

~ACTS~

Lesson 27- Saul's Conversion

We ended last time in chapter 8 looking at Philip the Evangelist traveling on the desert road leading to Gaza, and now today chapter 9's events take place on another desert road, this one leading to Damascus. Today we will begin learning about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus who, on the road to Damascus becomes the great Apostle Paul. Today we will be looking at verses 1-9 in chapter 9, but by way of review we were introduced to Saul back in chapter 7 with the martyrdom of Stephen as Saul of Tarsus was standing by consenting to his death, Acts 7:58-59. And then in chapter 8 we see Stephen's death led to an all-out assault on Christianity as Saul began persecuting the church of God, **Acts 8:1-4**. This intense persecution became the catalyst to spread the Gospel to the ends of the world. Last time we saw the Gospel taken up to Samaria and Caesarea and even all the way down to Ethiopia, and today as we begin looking at chapter 9, we see there are Christians in Damascus as well. And as the Gospel is spreading to the ends of the earth, so does the persecution of the saints follow, namely by one man, Saul of Tarsus. Chapter 9 begins with Saul still continuing his hostile pursuit against the Church.

1-2) Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² 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.

The timeframe of chapter 9 is probably about 3 years after the events in chapter 8. The death and resurrection of Jesus happened in April of 32AD; Pentecost was 50 days after the Resurrection; and all the events leading up to Stephen's martyrdom probably happened over the course of the remainder of that year leading into 33AD. Then as a result of Stephen's death, the Church is scattered and the events in Samaria probably happened toward the end of 33AD. So now beginning chapter 9, I would estimate that about 3 years have passed, and it is now the end of 36AD as Saul journeys on the road to Damascus. But this entire time, there has been an all-out assault on Christianity and **"Saul is still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord..."**

This word "breathing" is *ἐμπνέω*, literally to breath in. It is referred to in the LXX as the breath of life, Deut 20:16; Josh 10:40. This hatred of Christians is the inbreathing of his soul, his driving force of life as he breathes in threats and murder. And then Luke describes Saul breathing this hatred of threats and murder into the disciples of the Lord. This word "against" is the word *ἐν*, meaning "into," against is not a good translation. This very life force of hatred that Saul has for Christians is being breathed into the disciples of the Lord by way of threats, torture, arrest, and murder. And he is doing this all in the name of God, thinking he is doing God's work by destroying Christians, **Acts 26:9-11; Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:5-6**. The guilt of hunting down and killing Christians was always on his mind, **1 Corinthians 15:9; 1 Tim 1:13**; the thorn in his flesh, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

For 3 years Saul had been persecuting the Church, and as a result of this persecution, Christians were being scattered throughout the world. Acts 11:19 tells us they were being scattered even as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. We don't have any record that Saul went to these places, but in Acts 26:11, he tells us he went into what he calls, "foreign cities," persecuting Christians. Damascus would be considered a foreign city because it was outside the borders of Israel, and Saul has every intention to make this long journey north to continue his pursuit against the Christians.

Damascus was and still is the capital of Syria and is 175 miles north of Jerusalem. Isaiah calls Damascus the **"head of Syria,"** Is 7:8. The city of Damascus is one of the oldest cities in the Bible being mentioned during the time of Abraham, Genesis 14:15, 15:2. Josephus tells us that Damascus was founded by Uz, the grandson of Shem, Josephus Antiquities book 1, ch 6:4. This would have been around 2300bc, before the tower of Babel and Peleg when the earth was divided, Gen 10:21-25.

In the first century, there was a large population of Hellenistic Jews living in Damascus as a result of the Diaspora from Babylon, Acts 9:29. Josephus, in his *“War of the Jews,”* speaks extensively of Jews living in Damascus and tells of a time when 10,000 Jews were murdered in Damascus, Wars of the Jews, book 2, chapter 20:2, and then later in his book there is another account of 18,000 more Jews being slaughtered, Wars of the Jews, book 7, chapter 8:7. So Damascus had a very large population of Jews with many Jewish synagogues and because of the persecution from Saul, Jews from Jerusalem were traveling to Damascus to find refuge. After hearing of Christians living in Damascus, Saul decides to journey north, and he... **went to the high priest ² and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus,**

