

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 9

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 9 records three narrative movements: the dramatic conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road (vv. 1–19a), Saul’s early preaching and the violent opposition it provokes in Damascus and Jerusalem (vv. 19b–31), and Peter’s healing ministry in Lydda and Joppa — restoring Aeneas and raising Tabitha from the dead (vv. 32–43). These are not loosely connected episodes; Luke has deliberately joined them to make a composite argument. The chapter moves from the most hostile enemy of the church becoming its most zealous advocate, to the continuing expansion of the church through apostolic signs, to a summary statement that signals the church’s readiness for what follows (Cornelius, chapter 10). The dominant presence of the risen Christ — appearing to Saul, directing Ananias, working through Peter — binds all three sections together.

This Text — Intent

God is demonstrating through Acts 9 that no obstacle — not the most implacable human enemy, not physical infirmity, not death itself — can arrest the advance of His kingdom. The intent is not merely to inform the reader about early church history but to produce a settled, active confidence that the risen Christ is sovereign over every power arrayed against His church. Luke is writing to readers who face hostility, discouragement, and the apparent fragility of the church, and he is pressing them toward bold, fearless participation in the church’s mission on the grounds that Christ has already shown He can turn persecutors into apostles and raise the dead.

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ advances His church through sovereign reversals no human power can prevent.

Primary Claim: The same risen Lord who stopped Saul in his tracks, opened blind eyes, healed the paralyzed, and raised the dead is still building His church — and He is calling His people to bear witness without fear, because the outcome has never been in their hands.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of Saul's conversion — sudden versus process

Some interpreters, particularly in Wesleyan and Catholic devotional traditions, have read Saul's Damascus road encounter as the culmination of a gradual inward conviction — Saul kicking against the goads (v. 5) taken as evidence of a prolonged interior struggle, with the Damascus road as the moment it broke. This reading is worth *acknowledging* to the extent that it guards against a purely mechanical or external view of conversion. But it *qualifies* without becoming the governing frame: Luke does not present a gradual process. The encounter is sudden, blinding, and entirely initiated by Christ. The “goads” language (preserved in some manuscripts, and clearly present in Paul's retelling in Acts 26:14) most naturally refers to the futility of resisting divine sovereign action — like an ox kicking against a cattle prod — rather than to interior moral struggle. The Reformed reading is preferred: this is sovereign, unconditional, exteriorly-initiated divine intervention, which is precisely Luke's point. The conversion of Saul is a demonstration of grace, not a graduation of conscience.

Saul's conversion as a model for all conversion

A recurring Pentecostal and charismatic interpretive instinct is to treat Saul's Damascus road experience — and particularly the three-day fast, the anointing by Ananias, and the reception of the Spirit — as a normative pattern for Christian initiation or “Spirit baptism.” This should be *refuted* on both literary and theological grounds. Luke himself presents Paul's conversion in Acts as extraordinary, not normative — Paul is the “chosen instrument” (v. 15), the apostle “abnormally born” (1 Cor. 15:8), and the Damascus road appearance is explicitly set apart from ordinary Christian experience. The details of Ananias's ministry to Saul reflect the unique apostolic commissioning context, not a second-blessing structure. The Reformed reading is that Acts 9 is descriptive of a historically unique event in redemptive history and must not be pressed into a prescriptive pattern for contemporary conversion experience.

The relationship of the Peter narratives (vv. 32–43) to the Saul narrative

Some commentators treat the Peter section as essentially a separate tradition inserted here editorially, with no strong thematic connection to the Saul material. This reading is worth *qualifying* — it rightly recognizes that the Peter and Saul materials come from different streams of tradition. But Luke is not merely an archivist; he is a deliberate theologian-historian. The placement of the Peter narratives immediately after Saul's commission is intentional: Luke is showing that the church's advance continues on multiple fronts simultaneously, and that the same risen Christ who appeared to Saul is working through Peter. The healing of Aeneas and the raising of Tabitha demonstrate that Christ's power extends over every dimension of human need and loss, creating the conditions (v. 43 — Joppa, Simon the tanner) for the Cornelius breakthrough in chapter 10.

