

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 22, chapter 9 continued

Acts chapter 9 began with the fierce heretic hunter, Paul, determined to help eradicate this new sect of Judaism that called itself The Way, but whom the other Jewish factions called the **Notzrim**. But by halfway through the chapter **Sha'ul** has had a life-changing encounter with Yeshua calling out to him from Heaven, and has himself come to accept that Yeshua is the long awaited Messiah; Paul finds himself joining the very group he set out to destroy. Because the concept of Judaism as the organizational birthplace of Christ-worship can be so challenging for gentile Christians (and Jews as well) to get a handle on, I'll restate something we've talked about before. What is it about The Way insisting that Yeshua is the Messiah, which has caused other factions of Judaism to feel such anger towards them to the point of murder? After all, their founder and leader, Yeshua, was dead; so obviously he was of no further threat to Judaism's leadership structure. While it is always a little dangerous to oversimplify a complex issue, in the end it was that the Traditions taught by Yeshua didn't agree with the Traditions taught by these other factions of Judaism; or in Church-speak, it was a violent disagreement over religious doctrines and religious authority.

Even in Israel today the disagreements over **Halakhah** (Jewish law) and religious authority among Jewish factions can be extremely heated, regularly resulting in assaults and property damage; and especially when it involves Jewish followers of Yeshua. A few years ago an Israeli Messianic Jewish family that I personally know was viciously attacked by an Orthodox religious Jew over obvious differences in doctrines. This family's teenage boy received an explosive device disguised as a Purim gift. He brought it to his kitchen table, opened it and it exploded in his face destroying the room and injuring and burning him terribly. Miraculously, but with numerous operations, he survived. Like for the Believers that Paul was pursuing the issue that caused this attempted murder was not personal per se; it was about **Halakhah**: Jewish law and Traditions. It was about one faction of Judaism (Messianic Judaism) being picked on by another faction of Judaism.

By way of example, I pointed out in an earlier lesson that shortly before the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D., several disciples of the Jewish faction from the Rabbinic Academy of Hillel murdered a number of disciples of the Rabbinic Academy of Shammai over a proposed list of Oral Traditions that Shammai wanted the Sanhedrin to enact and enforce. So issues about who was Messiah weren't the only reasons for violence among Jewish factions. While it might seem so to modern Christians, the persecution that the Jewish Believers in the Book of Acts were experiencing from other Jews was nothing new, and in fact has continued sporadically and for varying reasons for centuries.

Let's also remember that at the point we're at in the Book of Acts there was as yet no gentile membership in The Way, and no Roman involvement in the persecution; this was purely an issue of infighting among Jews. However not all factions of Judaism were determined to eradicate The Way; only a few of the most zealous. Some merely tried to harass and thwart

their efforts; others had a more live and let live attitude. And to be fair, as regards the Purim bombing incident, Israeli news media raged against this attack and a few leaders of mainstream Judaism personally apologized to this teenage boy's family and openly denounced the actions of the Purim bomber. So we can no more indict all Judaism as violent persecutors of Peter and The Way in the New Testament era, than we can indict all Judaism as persecutors of the modern day Messianic Jews. We need to keep this perspective in mind as we continue our study of Acts.

When we left Paul he was still in Damascus, having only recently been healed from his spiritual and physical blindness by Hananyah, one of the disciples of Christ that had fled from Jerusalem, and who reluctantly laid hands on Paul at God's instruction. Hananyah knew full well who Sha'ul was, and he greatly feared him. He wasn't so easily buying that Paul had suddenly become a dedicated Believer between the time he left Jerusalem with warrants in hand to arrest Yeshua followers and his arriving in Damascus a few days later, supposedly a changed man. But the Lord reassured Hananyah that Paul was now in the fold and in fact had already been assigned the duty of taking the Good News to the gentiles; something else that Hananyah couldn't have been too thrilled about. But the ever obedient disciple obeyed God, and Paul received the Holy Spirit.

Paul ended his fast that began on the day Yeshua confronted him; he ate and regained his strength and straightaway went to the local Synagogues in Damascus to preach what he had just learned; that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Let's pick up with verse 22.

