

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 21, Chapter 9

We began Acts chapter 9 last week but I purposely postponed getting too deep into the Scripture passages to instead focus our attention on the person of Paul; or better **Sha'ul**, which was his given Hebrew name. Paul is the English version of a Latin word that is probably Paulus and it seems that in general he used that name, and that name was used of him, when he was dealing either with Jews from the Diaspora or gentiles who were subjects of the Roman Empire. Then dealing with Hebrews he seems to mostly use **Sha'ul** (Saul in English).

My reason for pausing at this point, and delving deeper into Paul, is that much of what will occur for the remainder of Acts will involve Paul to varying levels. There is no more misunderstood, misquoted, and influential source for Christian doctrine than Paul; so it is vital that we do all we can to uncover what Paul intends to tell us. Yet we can no more hope to understand what Paul meant by the things he did and said in his many letters that dominate the New Testament, than we can hope to understand what Homer meant by what he said in his great epic poems "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey", or by what Tolstoy said in "War and Peace", until we understand them as the unique individuals that they were who lived at particular times in history, and in the context of their culture, language, upbringing, education, and life experiences. Every writer speaks from the position of their own particular worldview, the lens through which they see history and happenings unfold and interpret them, even if they aren't fully conscious of it. So to pretend as though Paul was a blank sheet of paper who didn't have a personal worldview, or that whatever it was that he wrote is so mysterious that it transcends whatever worldview he may or may not have held, is not only illogical it makes him less than human. And for those theologians and Bible commentators who demand that Paul is culturally neutral or his words have little or no connection to who he is as a human person, it is for no other reason than for that writer or translator to be fully freed to make whatever he or she wants to make out of Paul's words.

So I have been putting together a picture for you of who the historical Paul is before we examine what he says; where he came from, what influenced his religious and societal thoughts and beliefs, and what the terms he regularly used meant to him in the context of his particular Jewish experience. It is complicated because just like for anyone, we can't be entirely described and labeled according to only one aspect of our lives. We can no more fully describe Paul by using the term Jew and thus anticipate his actions and reactions and thought processes than we can fully describe a random person as a Christian and assume too much only from that. This becomes especially important when some of the most critical doctrines that are foundational to our faith as Believers in Christ comes directly from the writings of Paul.

For those listeners who might think that what I'm covering is not something that anyone but a Bible academic needs to know, think again. For 21st century western gentiles, even though you might not realize it, Paul couldn't be more of a foreigner to us. So let's continue adding to Paul's biography.

Last time I said that Paul was originally a Diaspora Jew who was born and raised (at least for a time) in Tarsus of the province of Cilicia. It was a large city and so Paul was anything but a country boy like Yeshua was. At some point he came to the Holy Land to live and to go to religious school. He came from a prestigious family who identified themselves as Pharisees, something rather unusual when a Jewish family lived outside of the Holy Land. The social/political/religious divisions within Judaism that are represented by the parties of the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes were mostly present in Judea and the Diaspora Jews didn't tend to divide themselves up and label themselves that way. In the Diaspora occupation, craft, and social status usually determined which Synagogue one might attend; not so different from modern Christianity.

It is significant that Paul was a Roman citizen, another unusual status for a Jew. Not unheard of, but not typical; and this status was greatly advantageous to **Sha'ul** bringing him credibility as well as affording him special rights. This further emphasizes the privileged life he was born into, and his ease of operating in both Jewish and gentile environments.

Paul was a Greek speaker as his first language. However in order to attend the elite Academy of Gamaliel in Jerusalem for his religious training, he had to be fluent in Hebrew and be familiar with Aramaic. But even more the Academy of Gamaliel was so distinguished that in order to be a student Paul would have had to demonstrate amazing potential, as only a handful of the best and brightest were admitted. What were the students taught? The Tanakh (the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible) and **Halakhah**; that is, they were taught the Scriptures and Oral Torah....Traditions. We find Paul quote Scriptures dozens of times in his letters so he knew his way around the Bible. However, just as it is in Christian institutions, it is not so much what the Bible actually says that matters as much as what the teacher says the Bible **means** by what it says. Put another way, Bible interpretation was the key, and the interpretations are what separated the various factions of Judaism from one another the same way it separates the several thousand modern day Christian denominations from one another. And since Gamaliel was a Pharisee (and so was Paul even before coming to the Holy Land), then it was the Biblical interpretations of the Pharisees, meaning the Traditions of the Pharisees, that Paul learned.

