

Paul's Close Encounter

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The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/Dwdm27-YMkg>

The scripture reading is Acts 9:1-31

Paul's Damascus road transformation is one of the most familiar stories in the New Testament, and one of the least understood. Paul, or Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee and student of the famous Rabban Gamliel in Jerusalem. Paul believed that the followers of Yeshua of Nazareth were a danger to the community and sought to weed them out. Paul took an active part in the persecution of the believers, first in Jerusalem and then elsewhere. He later recounts the extent to which he persecuted the believers.

Acts 26:9-11 NKJV 9 "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 "This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. 11 "And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

All that was about to change. Paul was sent to the city of Damascus to seek out and bring the followers of Yeshua back to Jerusalem in chains. Little did Paul know that his life was about to take a fateful turn as he approached that city.

During Paul's persecution of the believers, he received letters of authorization from Caiaphas, the corrupt High Priest of the sect of the Sadducees. In doing so, Paul broke from the teaching and advice of his teacher Gamliel, who had previously advised the Sanhedrin to leave these men alone. Paul's reputation as a ruthless persecutor of the believers grew rapidly and many believers fled Jerusalem following the death of Stephen to escape being jailed or even put to death themselves.

Judaism at that time, was very sectarian in nature. The Bible mentions two sects in particular; the Pharisees and the Sadducees. But there were also others including the Zealots and the Essenes. The followers of Yeshua were mostly referred to as the sect of the "Nazarenes." But they referred to themselves as "The Way."

Regardless of what they were called, Paul saw the opportunity to perhaps make a name for himself and sought to extinguish this new and fast-growing movement.

Acts 9:1-2 NKJV 1 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.

Damascus sits at the apex of a major crossroad of the ancient world and is one of the worlds oldest, continuously occupied cities. At that time in history, Damascus was in the control of the neighboring kingdom of Nabataea and was one of the cities of the Decapolis.

Paul made a point to travel to this important city because of the large Jewish population located there. If this new sect of the Nazarene took hold there, it could spread far and wide in very short order.

With the letters of authority from the High Priest in hand, Paul set out for Damascus. The journey would have taken about a week. Damascus is some 135 miles north-northeast of Jerusalem. The letters Paul carried would have given him great access to the synagogues within the Jewish community. The believers in Messiah Yeshua were not a separate body, they continued to be well entrenched in the Jewish community wherever they were found.

In a commentary of the Jewish roots of the Book of Acts we find the following:

“The fact that Paul automatically turns to the synagogues in Damascus serves as one of the earliest and best testimonies to the believers’ participation in Jewish society and life... Paul does not intend to seek them out in gentile environments and expects them to be accessible precisely because of their continued integration in Jewish practice and customs.”ⁱ

Bent on destroying this new and seemingly dangerous sect, Paul and his traveling entourage approached Damascus when something extraordinary happened.

Acts 9:3-5 NKJV 3 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?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

In Christian circles, this encounter story is usually presented in the context of a “conversion” to a new religion. However, there is nothing in the text itself to indicate a conversion. It’s an anachronism placed there by later Christian Bible scholars. There was no religion called Christianity at that time or in the immediate future.

Paul did, however, undergo a radical transformation of heart and mind. He experienced what Yeshua referred to as being “Born Again.” Paul encountered a direct meeting with the risen Messiah Yeshua! However, nowhere in the Book of Acts or any of Paul’s own letters and writings do we see a deviation from his Jewish identity, his loyalty to the Torah, or to Jewish practices and traditions.

Paul, along with his traveling companions were stopped dead in their tracks by the presence of Yeshua Himself!

Acts 9:6-7 NKJV 6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The blinding light would have stunned and dazzled Paul and his companions. The voice Paul heard addressed him directly by name. Paul was blinded and quite likely terrified. When Paul asked who it was who is speaking to him, the voice answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” What could possibly have gone through Paul’s mind when he heard that name? Paul considered Yeshua a fraud. This is only a few years after Yeshua’s crucifixion. It is conceivable that Paul either witnessed or heard about it.

After the voice identified Himself as Yeshua of Nazareth, He said something else which can be puzzling to us, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” What does this mean? To get the answer we first need to understand what a “goad” is. It is a sharp prod used to control an ox while plowing a field. If the ox kicks against it, he will get injured.

The phrase is used idiomatically in this context and was a common metaphor in Hellenist Jewish circles. It basically means “it is fruitless to struggle against God or against one’s destiny.” The Rabbis of this time also used the metaphor of a goad to illustrate that if you struggle against God’s wisdom and the Torah, you can get hurt! Yeshua’s instruction to Paul seems to parallel Gamaliel’s words to the Sanhedrin when he urged them to

leave this movement alone. By fighting against The Way, Paul would be struggling against his own destiny and against God.

The light and voice disappeared almost as quickly as it had arrived.

Acts 9:7-9 NKJV 7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 Then Saul arose 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. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Paul emerged from this encounter with Yeshua totally blinded. The others with him obviously could see because they led Paul on into the city. A Jewish disciple of Yeshua by the name of Ananias was in the city. The name Ananias in Hebrew is Chananyah, which means, "The LORD has favored." Later in chapter twenty-two, Paul describes Ananias as:

Acts 22:12 NKJV 12 "Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there,

From his description we can infer Ananias was most likely a wealth man. Ananias was also given a vision and instructed to go to a certain house where he would encounter Paul.

Acts 9:10-11 NKJV 10 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying.