RE-READ ACTS 9:22 – end

Paul apparently had always been a zealot in everything he did. As we assemble his life history we see that he came to Jerusalem at a young age to seek the best religious training at the most elite school; that he was (as he once described himself) a Pharisee of Pharisees (meaning that he adopted the strictest code of Judaism for himself); that he was present at Stephen's stoning, cheering it on; and then that he was one of the hunters that the Sanhedrin employed to find and arrest those Jewish Believers who fled Jerusalem to Damascus. So it is not surprising that after his Salvation he remained every bit as zealous and uncompromising for Christ; it is simply how Paul was wired. Thus we find him in the Synagogues preaching the Good News, getting into fiery debates with these Damascus congregations, and upsetting the Jewish population in general. It seems that Paul was at first the proverbial bull-in-a-china-shop. He had the intelligence, the desire, the drive and the ability to preach the Good News. Yet we don't hear of one single person in Damascus that Paul convinced to follow Yeshua. No doubt it is because he had not yet learned to temper his enthusiasm with humility and the Godly wisdom that must accompany true evangelism.

Verse 23 begins with the words "Quite some time later". This could be weeks later, it could be years, that we read of Paul finally upsetting some of the Jews of Damascus sufficiently that they decided to kill him. Let me again interject: what had Paul done to warrant death threats? The standard **Halakhah** (the Traditions that mainstream Judaism followed) didn't agree with

Paul's new **Halakhah**, which had become that of the Jewish Believers. Nothing more. But the issues involved (mainly that Yeshua was the Messiah and He was deity) were so sensitive that it led to a desire of this movements' most outspoken opponents to kill.

I want to pause here and shift gears because we find in our passage that after Paul had to be stealthily smuggled out of Damascus in a basket, he would go back to Jerusalem. However the timeline of this sequence of events is problematic when we compare this to Paul's own writings. In Galatians Paul says this:

Galatians 1:15-19 CJB

15 But when God, who picked me out before I was born and called me by his grace, chose

16 to reveal his Son to me, so that I might announce him to the Gentiles, I did not consult anyone;

17 and I did not go up to Yerushalayim to see those who were emissaries before me. Instead, I immediately went off to Arabia and afterwards returned to Dammesek.

18 Not until three years later did I go up to Yerushalayim to make Kefa's acquaintance, and I stayed with him for two weeks,

19 but I did not see any of the other emissaries except Ya'akov the Lord's brother.

So the issue is this: here in Acts chapter 9 it seems that during the time that Paul first came to believe, he stayed in Damascus for an extended time. Then when a plot was discovered to murder him, some local disciples helped him to escape the walled City of Damascus by lowering him down in a basket. And then the next thing we're told (in verse 26) is that he went to Jerusalem. So the story in Acts 9 seems to say that this all happened in a direct sequence: he arrived in Damascus as a new Believer, escaped Damascus and then went to Jerusalem. However Galatians appears to tell a different story. In Galatians Paul says that after he left Damascus, he first went to Arabia and afterwards went back to Damascus. So only after his 2nd visit to Damascus did he finally go back to Jerusalem. There are other issues of discrepancy as well but we'll just focus on the timeline for the moment. In Galatians it seems that between the time Paul first fled from Damascus and before he finally went to Jerusalem is 3 years. It is common for Bible commentators to say that he was in Arabia for 3 years but that is an assumption; it is not what the Scripture passage says. We only know that the amount of time he spent in Arabia plus the amount of time he spent on his return trip to Damascus totaled 3 years. We don't know how he divided his time between Arabia and Damascus.

As Acts 9:23 says, it was "Quite some time later" when he left Damascus for Jerusalem. We have here an indefinite period of time from when Paul was led into Damascus, blind, and in a few days began preaching the Gospel in Synagogues; to when he fled Damascus for Arabia, and then eventually went back to Damascus, caused another ruckus, and had to escape over the wall at night. Now admittedly, because the Acts 9 and Galatians 1 passages leave out so

much detail and it is unclear exactly how much time he spent where, there are various interpretations by scholars and commentators. But without trying to define the exact amount of time, the sequence seems pretty obvious when we blend the information of Acts 9 with Galatians 1. Paul was on his way to Damascus when he met Christ. He arrived in Damascus, received the Holy Spirit and regained his sight, and then began preaching the good news in Synagogues all in only a few days.