So I want to stress again: the world of the Pharisees was the world of the Synagogue. And the world of the Synagogue stressed Oral Torah, Traditions. So Paul's thought processes, the very fiber of his understanding, was most influenced by **Halakhah**, which was the body of Jewish law that controlled everyday life for Jews. The Temple and the Priesthood however was the world of the Sadducees, and they stressed the Torah of Moses. They did not accept the **Halakhah** of the Pharisees; of course that means that they had their own interpretations of what the Law of Moses meant by what it said, and it was in many important ways different from the interpretations of the Pharisees and therefore often different from what was taught at the Synagogues. So the Temple and the Synagogue were rivals in many aspects.

Synagogues in the Diaspora used the Greek Septuagint as their Bibles. The LXX was a Greek translation of the Tanakh that had been created about 250 B.C.; although in the Holy Land some Synagogues used the Hebrew Bible (the original **Tanakh**) depending on the affiliation of the Synagogue. Paul would have been most familiar with the Septuagint. Although born in

Tarsus, Paul says in Acts 22 that he was “brought up” in Jerusalem. Luke says that at the time Paul was holding the cloaks for those who would stone Stephen he was a “young man”. A “young man” in that day was between roughly 24 to 40 years of age. So Paul had lived for some time in Jerusalem and was heavily indoctrinated in the type of Judaism present in the Holy Land more so than in the type of Judaism practiced in the foreign lands of the Diaspora. So although Paul had been subjected to Hellenist influences early in his life, it would be quite incorrect to label Paul as a Hellenist Jew. As an elite academic he was familiar with both sides of the fence, so to speak. He was as comfortable among the Hebrew Jews as he was among the Hellenist Jews.

I'll stop here for now in describing the historical Paul by giving you an example of how knowing a person's worldview, culture, and life context matters so much when interpreting what he or she has to say. I'm going to take this example not from Paul, but from His Master Yeshua. I do this for a couple of reasons; first because we see that even Jesus Christ was not a blank slate. At least what we might characterize as the human attribute of Him had a definite personal worldview and a life context that we need to grasp so that we can correctly understand what He meant by what He said. After all, He was a rural Galilean Jew, a craftsman, who communicated with, and lived among, other common, blue-collar every day Jews. And the life-context I want to highlight is that Yeshua's world was the world of the Synagogue, not of the Temple. And second, although he didn't belong to any party, it is my opinion that he was likely closest in religious philosophy to that of the Essenes. Nonetheless even though we are told that He had no formal religious training, it was the world of the Synagogue that He lived in and frequented, and not the world of the Temple. In fact the New Testament record shows that He only visited Jerusalem and the Temple during the Biblical Feast days, and that in order to obey requirements of the Law of Moses. Thus He well knew the teachings of the Rabbis. He certainly didn't need training in the Word of God since He WAS the Word of God. The point is that He was quite familiar with the terms of the Synagogue because that was part of standard Jewish social life.

