me and I sought God...that's STAR WARS, not gospel?** I had no good in me; no life. **When Jesus raised people from the dead,** he did not go around Jerusalem saying, "There's some life in that one!" Only one class of dead: dead. No (nearly dead) "Princess Bride" (3rd 80's reference!)
 - **There was no good in me...** I was just like Paul, against God's rule in my life when God pursued me.
 - **And here's why that's comforting to me:** if I didn't begin to follow God because of my goodness, then God is not depending on my goodness to keep me following him.
 - You see, **if it was a good moment** in which I found God, what would happen to me in my bad moments?
 - One thing I have learned over and over... my flesh is evil. And if God took his mercy from me for even a second, I would turn away.

⁶ Craig Groeschel, "The Making of a Man of God," 1 Kings 17

- **But I have this assurance that what he has begun in me** he surely will finish (Philippians 1:6).
- **Spurgeon:** "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 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."⁷
 - **Pastor friend in a moral failure...** "Let the doctrine of election become sweet to you."

I don't know all the answers to the question about the doctrine of how God chooses people. But what I do know is this:

- *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I'm found. (didn't find myself!) I was blind but now I see. I couldn't give myself sight!*
- *(Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's might, thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I rose the dungeon flamed with light; my chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed thee.)*

That God chose Paul also shows me that he is fully in charge of the world evangelization process. He's not sitting in heaven ringing his hands thinking "Whoa... was this 'every tribe and tongue and nation' prediction a little premature... maybe unrealistic... didn't factor in Putin... fundamentalist Muslims, where'd they come from? Overly optimistic?"

- **My discouragement in Indo** (Dr. Eitel's words to me.) God promised Abram sons like stars when he was completely sterile.
- As surely as there are stars in the sky, he will do it: even when you feel spiritually sterile.

- **Why are you a witness at work? At school?** Because God chose us and said he'd use us...

Sometimes this is all Paul had to hold onto! You see, Paul **didn't just start** his ministry in opposition and suffering, his whole life was characterized by it.

- Paul spent **his best years** in obscurity and prison. He never made any money. When he died, **half the church** thought he was awesome; but a lot of people were slandering him, saying he was an egotistical maniac.
- He was **executed by Nero** and his **body was discarded**. We have no grave. Scholars say his body was probably eaten by dogs.
 - **Now, of course, we see now that God was behind** it all, but Paul couldn't see that then!
 - **Here we are 2000 years later, Nero's empire has crumbled** and we're reading the books of Paul; we **name our sons** "Paul" and our dogs Nero. (And, btw, if your name is Nero here, I sincerely apologize)
 - So, from our perspective now, we see that Paul won, but from Paul's perspective, even at the end of his life, it sure seemed like he was losing!

From your perspective now, does it seem like you're losing? Don't you think God will be faithful to you as he was to Paul?

You are a chosen instrument, and God's purposes for are unstoppable!

I am convinced neither death nor life...

*So when I am **opposed**, I'll respond with boldness. When he **delays** (taking 'many days' to accomplish what he's promised), I'll respond with faith. And when I **suffer**, I'll respond with resurrection hope.*

*[8] We are **afflicted** in every way, but not crushed; **perplexed**, but not driven to despair; [9] **persecuted**, but not forsaken; **struck down**, but*

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures, book 2, page 47*

not destroyed; [10] **always carrying about in our bodies** the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies...

You see, Paul says, **death is at work** in us, but life in you. (2 Cor 4:8–12)

[36] As it is written, “**For your sake** we are being killed all the day long; we are **regarded as sheep** to be slaughtered.” [37] **Yea, though, in all these things** we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Romans 8:36–37)

Summit: we are chosen. We can't fail. Paul had this vision of Jesus standing before the throne!

- **24 (Jack's face still on on back of box!)**

So I'm struck down, but not destroyed, persecuted but not forsaken... And I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep...

And so, though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed, his truth to triumph through us. The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth; the Spirit and the gifts are ours, thru him who with us sideth. Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill; God's truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever.

Prayer:

Do you feel persecuted? You're not forsaken. Struck down? Not destroyed. Hopeless? Don't look within for hope. Don't look to your friends. Your past, present or future. Look to Jesus! And hear him say, even through my voice: “YOU ARE CHOSEN.”