Ananias and the question of obedience under risk

Some Baptist and discipleship-focused interpreters focus heavily on Ananias as the model figure in the passage — the ordinary believer who risks his life to obey. This is worth *acknowledging* as a genuine homiletical trajectory that the text supports. Ananias is indeed a significant figure, and his obedience is presented admiringly. However, the text resists making Ananias the center of gravity. Christ’s sovereign direction of Ananias (twice) keeps the focus on the divine initiative rather than human courage. The Reformed reading holds both: Ananias’s obedience is real and costly, but it flows from and is framed by Christ’s command — his courage is the instrument, not the engine.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 50:20** — Joseph’s declaration that what human agents intend for evil, God intends for good: the conversion of Saul is the New Testament’s most dramatic illustration of this principle — the church’s greatest persecutor becomes its greatest missionary.
- **Isaiah 35:5–6** — Blind eyes opened, the lame leaping: the healing of Aeneas and the recovery of Saul’s sight are signs that the age of restoration promised through Isaiah is arriving in the ministry of the risen Christ and His apostles.
- **Ezekiel 37:1–14** — The valley of dry bones: Tabitha’s resurrection echoes and fulfills the prophetic vision of death reversed by the breath/Spirit of God; Luke presents the church’s ministry as the dawning of the new creation over which death has lost its finality.
- **1 Corinthians 15:8–10** — Paul’s own retrospective on his Damascus road experience: he calls himself “one abnormally born,” the “least of the apostles,” who received grace precisely because he was a persecutor — corroborating Luke’s theological presentation that Saul’s conversion is a trophy of sovereign grace, not a product of latent receptivity.
- **2 Corinthians 4:6** — “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts”: Paul’s own theological interpretation of his Damascus experience (light, blindness, sight) grounds it in the creation narrative and presents conversion itself as a new-creation act — reinforcing the Reformed reading of Acts 9 as a demonstration of sovereign, irresistible grace.

Aim: To press the reader and hearer toward bold, unhesitating participation in the church’s mission by grounding that boldness not in personal courage or favorable circumstances but in the demonstrated sovereignty of the risen Christ over every opposing power.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Saul, “breathing murderous threats,” obtains letters from the high priest to arrest followers of “the Way” in Damascus	“The Way” — early self-designation of Jesus followers; Saul’s authorization is official and complete
3–4	A light from heaven flashes; Saul falls to the ground; a voice: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”	The repetition of the name (“Saul, Saul”) signals divine address; “me” — Christ identifies with His persecuted church
5–6	Saul asks who is speaking; “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”; Saul is told to enter Damascus and await further instruction	Christ provides no philosophical argument — only self-identification and command; Saul’s agency is entirely suspended
7	Saul’s companions stand speechless — hearing the sound but seeing no one	Luke’s detail preserves the uniqueness of Saul’s encounter while noting its external reality
8–9	Saul rises blind; led by hand into Damascus; three days without sight, food, or drink	Three-day blindness: a kind of death and burial before Ananias’s ministry restores him
10–12	Ananias, a disciple in Damascus, receives a vision from the Lord; told to find Saul on Straight Street; Saul has already seen Ananias coming in a vision	The Lord is coordinating both sides of the encounter simultaneously — no human intermediary arranges this
13–14	Ananias objects: he has heard of Saul’s persecution record and his mandate to arrest believers in Damascus	Luke presents Ananias’s fear as fully reasonable — this is not a failure of faith but honest human risk-assessment
15–16	The Lord’s response: Saul is a “chosen instrument” to carry Christ’s name before Gentiles, kings, and Israel; he will suffer for the name	The call includes both mission and suffering — the cross-shaped pattern appears immediately

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
17–19a	Ananias goes, places hands on Saul, addresses him as “Brother Saul,” announces the Spirit and restoration of sight; Saul is baptized; he eats and is strengthened	“Brother Saul” — remarkable: Ananias’s first word to the church’s persecutor is one of belonging
19b–22	Saul immediately begins preaching in the Damascus synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God; his hearers are astonished; his preaching grows more powerful	The reversal is immediate and total — the persecutor is now the proclaimer
23–25	Jewish leaders in Damascus conspire to kill Saul; disciples help him escape by lowering him in a basket through the city wall	The hunted becomes the hunter; now Saul knows what the church has been experiencing
26–27	Saul arrives in Jerusalem; disciples are afraid of him; Barnabas vouches for him to the apostles	Barnabas’s role: the ministry of credibility — he bridges Saul’s past and future
28–30	Saul preaches boldly in Jerusalem; Greek-speaking Jews attempt to kill him; the church sends him to Tarsus	The pattern repeats: proclamation, opposition, providential escape
31	Summary statement: the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria is at peace, built up, walking in fear of the Lord, growing in numbers	Luke’s transition marker — the church is consolidated; it is now ready for the Gentile breakthrough
32–35	Peter visits Lydda; finds Aeneas, paralyzed eight years; “Jesus Christ heals you — get up and make your bed”; all of Lydda and Sharon turn to the Lord	Peter’s formula is direct: “Jesus Christ heals you” — no ambiguity about whose power is at work
36–38	In Joppa, Tabitha (Dorcas) — a disciple known for good works and charity — becomes ill and dies;	Luke’s characterization of Tabitha is detailed and warm — she is a fully realized figure, not a prop