The example I want to give to you comes from Yeshua's most famous and extensive speech, the Sermon on the Mount. After plainly and emphatically stating in Matthew 5:17 -19 that He did not come to change or abolish the Law of Moses or the Prophets, so no one should interpret what He is saying in that light, in verse 21 we read this:

^{CJB} Matthew 5:21 *"You have heard that our fathers were told, 'Do not murder,' and that anyone who commits murder will be subject to judgment.*

When a Jewish teacher or a Rabbi is in a debate (a Midrash) or instructing on the Torah, the first thing they say is what a prominent teacher or Rabbi has previously said about it. And Christ says that what this crowd of Jews had been told by the earlier teachers of their fathers was “do not murder” because they'll be judged for it. But now, in typical rabbinical fashion, Christ gives His interpretation of the commandment to not murder. So in the next verse He says:

^{CJB} Matthew 5:22 *But I tell you that anyone who nurses anger against his brother will be subject to judgment; that whoever calls his brother, 'You good-for-nothing!' will be*

brought before the Sanhedrin; that whoever says, 'Fool!' incurs the penalty of burning in the fire of Gei-Hinnom!

For Yeshua's followers, this was Yeshua's Oral Torah, or Tradition, about what the commandment to not murder means. And despite all the erroneous teachings we've heard that essentially Christ lessened the restrictions of the commandments of Moses, thereby making it easier and less burdensome, in fact we find that He made them much stricter. Here harboring anger or even saying something unkind against a brother (meaning a fellow Hebrew) was considered to break the commandment against murder.

A few verses later we hear:

^{CJB} **Matthew 5:31 *"It was said, 'Whoever divorces his wife must give her a get (a divorce decree).'***

So in the same familiar rabbinical format Yeshua now discusses a hot topic of His day, divorce. And He begins by saying what has been previously declared by the earlier Synagogue teachings about divorce is that the wife must receive an official divorce decree and if the husband will do that, then he meets all the requirements of the commandment. But then in the next verse He says what His interpretation of the law of divorce is:

^{CJB} **Matthew 5:32 *But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of fornication, makes her an adulteress; and that anyone who marries a divorcee commits adultery.***

We see that just as with the murder topic, Yeshua's interpretation about divorce was far stricter.

The rather standard Christian teaching on this passage is that Yeshua was speaking against the Law of Moses and essentially canceling the commandments from Mt. Sinai and replacing them with His own. Had you been a Jew in that day, and regularly attended the Synagogue, you would have heard this form of debate and teaching countless times. And it in no way challenged or changed the Law of Moses; it was simply an issue of how to correctly interpret the Law of Moses.

Paul as a trained Rabbi also thought and spoke in the same usual customary way of Rabbis. Thus while to the uninitiated gentile Yeshua might sound as though he is setting up a new system of Laws and speaking against the old system (but He is not), so it is that when we hear Paul speak about the Law, even though it might seem so to a gentile, he is never talking **against** the Law but rather is offering His interpretation **of** the Law. And he is doing this in light of his own life experiences as a Pharisee, and owing to his training at the Academy of Gamaliel, but now greatly influenced with the divine revelation of the risen Christ and what Christ's disciples taught him.

What I'm telling you is not speculation; it is historical fact derived from a number of reliable sources. If you can but get your mind to accept it then reading Paul's letters changes

dramatically. His attitude towards the Law no longer seems negative at times, and some of the supposed contradictions he occasionally seems to offer disappear. Suddenly everything he says comes right back into line with the Torah, and with what Christ taught. We also see that while Paul is in no way repudiating or pulling away from Judaism, often he is arguing against many of the erroneous Traditions of Judaism that were popular, although incorrect.

So with that as our background, let's get into the Scripture passages of Acts chapter 9.

Let's re-read just the opening verses of Acts 9.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 9:1-19

Most commentators will refer to Acts 9:1 -19 as The Conversion of Paul. Nothing could be more misleading or inaccurate; and, I'm sorry to say, while I don't think it is meant that way, it is one of the most anti-Semitic Christian catch-phrases that one could use. In fact, Paul himself spoke out against the concept of conversion when a Jew or gentile comes to faith in Christ. I've spoken against the use of the term conversion and all that the word entails and I won't repeat that teaching, although I will briefly summarize. In the dictionary and certainly in the sense of the word as we think of it today, to convert means to metamorphose. It means to become something entirely different. A caterpillar will convert, or metamorphose, to a butterfly. The result is that there is no longer any resemblance between a caterpillar and a butterfly; all traces of the caterpillar have disappeared and an entirely new creature has emerged. Paul did not metamorphose from a Jewish caterpillar to a Christian butterfly.