At some undefined point Sha'ul left Damascus for Arabia. After living in Arabia for some unknown amount of time he returned to stay in Damascus (also for some unknown amount of time). However we do know that between the time he left Damascus for Arabia, and then returned to Damascus and then left Damascus again, this time for Jerusalem, was 3 years. So essentially everything we see happening in Acts 9 from verse 1 to verse 26 occurred over a period of 3 years; that's about the best we can do without involving considerable speculation.

What did Paul do while he was in Arabia? We don't know. Some say he preached the Gospel there but nothing says that is why he went or what he did. Might some of the Jerusalem Believers have fled to Arabia and so he went there to stay with them, or minister to them, safe from those in Damascus who wanted to kill him, perhaps even learning from them or instructing them? It is unknowable. However any notion that during the 3 years away that **Sha'ul** was given some special kind of education by Believers to prepare him for his mission doesn't fly. Nor is there any hint that Paul was like Moses in that God Himself gave one on one instruction to Paul. Nor while away from his Pharisee associates did he transition from Judaism and become a "Christian" (we'll see the truth of that play out in coming chapters of Acts). I can say this without reservation because there is no evidence or implication that there were any disciples at all in Arabia (although for certain there were Jewish communities in Arabia), and whatever disciples lived in Damascus were ordinary disciples and not the leadership who tasked themselves as the teachers of the finer points of the Gospel (we're specifically told that in Acts 6:2 and in Acts 8:1).

But more importantly it is because Paul was already a Torah scholar. He knew more about the Torah of Moses, the Prophets, the Writings, and the Oral Traditions of the Pharisees than any of those he was among. We must remember: what Paul learned upon coming to faith in Christ was some new Oral Traditions (new Bible interpretations) that confirmed that Yeshua was the Messiah; not that everything he knew was wrong and he had to start over from scratch. Even what he had to relearn concerned primarily the very narrow issues of the identification and nature of the Messiah and how salvation occurred. Paul didn't need 3 months, let alone 3 years, of training to be an effective preacher of the Gospel. And it is not as though some extensive blueprint for a new religion, complete with new doctrines, had been created by the Jerusalem Believers in the few short years since Messiah's death and ascent into Heaven; a blueprint that Paul needed to be taught. Paul was already a noted Bible expert and trained in teaching. That is why his letters dominate the New Testament and he is considered in authority over the Believing congregations in the Diaspora; he deals with Scripture passages and doctrine in organized, articulate and deeply spiritual and practical ways that could be very difficult for Jews of his day, as well as for modern and even early Christians, to understand because of his high-level academic background and his thorough knowledge of the Tanakh (the Old Testament).

And by the way; I hope by now Seed of Abraham Torah Class listeners understand that there was no New Testament in existence during Paul's era. Nor did Paul think he was part of writing one. It would be around 100 years after Paul before a New Testament was proposed (and at the time that proposal was considered heresy), and 150 years after Paul before one was actually formulated and declared by the gentile Bishops. They chose some of Paul's and Peter's letters that had been written to various congregations, along with some Gospel accounts and a few other documents that they felt were the most reliable (out of the many that were floating around), to form this New Testament. Thus everything Paul quoted and interpreted in his writings as regards Yeshua's advent and all that it means were based on the ancient Hebrew Tanakh; not some new writings. And yet, when he explained his interpretations he naturally used the terms and thought processes of his culture and his years of training in the Pharisee discipline, and these revolved around **Halakhah**.

So it is about 3 years after Paul came to faith in Christ that we find him back in Jerusalem and he wants to meet with the disciples (meaning the leadership) in Jerusalem. Paul is a natural leader and so is most comfortable dealing with leadership as we see he used to deal with the leadership of the Sanhedrin; naturally that's who he seeks out. However just as it was in Damascus, even 3 years later, the Believers in Jerusalem don't trust him. They didn't believe that he had really become one of them. And although it isn't mentioned, his old associates among the Priesthood, and the ruling Sadducees and Pharisees no doubt would have considered him a traitor; so Paul finds himself in a bind.