The refugees fleeing the persecution in Jerusalem would have attended the various synagogues in and around Damascus sharing with the community there about the persecution and certainly about the one named Paul. They quite possibly had heard in advance that Paul was on his way to their city to arrest the believers. I am sure that they braced themselves for the coming persecution.

Ananias, being from among the believers of Yeshua of Nazareth, probably could not believe that he was given instruction to seek out Paul as opposed to fleeing from him!

In Ananias' vision, he is given details about Paul's vision. Paul was told to expect Ananias to visit him, pray for him and restore his sight. It is only understandable that Ananias would object to seeking out Paul.

Acts 9:12-14 NKJV 12 "And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight." 13 Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. 14 "And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."

Back in verse 9 we read that Paul remained blind following his encounter and refused food or drink for three days. Ananias received his vision toward the end of these three days. He was instructed to immediately go to the house of a merchant named Judas where he would find Paul in fasting and prayer. Ananias was told that Paul would be expecting him and that he was to provide the healing for Paul's sight.

Ananias, at first objected to this mission. After all, Paul was an exceedingly dangerous man carrying with him the complete authority of the Sanhedrin to arrest the believers. But Ananias was the LORD's chosen instrument to commission Paul for his unique assignment.

Acts 9:15-16 NKJV 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 "For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake."

Since it was three days later, Ananias probably heard about Paul's road-side encounter with Yeshua. Ananias went to the house of Judas as instructed and found a blinded, humbled, and praying man. Probably not at all what he expected to see.

Acts 9:17-18 NKJV 17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.

Ananias immediately went to Paul and prayed for him, immediately, Paul's sight was restored to him. Ananias then prophesied over him. Paul later described the experience.

Acts 22:13-16 NKJV 13 (Ananias) "came to me; and he stood and said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him. 14 "Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. 15 'For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 'And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.'

The prophecy which Ananias spoke over Paul revealed the mission which Yeshua had commissioned for Paul. This was to be a special mission unlike that of any other apostle.

Paul's apostleship is a special case. Up until now, in order to be an apostle, one had to have witnessed the risen Yeshua prior to His ascension and been commissioned specifically by Yeshua as His witness. Paul had seen the risen Messiah in his encounter on the road and he was commissioned secondarily through Ananias. Paul referred to himself as the least or last apostle.

1 Corinthians 15:8-10 NKJV 8 Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

After finishing his prayer, Ananias led Paul out to be immersed or baptized. Paul confessed his sins, in particular those sins committed against the believers of Yeshua. As he entered the water, Paul called on the name of Yeshua and emerged a new man, born again, hungry and wet.

Paul had fasted for three days prior to his commissioning and baptism. This follows a pattern of instruction that the disciples would follow in the years to come. In Paul's commissioning, Yeshua explained that Paul was chosen as His instrument to carry His name to the Gentiles, to kings, and to princes. Paul was specifically appointed as the apostle to the Gentiles. He would indeed carry the name of Yeshua of Nazareth as he stood trial before Herod Agrippa and Emperor Nero. Paul would take the name of Yeshua before the Sons of Israel as when he traveled to many of the synagogues and communities in the diaspora.

As Yeshua's chosen instrument, Paul had a strong sense of the unique mission he was called to do. He spoke of it to the believers in Galatia.

Galatians 1:13-16a NKJV 13 For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. 14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of

my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, 16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles,...

Paul described himself as a Pharisee among Pharisees. He was a highly educated man, and being from Tarsus, the center of Greek learning at that time, he would be exceedingly familiar with the ways of the Gentile world of the Middle East. Paul's education and status as a Roman citizen placed him in a unique position to take the Gospel message to his fellow Jews and to the Gentiles in the Roman controlled areas of the diaspora. With the same energy and zeal which he once opposed the message of Yeshua of Nazareth, he now passionately advanced the message.

Acts 9:20-21 NKJV 20 Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. 21 Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?"

Wherever he went, People were astonished at the transformation of Paul. But his status as a student of the famous Gamliel put him in a powerful position of prestige and credibility as he traveled from synagogue to synagogue debating with his fellow Jews and bringing them the message of Messiah Yeshua. Paul did not just demonstrate to his listeners the validity of Yeshua of Nazareth as the Messiah, but his supernatural encounter with the living Yeshua on the road to Damascus convinced Paul that Yeshua of Nazareth was more than a mere human Messiah. He was indeed the Son of God.

Study Questions:

1. Last week we compared the two Hellenist Jews, Paul and Philip. How do they compare now after Paul's encounter with Yeshua?
2. In the section of our reading not covered in the video, Paul remained in Damascus for a time teaching and debating in the synagogues in and around the city. Galatians 1:17-18 indicates that once Paul left Damascus, he traveled around Arabia for a time. Wherever he went, those who wanted him dead were not far behind. What was Paul's contribution to the growth of the body of believers across the region?
3. We know that names are important in the Bible and when a name is mentioned it is significant. The two men that Paul first encounters following the meeting on the road are Ananias and Judas. What is the significance of these names?
4. Describe Paul before and after his encounter with Yeshua. How do we see "measure for measure" played out in Paul's life?
5. Paul's apostleship was a unique case. He was not one of the twelve who received their commission directly from Yeshua before His ascension. How is Paul's unique commissioning and mission different from the other twelve? Why do you suppose that Paul was chosen for this mission?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

ⁱ Le Cornu and Shulam, A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Acts: Acts 1-15, 484.