Rather Paul turned. That is, he turned away from wrong interpretations of the Law and the Prophets and turned towards the right interpretations. He turned away from rejecting Yeshua as the Messiah that the Law and the Prophets pointed to, and turned towards accepting Him not only as Savior but as God. Paul did not become a new creature; he was simply the same creature with a new understanding. He did not cease being a Jew and instead became a gentile. He did not stop obeying the Law of Moses, and start obeying a new set of Laws that Yeshua supposedly created. He did not renounce Judaism and adopt Christianity, and he did not stop going to the Temple or the Synagogue and instead become a church-goer. So my name for Acts 9:1 -19 is The Turning of Saul.

The chapter opens with Saul's condition before he turns. He is working furiously to stamp out this new sect of Judaism that calls itself The Way. Paul is not intending to personally murder anyone; that wasn't his job because he was an academic. But no doubt, as with Stephen, he was hoping that by ferreting out and arresting Yeshua's followers that the result would be the same. Thus in verse 2 we find that Paul goes to the High Priest and asks for letters of authorization to the Synagogue leaders to identify and hand over to Paul anyone in their congregations that might be Yeshua sympathizers. Why go to the High Priest for permission? Because the High Priest was head of the Sanhedrin and Paul was operating in some kind of official capacity for the Sanhedrin. And why go to the Synagogues? Because especially in the Diaspora the Synagogue functioned the way Churches do in rural settings. That is they are typically the local meeting place; town hall and sanctuary rolled into one. The Synagogue was the social and religious hub of the Jewish communities operating in foreign lands, and this

represented around 95% of all living Jews.

This also shows that even though there was a separation of authority structure and operation between the Temple and the Synagogue, that since the Sanhedrin was the Jewish High Court, and the head of the Jewish High Court was the High Priest, then the Temple of course had authority in a certain sense over the Synagogue and those who attended. Thus we find Paul on the road to Damascus with a letter of authority to round up Believers in any of the several Synagogues there. Damascus was in Syria, part of the Roman Empire, but of course outside of the Holy Land. Since the Believers of Jerusalem fled after the execution of Stephen no doubt it was these fugitives that Paul was searching for.

It was a 130 mile journey from Jerusalem to Damascus, and somewhere along the route Paul was confronted by God; or better by Yeshua in spirit. A bright light burst from the sky and it was so terrifying and sudden that Paul fell to the ground in fright; a voice rang out from the clouds that asked Paul why he was persecuting him. Actually Luke says that the words from Heaven said **Sha'ul**, not Paul, indicating that the language Saul heard was Hebrew. **Sha'ul** of course is puzzled and confused and asks who it is that is speaking to him. The voice says it is Yeshua. Clearly the point of Yeshua identifying Himself with the persecuted Believers is to show full solidarity with them. But it also makes the point that from the divine perspective to reject and persecute a worshipper of Messiah because they are doing the will of the Messiah is the same as rejecting and persecuting the Messiah Himself.

Our CJB is correct to say that Paul's response was "Sir, who are you?" unlike most versions that say "Lord, who are you?" When Sha'ul responded he was not meaning lord in the sense of the Lord God, but rather in the sense of addressing a person of authority; so "sir" carries the best meaning. Yeshua responded by telling Paul to get up from the ground and complete his journey to Damascus. But when he got there someone would be sent to meet him with further instructions.

Verse 7 explains that Paul had companions traveling with him; they saw the light, they heard the voice, but they saw no one who was speaking. They were frozen with fear and could say nothing. But Sha'ul was blind. It was not the intensity of the light that blinded him or the other men would have been blinded as well. Nor was Paul being punished for not believing. Might his visual blindness be a living metaphor that exposed his spiritual blindness? Yes, I think so. There were much earlier events in Israel's history that essentially accomplished the same thing. One was when Miriam spoke out against her brother Moses and questioned his authority. She instantly broke out in **Tzara'at**, an unclean skin disease that is divinely caused. Thus Miriam's spiritual health was revealed; she was spiritually unclean on the inside even though she looked so pious on the outside.