There was one Believer, though, that was willing to give Paul the benefit of the doubt: Bar-Nabba. He takes Paul to the emissaries (meaning the leadership). This brings us to another issue that some Bible commentators see as a discrepancy. In Galatians 1:18, 19 Paul says that when he went to **Yerushalayim** he met ONLY with Peter and with James, Yeshua's brother. Yet here in Acts 9 the inference is that he was taken to meet with most or all of the 12 disciples. I want to point out that in the case of Acts 9 we likely have Luke using second hand information (he was not an eye witness) and telling the story in broad and general terms; while in Galatians 1 we have Paul giving his own account of the same story and being more specific. It would be like me saying that on such and such a day my wife went to the Supermarket to do grocery shopping. But when she recounts the story she says that she went to the Supermarket and bought milk and eggs. I told the story in a general way; she added specific detail. My story could be construed by others to mean that she bought many different things; but in reality she only bought a couple of items. Either way she went to the Supermarket. In fact it may be that Luke didn't even know exactly who among the Believers' leadership that Paul met with; but later Paul in his own letter to the Galatians says it was only with 2 leaders, Kefa and Ya'acov. And at this time Peter and James are the top 2 leaders of The Way.

Paul did in Jerusalem as he had done in Damascus; after meeting with Kefa and Ya'acov he went around preaching about Yeshua (no doubt with their permission). Although it doesn't say so specifically Paul would have taught in some of the 400 or so Synagogues that crowded Jerusalem at this time. Most of the Synagogues were Hellenist, so that explains why it was specifically the Hellenist Jews that started to make attempts to kill him. I'm wondering if it is occurring to anyone other than me that somehow the Judaism of Paul's era seems to have forgotten all about the Torah Commandment that "Thou shalt not kill"? Somewhere along the

way since the Babylonian exile, because the teachings of Rabbis and Sages had superseded the actual teachings of God in His Word, matters became confused and it was deemed justifiable to take the life of someone whose doctrine didn't match your own if the issue was deemed fundamental enough. It is interesting that never will we encounter the accusation that Jewish Believers had left Judaism, so that is why they could be murdered. Not once will we hear of a Jew being told that he cannot both be a Jew and worship Yeshua as the Messiah. So how much their doctrines disagreed didn't disqualify Believers as being Jewish. I'm sorry to say that we have similar problems among Christians and Messianics today and the reason for it now is the same as it was in the New Testament era: the identity of Messiah. But today Jews do indeed accuse Jewish Believers of giving up their Jewishness, and gentile Believers demand that Jews minimize or abandon their Jewishness to worship Christ.

The teaching of God's Word then, as now, had become almost passé. I'm not sure whether the disinterest of the congregations in the Holy Scriptures has led to Pastors and Rabbis not bothering to learn and teach the Scriptures; or if it is Pastors and Rabbis who find it easier and more efficient to preach manmade doctrines and social issues than the Bible so the people assume that they are one in the same. But today we find all sorts of new traditions and doctrines among Believing congregations that turns God's actual Word on its head. God **demand**s that we execute convicted murderers; most of Christianity and Judaism says that mercy and compassion demands that we not. The Lord says marriage is one man to one woman; large and growing segments of Christianity and Judaism say that as long as love is involved marriage is however we choose to define it; and this list goes on.

So while we can look on with alarm and disgust at the Believers in Paul's day being singled out for death by other Jews over doctrines of Judaism, and wonder how worshippers of the God of Israel could do such a thing, we first need to look in the mirror and ask how Believers in Yeshua, the God of Israel, could adopt the ideas and behaviors that many of us have that are so contradictory to God's written instructions. In both cases the answer is the same: manmade doctrines and traditions eventually overturned God's Word.

In verse 30 the Believers in Jerusalem somehow learn about the plot against Paul and get him out of town before it can be carried out. Paul is sent first to Caesarea and then to Tarsus, the town of his birth where his parents and/or family lived. Caesarea is referring to Caesarea Maritima a bustling port city located around 60 miles northwest of Jerusalem. I've taken hundreds of people there on tours to Israel, and it is truly breath taking. It was a crown jewel in many of Herod's building projects, 2nd only to the Temple in Jerusalem. The city was thoroughly Roman in design, architecture, engineering technology, and purpose. It contained a pagan Temple, a hippodrome, a large amphitheater, and the most modern of ports. It served as the provincial seat of Roman governance of Judea. But it also had a large and wealthy Jewish population. It is clear from Paul's final destination, Tarsus, that the reason he went to Caesarea was to get ship passage to Tarsus.