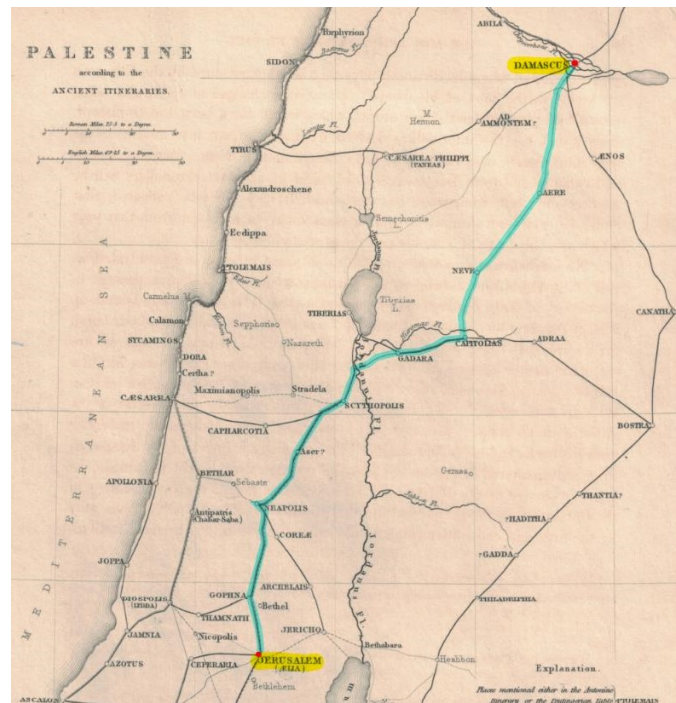
The Sanhedrin Council was the supreme court of Jewish Law. The court was located in Jerusalem, as we have already been introduced several times, but their decrees and edicts were not limited by physical borders. Their decrees spread across the world to all Jews wherever they were living in the world. So, Saul, being zealous for the tradition of the Law, was traveling everywhere to hunt down Christians who were in violation of the decree from Acts 4:18, that made it illegal to preach and teach in the name of Jesus. And Saul asked for letters from the High Priest to give him authorization to go into these Jewish synagogues and hunt these Christians down and arrest them, verse 2... **so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.** Notice how Christians were referred to, those who were of **“the Way.”** This is a great title for Christians because Jesus is **the Way**, the Truth, and the Life. He is the Way to Eternal Salvation.

Therefore, Saul begins traveling north on the road to Damascus with his band of zealots to hunt down Christians, but God has different plans for him...

3-4) As he journeyed, he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. ⁴ Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

As Saul was nearing Damascus, somewhere along this desert road, probably on the final day of his 7-day journey from Jerusalem, he is stopped in his tracks by Jesus Himself. The phrase, **“and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven,”** isn't a strong enough translation. “Suddenly” is the word, *ἐξαίφνης*, it means extreme surprise. Luke uses this same word to describe the multitude of angels that suddenly appear in the sky at Jesus' birth, Luke 2:13.

Then Luke describes “a light shone around him.” There are two other accounts of Paul's testimony in the book of Acts that we can draw from as well to get a more complete picture of this event. We see Paul describe this personally in Acts 22 and 26. So we will be referring back to these two chapters throughout our lesson today. Luke says in Acts 9 that a light shone around him. **Acts 26:13** tells us this is a light brighter than the sun shining at midday.



The Road to Damascus - 175-mile journey from Jerusalem

And Luke says this is a light from heaven. This light shining brighter than the sun can only be **“THE SON”- JESUS CHRIST**. He is the True Light, **Revelation 1:12-18**; John 1:4-5, 8; 8:12; 12:46; Acts 13:47; 1 Tim 6:16; Rev 22:5. Luke continues by saying this Light “shone around...” This is one word in Greek, *περιαστράπτω*, literally means “lighting flashing all around.” It is a combination of two Greek words, *περι* (around) + *ἀστράπτω* (to flash lightning). *ἀστραπή* is the word for lightning. When I thought about what

this may have looked like to Saul, I thought of another time Jesus came down to earth. And that was when God descended on the top of Mount Sinai. I believe this was an instance of the pre-incarnate Word of God coming to the earth, and remember what happened on that occasion, **Exodus 19:16**. Notice the people's response, they trembled. This is exactly what happened to Saul. Verse 6 says he was trembling and astonished. This is very similar to what John describes in Revelation when he sees the throne of God in heaven.... Revelation 4:5- *and from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices...* The glory of God is such an awesome sight! Here in Revelation the 24 elders fall down on their faces and cast their crowns before them; John fell before Jesus' feet as if he was dead; the people at Mount Sinai trembled and said let not God speak to us lest we die, Ex 20:19; and here on the road to Damascus, Saul falls to the ground. Look at verse 4... **Then he fell to the ground...** and in the testimony to King Agrippa in Acts 26, Paul tells us that even all the men with him fell to the ground as well, **Acts 26:13-14a**.