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	disciples learn Peter is nearby; send for him	
39	Peter arrives; widows show him garments Tabitha made; she is mourned by those she served	The community's grief is genuine; her works of mercy had built real relationships
40–41	Peter sends everyone out; kneels; prays; says “Tabitha, get up”; she opens her eyes; Peter gives her his hand and presents her alive	The verbal formula echoes Jesus raising Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:41 — “Talitha koum”); Luke intends the echo
42–43	This becomes known throughout Joppa; many believe; Peter stays in Joppa with Simon the tanner	V. 43 is a geographic and social setup for chapter 10 — Joppa, the tanner, the Gentile question

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–9	The Sovereign Arrest: Christ stops the persecutor
2	10–19a	The Sovereign Commission: Christ sends the reluctant disciple
3	19b–31	The Sovereign Reversal: the persecutor becomes the persecuted proclaimer
4	32–35	The Sovereign Healer: Christ restores through Peter in Lydda
5	36–43	The Sovereign Victor over Death: Christ raises through Peter in Joppa

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ advances His church through sovereign reversals no human power can prevent.

Primary Claim: The same risen Lord who stopped Saul in his tracks, opened blind eyes, healed the paralyzed, and raised the dead is still building His church — and He is calling His people to bear witness without fear, because the outcome has never been in their hands.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe who is beyond reach. (*Mind/Belief*) The conversion of Saul destroys the category of “the person too far gone to be saved.” If you have written off a family member, a colleague, a culture, or a movement as beyond the reach of the gospel, Acts 9 is a direct challenge to that assessment. The risen Christ did not work with the most promising candidate in Damascus — He went after the most hostile one. Reconsider who you have quietly stopped praying for, and ask what it would look like to believe again that Christ is sovereign over that person’s heart.

2. Recognize that Christ identifies with His persecuted church. (*Mind/Belief*) When Christ speaks to Saul, He does not say “why are you persecuting my people?” — He says “why are you persecuting *me*?” This is not rhetorical inflation; it is a theological declaration about the union between Christ and His body. Every time the church suffers for the name — every believer who faces hostility, discrimination, or violence for their witness — Christ counts that as done to Himself. This should produce both solidarity with suffering believers worldwide and a settled refusal to be ashamed of the gospel, knowing that Christ takes our suffering personally.

3. Let Ananias’s obedience confront your risk-aversion in mission. (*Will/Behavior*) Ananias knew exactly who Saul was and what he was capable of. He raised his objections honestly, and then he went anyway — on the strength of Christ’s command alone, with no guarantee of personal safety. Identify one person, one relationship, or one situation in your own life where fear of rejection, confrontation, or cost has caused you to pull back from obedience. Ananias’s example does not call you to recklessness; it calls you to act on Christ’s command even when your risk-assessment is telling you to stay home.

4. Receive the grief of Tabitha’s community as permission to mourn, and the resurrection as the ground of hope. (*Affections/Worship*) Luke takes time with Tabitha’s story — her works, her relationships, the widows who show Peter the garments she made with her hands. Her death is a real loss, not a theological abstraction. And her resurrection is not presented as a proof of concept but as a restoration of a beloved person to the community that needed her. In a season of grief or loss, Acts 9 does not say “get over it — God is sovereign.” It says: the risen Christ who raised Tabitha is present in your grief, and the resurrection is not a distant comfort — it is the specific reversal He has already demonstrated He can perform.

5. Find your place in the chain of witnesses — you are not the first link and you are not the last. (*Affections/Worship*) Acts 9 ends with the church at peace, being built up, walking