Tarsus would give Paul a good base from which to launch his mission to the gentiles. He would have easy access to all points of the compass from there, and he would have had a friendly environ to host him in the meantime. As a native of Tarsus and as a Roman citizen, he had every advantage and would make good use of it. And no doubt by now Paul was learning to be

a little more measured in how he approached the issue of the Gospel as he brought it to both Diaspora Jews and gentiles. Another wonderful lesson for us is just under the surface here. Paul was given his marching orders directly from God: take the Good News of Yeshua to the gentiles. So far as we know, up to now, there was nothing more specific than that. So when God gives us an assignment it is up to us to get up and get moving. Pray as preparation, but don't expect the assignment to be accomplished supernaturally. Think. Assess. Learn. Organize. Do. God gave each of us a brain, and certain abilities. Sometimes the Lord will give us unusual backgrounds and circumstances that give us a unique opportunity to reach a certain segment of society, or to accomplish a task that perhaps others couldn't. Don't be afraid to be who you are, to draw on your life experiences, and to use your abilities and assets in service to the Lord.

Verse 31 says that after Paul's departure, throughout the Holy Land the Messianic community enjoyed peace. The intent is not to say that it was because of Paul leaving that Messianics enjoyed peace; but rather that on a timeline it was after Paul departed that things also calmed down. But it also means that those zealots who were so determined to harass and destroy the Yeshua followers had calmed down and this period of quiet gave the Believers a chance to spread the message without fear.

Notice in this same verse that it speaks of the Believers "living in the fear of the Lord". A better more literal translation of the Greek is not "living" but rather "going" in the fear of the Lord. I point this out because at this point in Jewish history the Biblical phrase "walking in the fear of the Lord" or "going in the fear of the Lord" had become a standard expression in Jewish life that meant to denote faithful observance to the **Halakhah**; Jewish law. Remember what I told you that the word **Halakhah** means? It means "the path that one walks". So the idea is that "walking in the fear of the Lord" is "the path that one walks". See how that fits together? And in that era, **Halakhah** consisted of a combination of Torah Law, Oral Law and customs that Judaism said establishes the path that one ought to walk.

Among scholars a phrase of this type is called a Hebraism. That is, just like we might call a phrase like "don't let the cat out of the bag" an Americanism because it is used nowhere else but in America, it has a meaning among Americans that goes beyond what the words mean in their literal sense; but only Americans know what it means. After all, this particular Americanism has nothing to do with cats or bags; it merely means to keep something secret. A Hebraism does the same; there are sayings that have a certain meaning only within Hebrew society, and the saying doesn't necessarily mean exactly what the individual words seem to say. I bring this up because the New Testament is chocked full of Hebraisms that can be hard to spot because they are first expressed in Greek and then further translated to English. Thus we can look at the literal meaning of those words and get the wrong impression unless we recognize it as a uniquely Hebrew expression. So in the NT whenever we see the expression of going, or walking, or living in the fear of the Lord, it is actually a Hebraism that is referring to being faithful to the total body of **Halakhah**. And of course, this was considered as the most pious, God-fearing thing that a Jew could do.

Verse 32 now transitions away from Paul and back to Peter, the unquestioned leader of The Way at this time. He was traveling around, ministering to the Believers who were scattered in

groups around the Holy Land. He came to the town of Lud; Lud is also known as Lydda. This was a large Jewish city in the Roman province of Samaria, about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Here Peter would perform another healing miracle.