Therefore, Saul and his men see this bright light, a light even brighter than the sun, they see thunderous lightening flashing all around them and they fall to the ground and Jesus starts to speak, but Saul is the only one who can hear Jesus' words, Acts 9:4... **and (he) heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Acts 22:9.**

Saul had been violently torturing Christians, arresting, persecuting, and killing those who call on the Name of the Lord, but Jesus doesn't ask Saul why he has been persecuting Christians. He says, **"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"** This is astounding because it shows the oneness we have with Jesus. When we are born again, born from the Spirit, we are a new creature in Christ. We are connected to Him. We are one with Him in all things. This is why Jesus says, *"Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."* Matthew 25:40. This is also why Paul says we must treat our bodies as God's Holy Temple because He is living in us and we are one with Him, 1 Cor 6:15-20. God is right there with us and a part of us as we live our lives.

Therefore, Jesus asks Saul the question, **"Why are you persecuting Me?"** At this point, Saul doesn't know who is speaking to him, but he knows this awesome power is coming from someone bigger than him, so Saul answers in verse 5...

5) And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" This first response is not Saul's conversion. He is still trying to figure out who is talking to him, but then he quickly gets his answer... **Then the Lord said, "I AM Jesus, whom you are persecuting."**

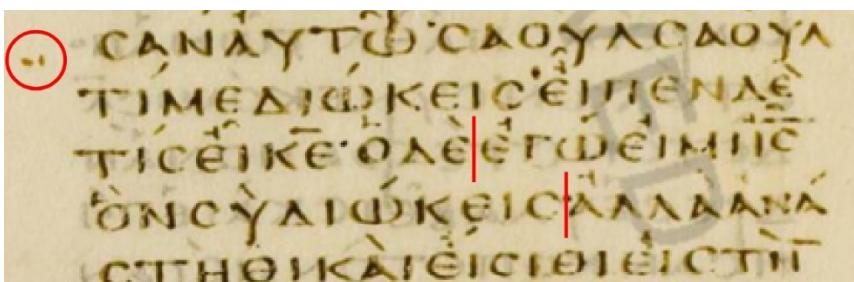
Saul is now confronted with the Man who these Christians are saying has risen from the dead. Notice the power of these words, **"I AM Jesus..."** This is another I AM statement from Jesus, *Ἐγώ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς*. Saul has been persecuting Christians for 3 years, and now he is face to face with Jesus Christ Himself.

And Jesus says, **"It is hard for you to kick against the goads."** A goad is a sharp point on the end of a shepherd's staff. It is used to prod and guide livestock or beasts of burden on the path of the shepherd, **Eccl 12:11**. Jesus is the Great Shepherd, and He has a Righteous plan for each one of us, but if we kick against His goad, it makes life hard. Saul was kicking against God's Righteous goad as he was persecuting Christians, and every time he reared up in hatred toward Jesus, his heart was pricked by the Good Shepherd's goad. And I believe these goads were the words of Stephen he heard in the Council the day Stephen was murdered, **Acts 7:51-55**. For three years these words of Stephen had been pricking his heart. And when Stephen cried out that he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father, the council lost control, but now Saul is seeing this same Jesus right in front of Him in all His glory. That's how Paul describes this light in Acts 22:11, as this glorious light.

In this instant, Saul is brought to the end of himself. Lightning is flashing all around him, the glory of God is shining so bright that it has blinded his eyes, and he hears this thunderous voice speak conviction into his soul. And in this moment, Saul realizes he has been fighting God and he humbles himself.

6) So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” This second time Saul says, “Lord” is Saul humbling himself in submission to Jesus as his Lord and Savior, and I believe this is when Saul was converted and born again.