Sha'ul's companions had to lead him by the hand the remainder of their journey to Damascus and he stayed blind for a time after he arrived. During that time he neither eats nor drinks. He was blind, not ill, so very likely he was fasting as he realized he had encountered God and because of Christ's instructions he knew he was about to hear more from God through someone else. Fasting to prepare for God's oracle was Biblical and it is invariably accompanied with prayer.

There was a particular disciple of Christ in Damascus named Hananyah. Hananyah is a Hebrew name, so this person was a Jew originally from the Holy Land, likely one of the fugitives Paul was seeking to arrest. The Lord comes to Hananyah in a vision and calls his name. Hananyah replies, "Behold, here I am Lord". We don't find the word "behold" in the CJB, but it ought to be there because the Greek says "idou", which is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word **hineni**. **Hineni** is a word that characterizes obedience, attentiveness and a readiness to act with zeal upon whatever comes next. It is often associated with God's prophets. God tells Hananyah to go to a certain house and ask about a man from Tarsus and that this man will be praying (this ties in with Sha'ul fasting). And while praying God has readied Paul for this encounter by means of a vision of Hananyah coming to him, laying hands on him, and restoring his sight.

But Hananyah was skeptical of Yeshua's instruction to go to Paul because Paul's mission to harm the Believers was well known. Yeshua doesn't chastise Hananyah because He knows things that Hananyah doesn't. So He patiently explains that Paul has been chosen for a special mission, and that will be to carry the Good News to the gentiles, to gentile kings, and even to the sons of Israel. This reference to the sons of Israel means the Diaspora Jews who live among the gentiles but no doubt is also meant to include the scattered 10 tribes of Israel most of whom had forgotten their Hebrew heritage. But more, Yeshua tells Hananyah that Paul is also going to find out that this mission is going to require great suffering. And indeed it did as, for example, Paul says in 2Corinthians 11:

2Corinthians 11:24-28 CJB

²⁴ Five times I received "forty lashes less one" from the Jews.

²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea.

²⁶ In my many travels I have been exposed to danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the desert, danger at sea, danger from false brothers.

²⁷ I have toiled and endured hardship, often not had enough sleep, been hungry and thirsty, frequently gone without food, been cold and naked.

²⁸ And besides these external matters, there is the daily pressure of my anxious concern for all the congregations.

One can only imagine what was going through Hananyah's mind as he contemplated Christ's words that Paul would take the Jewish Gospel to gentiles. This had to be perhaps the most incomprehensible (probably the most upsetting) part of what he heard in his vision. Why would the gentiles want a Jewish Messiah and why would the Jews want to share their Messiah with their oppressors? Nonetheless Hananyah obeyed, went in and laid his hands on Paul and Paul's sight returned. His blessing upon Sha'ul was in the name of Yeshua, the same one who took Paul's sight away from him a few days earlier.

But now comes an issue we discussed a couple of lessons ago; Hananyah's laying on of hands also resulted in Paul receiving the Holy Spirit. So we are left to assume that Paul had already come to believe in Yeshua (although we are not directly told so), probably during his prayer and fasting. So sometime after coming to faith, but before immersion, the Holy Spirit comes to indwell Paul but only with the laying on of hands. And along with the indwelling of the Spirit comes healing. My conviction is that the end of his physical blindness was a real and living witness to the end of his spiritual blindness; otherwise the physical blindness doesn't seem to have had a discernable purpose.

We discussed the issue of the connection between faith, baptism and the Holy Spirit at length in earlier lessons but the point I want to draw today is that while Christian denominations will often insist upon a certain authorized sequence of how and when baptism and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit MUST happen and does happen, in fact what we have seen up to now in the Book of Acts, and will see more of in coming chapters, is that there is no consistent divine formula or sequence; it can happen in any number of ways. Sometimes long intervals can happen between steps; sometimes it all happens immediately. Sometimes it involves the intervention of another; sometimes it all happens in private. The Lord is sovereign and He will deal with us as individuals and on His own terms.