The subject was a man named Aeneas who, we are told, had been paralyzed for 8 years. The most common reason for sudden paralysis in an adult in this era was a Stroke. Aeneas was a Believer. Peter went into his room, and prayed over him in the name of Yeshua the Messiah. In fact the form of the prayer is a command for Aeneas to be healed of his paralysis. Clearly since Aeneas was a Believer living amongst other Believers many prayers for his healing would already have been sent Heavenward. But Peter had been given special authority by Christ to do miracles. Since the man had been bed ridden for 8 years, Peter's command to "get up, and make your bed" is actually a bit light hearted if not humorous. Many non-Believers in the area heard of this, and saw Aeneas healed, and this brought them to faith in Yeshua. The added significance is that this occurred in Samaria so many Samaritans lived there. And we've discussed before the animosity between Jews and Samaritans. No doubt those who came to faith involved both Samaritans and Jews.

From there Peter was called to Yafo, also called Jaffa and Joppa. In Yafo lived a young lady named Tavita. Tavita is Hebrew for gazelle. The Greek word for gazelle is Dorcas and so occasionally we'll see the name Dorcas in our Bibles. English Bibles usually call her Tabitha. She was known as a good woman who helped others; however she suddenly took ill and died. Because in Hebrew society burial must be accomplished by sundown of the day the person passes away, they quickly washed the body, wrapped her in linen cloth, and laid her on her bed. So take notice that in the case of the paralyzed man in Lydda and now with the deceased woman in Yafo, both are Believers. Thus in both cases the local community fully knew that if He wanted to the Lord could heal not only paralysis but even bring the dead back to life. Who better to be summoned then, than Peter?

Upper rooms were common on houses as a rather easy way to add on more living space since all roofs were flat roofs. Often the upper rooms were guest quarters. It was customary for a Hebrew to be laid out in their own bed in their own room should they die. That it was an upper room changes none of that.

Verse 39 explains that Peter immediately went to Tavita's bedside, and next to her bed were sobbing widows. The likely significance that there were several widows present is that often widows were hired to come and be part of the customary mourning rites. They were usually available, and many needed money, so a small fee would be paid. So it had become rather customary to employ widows as professional mourners. These widows were no strangers to Tavita as they each displayed the clothes Tavita had made and given to them; this tells us that these widows were indeed poor.

Peter wasted no time; he sent the widows away and prayed over Tavita. Just as Kefa had ordered the disabled Aeneas to get up out of his bed, so he orders the deceased Tavita to get up out of her bed. Immediately she opened her eyes and sat up. Folks, our God has the power over life and death! Death is no obstacle for Him and this is a hope that we have that is more than only a wish; it is a promise. As Believers we will still die; but it won't be permanent. We

will live again and our God has but to think it to make it so.

Peter actually follows a Biblical pattern here. This is not the first time in the Bible that a Prophet of God has been used to bring the dead back to life. Elijah did it. Elisha did it. And of course Yeshua did it. And each time the pattern was that the corpse was lying on their bed, and the Prophet ordered everyone to leave the room. The Lord was beseeched through prayer by the Prophet, and in His sovereign will God acted by raising that person from the dead (just as we see here with Tavita).

One can only imagine the joy as Peter took her hand and led her to her many friends who anxiously awaited. No doubt many harbored hope that Tavita would be returned to them; but how many actually thought it would happen? Was it for Tavita's sake that the Lord reanimated her lifeless body? No. Tavita's eternal future was secure. The reason for this miracle is stated in the next verse.

^{CJB} **Acts 9:42** *This became known all over Yafo, and many people put their trust in the Lord.*

God's purpose for the miracles of Aeneas and Tavita was to demonstrate His power, His love, His authority over everything seen and unseen. Many who saw these things happen with their own eyes could not resist and they too accepted Yeshua into their hearts.

This chapter ends with the notice that Kefa stayed in Yafo for an undetermined amount of time, being hosted by **Shimon**, a leather tanner. We'll learn more about Shimon next time, but for now just know that a leather tanner was pretty much the lowliest craft a person could practice. The tanning fluid used in those days was so putrid in odor that they usually set up shop by the sea in hopes the wind would help some. But it also meant that the tanner wore a permanent stench that no amount of bathing or incense would solve.

Peter, then, the head of the rapidly growing Yeshua movement, and so loved by God and given such awesome authority by Christ, didn't stay in a lovely home with a wealthy person of status in the community. Instead he chose the hospitality of the lowliest, least respected craftsman in Jewish society, who usually wasn't even permitted near other folks.

We'll begin Acts chapter 10 next time.