in the fear of the Lord, and increasing in numbers (v. 31) — and then immediately continues with Peter in Lydda, then Joppa, and then (chapter 10) Cornelius. The church does not stop; the advance continues; the next witness is always being prepared. You are not the originator of this mission and you are not responsible for its completion. You are one link in a chain that runs from Acts 9 to this present moment. Live with the freedom of someone who has been entrusted with a real role in a story much larger than themselves — and with the confidence that the Author has not lost the plot.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 9 makes an explicit claim about the sovereignty of the risen Christ over human opposition, physical infirmity, and death itself. The chapter refuses to allow any obstacle — whether it is the murderous hostility of a persecutor, the paralysis of eight years, or the finality of death — to stand as a barrier to the advance of Christ's kingdom. Christ does not merely respond to these obstacles; He is shown to be directing events on both sides of every encounter simultaneously (the dual visions of Saul and Ananias are the clearest instance of this). The chapter also makes a crucial claim about the church's identity: to persecute the church is to persecute Christ, which means the church is not a voluntary association of like-minded individuals but the body of the risen Lord, carrying His presence and His name into the world. Every miracle in this chapter — conversion, healing, resurrection — is attributed directly to the name and power of Jesus Christ, reinforcing Luke's consistent Christological center throughout Acts.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: The conversion of Saul of Tarsus is the New Testament's most concentrated demonstration of sovereign, unconditional, irresistible grace. Saul was not seeking; he was not open; he was not moving in the right direction — he was actively, officially, and violently opposing the gospel. The initiative is entirely and exclusively divine. This is not presented as an anomaly but as an illustration of the grace that underlies every conversion — Saul is simply the case where the sovereignty of grace is most starkly visible. The Reformed doctrine of effectual calling (that God's call in regeneration accomplishes what it announces) has no more vivid narrative instantiation in all of Scripture than Acts 9:1–19. Furthermore, the chapter's insistence that Saul was a “chosen instrument” — elected for a purpose that included suffering — reflects the Reformed understanding that election is not merely for personal salvation but for mission and for the display of God's glory, and that the cross-shaped pattern of call and suffering is not an accident of history but the form Christ's mission regularly takes in the lives of those He sends.

Main Takeaway

The risen Christ who turned the church's greatest enemy into its greatest missionary, who healed what eight years of paralysis had fixed, and who reversed death in a Joppa upper room is not less sovereign today. Stop calculating whether the gospel can reach the person in front of you, whether the situation is too far gone, whether you have what it takes. The outcome of Christ's mission has never depended on favorable conditions or willing instruments — it has always depended on Him. Go. Pray. Speak. He has been building His church through impossible situations since the Damascus road, and He is not finished.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching Saul's conversion as a normative experience pattern.** The Damascus road encounter — the blinding light, the three-day fast, the hands-on anointing — is extraordinary and unrepeatable. It belongs to the unique apostolic commissioning of Paul, not to a template for conversion or "deeper" Spirit-experience. Preachers who press for Damascus road experiences in their hearers are importing a pattern Luke himself marks as exceptional. The normative element is the sovereignty of grace in conversion; the form that sovereignty took for Saul was particular to his apostolic calling.
- **Making Saul the hero of his own conversion.** The text gives Saul nothing to do in his conversion except fall down, go blind, and wait. Any preaching that introduces Saul's sincerity, his willingness to change, or his latent openness as contributing factors to his conversion is importing what the text explicitly excludes. The theological point depends on Saul being precisely as hostile as he was — the trophies of grace are not the almost-persuaded but the actively opposed.
- **Treating the Peter narratives (vv. 32–43) as appendices rather than arguments.** Preachers working through Acts 9 who run out of time for the Aeneas and Tabitha episodes, or who treat them as warm-up material for Paul's story, miss Luke's compositional intention. The Peter narratives are not postscripts — they are the chapter's demonstration that Christ's sovereignty extends over physical infirmity and death, and they set the table for the Cornelius breakthrough. Omitting them truncates the chapter's theological claim.
- **Domesticating Ananias's obedience.** Ananias is sometimes preached as an example of ordinary obedience — the relatable everyman who does what God asks. This is true but insufficient. Ananias was being asked to go alone to a man who had an official warrant to arrest him and send him to Jerusalem for trial. His obedience was not a mild act of volunteerism — it was a genuinely dangerous act of faith. Domesticating it into a general lesson about "saying yes to God" loses the cost that makes it compelling.

- **Sentimentalizing Tabitha's story without landing its resurrection claim.** The Tabitha narrative is emotionally rich and it is tempting to preach it primarily as a story about the value of faithful, quiet service — a tribute to the Tabithas of every congregation. That application is not wrong, but it misses the chapter's primary thrust: Tabitha is raised from the dead because death is not the final word for those who belong to the risen Christ. The point is not that good works are rewarded but that the same power that raised Christ raised Tabitha, and will raise all who are His. Land the resurrection claim; do not let the warmth of the narrative carry the whole sermon without it.
- **Missing the verse 31 pivot.** Acts 9:31 is not just a rest beat between action scenes — it is Luke's summary assessment that the church, having passed through the crisis of Saul's conversion and early ministry, is now consolidated and ready for the next phase of advance. Preachers who blow past this verse miss an opportunity to show the congregation the pattern: Christ advances His church through upheaval, opposition, and crisis, and the result — on the other side of obedience — is a church that is built up, multiplied, and walking in the fear of the Lord. That is the shape of the church's growth throughout Acts, and it is the shape the church should expect today.