Notice that your NKJV has a note that says “*NU, M omit the rest of v.5 and begin v.6 with ‘But arise and go.’*” * Here is another instance of the Gnostics deleting verses in our Bible. There are two omissions here. First, they delete “*The Lord said,*” because the Gnostics reject that Jesus is the Lord God, and this statement clearly identifies that Jesus is the Lord from heaven. The NLT translates v. 5 like this, “Who are you, lord?” Saul asked. And **the voice replied**, “I am Jesus...” They removed the connection that Jesus is Lord and reduced Him to a voice. And then the Alexandrian texts delete the entire statement that says, “*It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*” **So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?”** This was the moment of Saul’s conversion, and they took it out. It shows conviction of sin, and Saul’s humble submission of a willing heart to God. These are not just random omissions. They were purposeful deletions by the Gnostics that take away the Truth of Salvation. And again, it just so happens that in the Codex Vaticanus manuscript, there are two little dots showing that these verses were a textual variant from the original manuscripts, and they have been removed in the Alexandrian text. Just another proof that the Textus Receptus represented by the KJV and NKJV are the trusted source for the True Word of God.



Codex Vaticanus- Acts 9:5-6

Back to verse 6 as Jesus responds to Saul now that he has surrendered his life and will to Jesus...

6) Then the Lord said to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Saul’s personal testimony in Acts 26 adds a little more detail. Acts 26:16-18- ¹⁶ *But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you.* ¹⁷ *I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you,* ¹⁸ *to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.’*

Jesus calls Saul into the ministry to be His witness and instantly his heart is changed. But notice that Saul still had free will through this process. Saul had to make the decision to either humble or harden. In God’s infinite foreknowledge, He knew what choice Saul would make, but that doesn’t take away from the fact that Saul didn’t have a choice. This is why Jesus tells Ananias in verse 15 that Saul is a *chosen vessel of Mine*. This was part of God’s plan of redemption and Paul would become God’s greatest vessel to bring the revelation of the New Covenant to the world.

In Acts 26:19, Paul tells King Agrippa, “*I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,*” Saul has humbled himself to Jesus and he is obedient to do what He says...

7-8) ⁷ And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Then Saul arose ^(passive voice) The men with him had gotten back on their feet and then they help Saul up as well...**and Saul was raised up 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.**

* The NU stands for Nestle-Aland and the United Bible Societies, who represent the Alexandrian codices and the M stands for the Majority text represented by the majority of Byzantine texts.

Notice that everyone is in shock, even the men with Saul. These men didn't see Jesus or hear His words, but they saw a bright light and probably something that sounded like thunder and lightning. So they are all amazed and they help Saul to his feet. But when Saul gets to his feet, he can't see because he was blinded by the glorious light of God. Verse 9 says...

9) And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Luke says they were near Damascus, probably within a day's journey, and so, seemingly by Saul's command, his men lead him to Damascus. Saul doesn't know who he is supposed to meet. All he knows is what Jesus told him. **"Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."** And Saul is obedient. Notice that Jesus didn't lay out the whole plan all at once. He is forcing Saul to walk by faith, one small step at a time. This is how God works. Almost never does God lay out the whole plan to us ahead of time. He does this purposely so that we will trust in Him every step of the way.

Saul has been blinded by the glory of God, but for the first time, he is seeing more clearly than he ever has. His whole life has been turned upside down; everything he thought was right is now wrong, but now He knows the Truth because he has found the Messiah and he has been rescued out from darkness into His marvelous light.

Saul's men lead him to Damascus. And it is interesting to note that no one from Saul's team tries to carry out the mission of arresting Christians. Saul was in charge of this band of men and no doubt he is telling them that even though they are going on into Damascus, their original objective to arrest Christians is over. So they get to Damascus, and through God's providential Hand, He leads them to the street called Straight to the house of Judas. For three days he spends his time in the house of Judas praying and fasting. Before this, his prayers were that of Legalism and necessity. There was no real communion with God, but now his conscience is cleansed, and he can *come boldly to the throne of Grace and obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need*, Heb 4:16.

No doubt the words of Jesus he heard on the road to Damascus are echoing in his mind, along with the words of Stephen from 3 years ago. Saul is basically in solitude for three days because he can't see, and being a Pharisee and knowing the Scriptures, he begins putting all the pieces together that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the One whom the prophets and Moses promised would come and now He is here to give Eternal Life to all who believe.