The healing Paul experiences is as though scales fell from his eyes. There is no reason to take this as an expression; some kind of flaky substance literally covered over his eyes for several days and then all at once fell off. The healed, saved, prepared Paul is now ready for God to begin to mold him and shape him. Paul ends his fast, and begins eating and drinking again to regain his strength.

Let's read a little more of Acts chapter 9.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 9:19 – 22

We're told that Paul spent time with the disciples in Damascus no doubt mostly meaning he lodged with them while there. And immediately he went to the Synagogues to preach Yeshua as the Son of God. Immediately is ***eutheos*** in Greek, and we should be careful as to the intensity that the word "immediately" has to our minds in modern English. "Immediately" in typical modern day use has the sense of something being hurried, or urgent, or nearly instant. Rather the word ***eutheos*** more has the correct sense of forthwith or directly simply meaning that there was nothing of any note that occurred in between two events, and that not very much time passed. So the first thing Paul did after hanging out with the disciples for a few days was to go speak in the Synagogues. No doubt during that time he and the disciples discussed theology and ***Halakhah*** and this gave Paul time to digest all that had happened in the last few days.

But note where it is that Paul went; to the Synagogues. Why? Because that's where the Jews would be. So even though the bulk of Paul's mission will be to the gentiles, first he goes to the Jews. And we're told that Sha'ul taught that Yeshua was the Son of God, which is interesting because we might think that we would find that words that Paul taught are that Yeshua is the Mashiach; the Messiah. Let's not just glide right by what it is that Paul taught.

Son of God was not just a term that Yeshua seemed to favor to describe Himself (along with Son of Man), it had a definite meaning in the world of Judaism and especially if one was a Pharisee (which, of course, Paul was). Son of God was a term that we find in the Old Testament that refers to the entire line of kings coming from King David; however some of the Psalms, such as 110, nuance this term to give it a Messianic tone. Thus in early Biblical usage Son of God did not have any sense that a Davidic king was deity. Rather it is that since God was supposed to be Israel's king, but long ago Israel had demanded a human king to rule over them, then the human king was supposed to be God's agent or under-shepherd on earth so to speak. The human king of Israel was to operate in a Torah based, godly manner behaving more as servant to his people than a superior self-serving ruler so typical of gentile kings. But God was to rule over the king and the king was to accept that. And King David is said to have exemplified this as God's servant/shepherd king.

Thus when Paul preached Yeshua as Son of God, it would have been little different had he preached King David as Son of God. By Paul's day the Pharisees were teaching that a Messiah in the mold of King David was coming. They were not at all expecting this new King David to be anything other than a normal flesh and blood human being. So since King David was himself called a son of God by the Lord, then the strongest part of the reference is the "King" part. The "God" part meant that this king was God authorized and under the rule of God. So when Paul preached Yeshua as Son of God it mostly meant that Yeshua was God's anointed king who comes from King David's line. And since the **Halakhah** of the Pharisees said that Israel's next anointed king would be from King David's line, and would be their deliverer from the oppression of Rome, then this king was of course the Messiah (the anointed one). Again; no thought of deity was involved in that concept.

Don't misunderstand me; I'm in no way saying that Paul was preaching that Yeshua was just a man and not God. It's only that we're told that the first thing Paul taught about Yeshua was that he was the Davidic king that had been prophesied. And the Pharisees said that the Davidic king was the Messiah. Even though the Jews in the Synagogues of Damascus would not have counted themselves as Pharisees, all the Oral Torah (Halakhah) they were taught in the Synagogues came from the teaching of the Pharisees, because all Rabbis were Pharisees. Paul had an audience that would readily understand what he was preaching. The issue was whether or not they would accept it.

We'll continue with Acts chapter 9 next time.