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Sha’ul Turns from Murder to Messiah 9: 1-31

34 AD
Pilate’s rule as procurator in Judea ended

Sha’ul turns from murder to Messiah DIG: Sha’ul traveled 150 miles to Damascus in order to expand what started as a local persecution against believers in Jerusalem (8:1). What does that tell you about him? Sha’ul’s former teacher was Gamaliel (22:3). What had Gamaliel advised the Sanhedrin regarding believers in 5:34-39? How did Sha’ul respond to that advice? What does that say about him? How do you think Sha’ul felt when confronted by Yeshua? When he proceeded to preach about Messiah in the synagogue, how did they react? Why? The events of verses 23-28 probably happened two or three years after Sha’ul’s conversion (see **Galatians 1:15-18). How has the Lord totally changed things for Sha’ul during that time? Why might the Yerushalayim disciples still fear him? What risk was Barnabas taking? People in Damascus and Jerusalem want to kill Sha’ul. What does that say about him? How is the story of Sha’ul related to 1:8?**

REFLECT: How did the Lord first get your attention? Was it in some dramatic way like Sha’ul, or in a quieter, more natural way? What types of people do you assume are beyond God’s reach so that, if God spoke to you about them, you would question him? Be honest. How does this story challenge these assumptions? When have you, like Ananias, obeyed the Lord even when you had doubts about it? What happened? Who has played the role of Ananias in your life? To whom does the Lord want you to play that role? What challenges has knowing Jesus brought into your life? How have other people responded? Who has been a Barnabas to you? How? To whom have you served as a Barnabas?

At a young age, John Newton went to sea. Like most sailors of his day, he lived a life of rebellion and debauchery. For several years, he worked on slave ships, capturing slaves for sale to the plantations of the New World. He sank so low that at one point

he became a slave himself, captive of another slave trader. Eventually, he became the captain of his own slave ship. The combination of a frightening storm at sea, coupled with his reading of Thomas a Kempis' classic *Imitation of Christ*, planted the seeds that resulted in his conversion. He went on to become a leader in the evangelical movement in eighteenth-century England, along with such men as Charles Wesley, George Whitefield and William Wilberforce. On his tombstone is inscribed the following epitaph, written by Newton himself: "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy." When he wrote the beloved hymn, "Amazing Grace," he knew firsthand the truths that it proclaimed.[191] Church history is filled with accounts like this, which highlight the wonderful power of the gospel to transform sinners. But no transformation is as remarkable, or has had such far-reaching implications for history, as the conversion of **Sha'ul of Tarsus**.[192]

After the interlude of **Chapter 8**, which describes the ministry of **Philip** and the salvation of the Samaritans, the scene shifts back **to Jerusalem**. **Now Sha'ul, still breathing out threats and murder against the Lord's disciples, went to [Caiaphas], the cohen gadol. He requested letters of introduction from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any men or women belonging to the Way, he might bring them as prisoners to Yerushalayim (9:1-2). Sha'ul** was so incensed at **the Messianic Community (8:1** and **26:11)** that **he** was not satisfied merely to conduct **his** inquisitions and persecutions only in **Jerusalem**. Letters from **the high priest** would carry weight in the Diaspora. Under Roman rule the Sanhedrin did not have temporal power; but in internal Jewish matters it was honored even beyond the borders of **Isra'el**, for example, **in Damascus,** which had a large Jewish population.[193]

People belonging to the Way: Evidently this is how the early believers referred to themselves **(19:9** and **23, 22:4, 24:14** and **22)**. In addition, this is the favorite name for the new faith in the book of **Acts**. The Greek word **the Way** has a **Jewish** origin behind it. In the TaNaKh it referred to a definition of life. Based upon **Isaiah 40:3: the way of ADONAI,** and **Psalm 1:6** that contrasted **the way of the righteous** as over against **the way of the wicked.** So this was **the Way**, a clear definition of life, **the Way** of **the Messiah** specifically. Other **Jews**, in calling themselves *Natzratim* or **the Nazarene sect (24:5)**, identified them as one **Jewish** sect among many; but the term **the Way** is a claim of Messianic Judaism. Indeed, **Yeshua** called **Himself the Way (John 14:6)**.

The Conversion: The story of how **Rabbi Sha'ul** came to trust in **Yeshua** is told again in **22:5-16** and a third time in **26:13-18**, each with varying details (see **26:13-18** on recording these differences). This is **Luke's** way of emphasizing the importance of Sha'ul's conversion and it actually ends up being eight percent of the entire book. **As he was traveling, approaching Damascus** to begin **his** carnage when **suddenly a light from heaven, God's** Sh'khinah glory, **flashed around him. Falling to the ground, he heard a voice.**



The rabbis taught that when God speaks in heaven, "the daughter of His voice" the *bat-kol*, or an echo, is heard on earth. After the last of the prophets, it was considered that God provided the *bat-kol* to continue to give guidance to the people (Tractate Yoma 9b). How very interesting that the *bat-kol* testified after the last of the prophets and before the New Covenant was established, that **Yeshua** is indeed **God's Son**. This is the first time since **Messiah's** immersion **(Matthew 3:17; Luke 3:22c)**, that the *bat-kol* was heard.

He heard and saw (see **22:17-18**) **a voice saying to him in Aramaic** (**to see link click Bf – Peter's Vision: A closer look at visions or dreams**)**: Sha'ul, Sha'ul.** The repetition is emphatic, as elsewhere in **Luke's** writings **(Luke 10:41, 13:34,** and **22:31)**. There is nothing in the narrative to suggest that **Yeshua** subsequently changed **Sha'ul's name**. In **Galatians 1:15-17**, **Sha'ul** speaks of being **set apart** before birth **to preach to the Goyim (Gentiles)**, but there is no mention of any **name** change.

Why are you persecuting Me? Now **Sha'ul** never directly persecuted **Yeshua** and is not mentioned in any of the four gospels. But in persecuting **His children**, **Sha'ul** was also persecuting **the Messiah**; to persecute **the Body** was to persecute **the Head**. **It is hard for you to kick against the goads,** or sharp pointed sticks **(9:3-4** and **26:14)?** The point is that it is fruitless for **Sha'ul** to resist **ADONAI** and what **God** has planned for **him**.

But this confused **Sha'ul** and **he** asked: **Who are You, Sir?** At that point **he** didn't think **he** was persecuting a heavenly being. But **Messiah** gave **him** a big dose of reality when **He** said: **I am Yeshua – whom you are persecuting (9:5).** When **Sha'ul** heard those words, the light of truth was confirmed in **his** soul and the gospel became real to **him**. Having debated the Good News with **Stephen, Yeshua**, whom **he** believed to be dead, was obviously alive. **Sha'ul's** resistance was crushed at that moment, and **his** heart, broken by repentance, was healed by faith **(Philippians 3:4-11)**. For the rest of **his** life, **Sha'ul** could only offer one explanation to what had happened to **him** – **he** had *seen* the risen **Lord Yeshua Messiah**.

The genuineness of **Sha'ul's** conversing immediately became evident. From **Acts 22:10** we learn that **he** asked, **"What shall I do, Lord?" His** surrender was complete, as **he** humbly submitted **himself** to **the Lord he** had hated. **Yeshua** continued: **But get up and go into the city** of **Damascus, and you will be told what you must do (9:6).** This is the first of four times that **Paul** saw **the Lord** in a vision **(**here**; 18:9-10; 22:17-21** and **23:11).**

The men travelling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one (9:7). Here the word **voice** is used with a genitive, which means to hear a sound, but **not** to **understand** it. So **his traveling** companions did **hear the voice**, but **they** couldn't make out the words. Only **Sha'ul** understood the words. **Paul** recounts the same incident in **22:9: Now those who were with me saw the light, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me.** Here the Greek word for **voice** is used with an accusative. In that case it means **they** could make out the words but couldn't understand what they meant.

Secondly, **they** did **see the light, but they didn't see anyone**, but **Sha'ul** saw both **the light** and **the One who was speaking**. That meant **he** was qualified to be **an apostle** of the second category, that of seeing the resurrected **Messiah**. The first category was to have lived with and witnessed **Messiah's** earthly ministry.

So sudden had been **his** placing of faith in **Messiah** that **Sha'ul** needed some time to reflect on the transformation of every aspect of **his** life. **Sha'ul got up from the ground – but opening his eyes, he could see nothing** because of the blinding **light** of the Sh'khinah glory**. They led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. He for three days could not see, and** was so shaken, **he did not eat or drink (9:7-9).** All he could do was to sit in blind silence. It was then that **ADONAI led him** through the process of reconstructing everything **he** was and everything **he** did. **His** entry into **the city** was very different than **he** had anticipated. Instead of barging in as the conquering hero, the scourge of **the Way, he** entered helplessly **blinded, led by the hand**.[194]

The contrition: While **Sha'ul** waited, blinded and fasting, reflecting on what had occurred, **God** was dealing with another man. **Now there was a disciple named Ananias,** the Greek form of the Hebrew name **Hananyah**, meaning *ADONAI is gracious*, **in Damascus. He** is described in **22:12** as **a devout man according to the Torah, well-spoken of by all the Jewish people living there. He** was one of the spiritual leaders of **the Damascus** Synagogue, and ironically, would have been one of **Sha'ul's** main targets.

The Lord said to him: Ananias (see **Bf – Peter's Vision: A closer look at visions or dreams**)**.**

He said: **Here I am, Lord (9:10).** The Greek *Idou ego* **(Here I am)**, corresponds to the Hebrew *Hineni*. **Ananias** joined a select company when **he** gave this answer expressing ready and expectant submission to **God**. **Abraham** answered, *Hineni*, when **ADONAI** told **him** to sacrifice **his** son Isaac **(Genesis 22:1)**, and also when **the Angel of ADONAI** told **him not to lay a hand on the boy (Genesis 22:11). Moshe** answered, *Hineni*, to **God's** call from the burning bush **(Exodus 3:4)**. **Samuel** did the same when **YHVH** first spoke to **him (First Samuel 3:4-10),** likewise **Isaiah** when the voice of **Adonai** asked: **Who shall I send (Isaiah 6:8).** Today, people can say *Hineni* to **ADONAI** by agreeing that **He** speaks through the Scriptures, repenting of their sins, accepting **the LORD's** forgiveness through **Yeshua's** death as atonement, and offering themselves to **God** unconditionally in obedient, holy service.[195]

The Lord said to him: Get up and go to the street called Straight (most streets in the ancient world were crooked, so this would have been easy to find)**, and ask in the house of Judah** (who was probably an unbeliever and **Sha'ul's** original place of residence while in **Damascus** before **he** was saved, but it seemed

to be so well known that **Ananias** knew where **he** had to go) **for someone from Tarsus named Saul. For look, he is praying; and** even though **he** was blind, **in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and laying his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight (9:11-12).** That would have been a severe test of **Ananias'** faith, since **Sha'ul's** fearsome reputation was widely known. **Ananias** would have had no way of knowing of **Sha'ul's** conversion, since **the Lord** did not reveal it to **him**. And as for **Sha'ul**, when **Ananias** showed up, it would authenticate that **the vision he** had received was clearly from **ADONAI**. **Yeshua Messiah** appeared to **Sha'ul** of Tarsus on two other occasions **(Acts 18:9** and **23:11)**. There is no trustworthy evidence that **He** has appeared to anyone else since the close of the era of **the apostles**.

But Ananias protested, saying: **Lord, I have heard from many about this man – how many evil things (26:10) he has done to your kedoshim (holy ones) in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the ruling cohanim to tie up all who call on Your name (9:13-14).** News had come from many sources of the harm that **he** had already done in **the City of David**, and it had quickly become known why **he** had traveled to **Damascus**. The request no doubt seemed to **him** to be suicidal. **His** life and **his** ministry were at stake and **he** was asking if **the Lord** really meant to end them both.

But the Lord explained **to him: Go, for he is a choice instrument to carry My name before Gentile nations and kings and Bnei-Yisrael (the sons of Isra'el).** Then a warning in advance: **For I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake (9:15-16). Sha'ul** was called by **God Himself (Galatians 1:1; First Timothy 2:7; Second Timothy 1:1). He** also understood that the gospel was to be preached first to **the Jews (13:14, 14:1, 17:1, 18:4, 19:8)**, although **his** primary calling was to minister to **the Gentiles (Romans 11:13, 15:16)**. Further, **he** was privileged to bear witness to **his Lord** before **kings**, such as **Agrippa (25:23ff)**, and most likely, **Caesar (Second Tim 4:16-17)**.

Strengthened by the vision from **the Lord**, and overcoming **his** fears, **Ananias left and entered into the house** and greeted **Sha'ul** warmly**. Laying hands on Sha'ul he** said: **Brother Sha'ul, the Lord – Yeshua, the One who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming – has sent me, so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Ruach ha-Kodesh (9:17).** Interestingly, **Acts 9** does not mention that **Sha'ul** spoke in tongues (ie. languages) at that time. Yet later **he** told the Corinthians that **he** spoke in languages more than

all of them **(First Cor 14:18)**.

Sha'ul of Tarsus was well aware of the varieties of experiences that had happened to people as recorded in **Acts**. **He** was right in the middle of them. But in none of **his** letters did **he** ever hint that one must be saved first and then experience the immersion of **the Spirit** sometime later. The same is true in the writings of **Jude**, **James** and **Peter**. No apostle ever wrote or taught the charismatic or Pentecostal doctrine of subsequence (salvation first, and then a second experience of speaking in ecstatic utterances later down the road).[196]

The Spirit was already active in **Sha'ul's** life, convicting **him** of sin **(John 16:9)**, convincing **him** of the lordship of **Yeshua Messiah (First Corinthians 12:3)**, converting **him (John 3:5; Titus 3:5)**, placing **him** in **the Body of Messiah**, and indwelling **him** permanently **(First Corinthians 12:13)**. Beyond all that, **he** was to **be filled,** or controlled, **with the Ruach ha-Kodesh** in a way that empowered **him** for service.[197] **Immediately, something like scales fell from Sha'ul's eyes, and he regained his sight 9:18a).**

There is no mention of a name change, and **Yeshua** is still calling **him Sha'ul** even after **his** encounter with the risen **Lord** on **the Damascus** road. So he is referred to as both **Sha'ul** and **Paul**. In fact, after **his** conversion experience, **he** is called **Sha'ul** eleven more times. Again, this would be odd if **Jesus** had changed **his name** to **Paul**.

At that point he left the house of **Judas** and remained **for several days with the disciples in Damascus,** allowing **them** to celebrate **his** conversion with **him** and minister to **his** needs**.** By that act **he** openly united with the very people **he** had hated and persecuted. **His** hated enemies became **his** friends, while **his** former friends instantly became **his** enemies **(9:23)**. In keeping with the consistent pattern of believers' testimonies in **Acts, Rabbi Sha'ul** was **immersed** following **his** conversion. Then **Sha'ul** enjoyed **his** first taste of fellowship in **Messiah** as **he took food and was strengthened (9:18b-19).** One can only imagine the overwhelming joy of those days and the continuous praise of **God**.

The conflicts: Immediately he began proclaiming Yeshua in the synagogues, saying: **He is the Ben-Elohim. Paul's** message was all about **Messiah**! **All those hearing him were beside themselves** at the sudden change in **Sha'ul** the persecutor**. They were** saying: **Isn't this the one who made havoc in Jerusalem for all those who call on this name? And hasn't**

he come here to bring them as prisoners before the ruling cohanim (9:20-21)?

Then we are given a short summary of **Sha'ul's** stay in **Damascus**. **Sha'ul kept growing stronger.** Like Stephen before **him, Sha'ul** met **the Jews** in open debate about the deity and messiahship of **Yeshua. And** the more **he** preached, the more **confounding the** unbelieving **Jewish people living in Damascus** became **by proving that Yeshua is the Messiah (9:22).** The word for **proving** (Greek: *sumbibazon* means *to knit together,* hence by extension *to teach*) shows that he was bringing the passages of the TaNaKh together with what **he** knew about the life of **Messiah**, **proving** that **He** fulfilled the Scriptures.

Probably at this point, **Sha'ul** left for **Arabia** or Nabatea, in what is today Syria. At various times **Damascus** was the principle city of Nabatea. So Sha'ul merely went out into the Syrian countryside outside of **Damascus**. The inspired author did not choose to record this part of **his** life. But **Paul himself** tells us about what happened later: **But when God – who set me apart from birth called me through His grace – was pleased to reveal His Son to me so I would proclaim Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with any human. I did not go up to Yerushalayim to those who were apostles before me, either. Instead I went away to Arabia (Galatians 1:15-17a). Sha'ul** spent close to **three years** learning from **ADONAI** in the kingdom of Nabatean **Arabia**.

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The conspiracies: When many days had passed, the three years Sha'ul had spent in Nabatean **Arabia, he returned** and began preaching **again in Damascus (Galatians 1:17b)** more powerfully than ever, which thoroughly frustrated **the [non believing] Jews** who **plotted to kill him.** This is the first of many conspiracies against **Paul (Second Corinthians 11: 21b-27). But their plot became known to Sha'ul.** We learn from **Second Corinthians 11:32** that **in** addition to **the [non-believing] Jews** in **Damascus, the mayor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize [Sha'ul].** Apparently during **his three years in Arabia**, **he** had thoroughly preached the gospel and had worn out **his** welcome there also. **They** were **so** united in **their** effort that **they were** secretly **watching the gates day and night, to kill him.** A wall surrounded **the city** and the only exit was through the gates, **but his disciples took Sha'ul by night and let him down over the wall, lowering**

him in a large **basket** made of reeds **(9:23-25).**

Then after escaping from **Damascus, Sha'ul went up to Yerushalayim to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days** (see the commentary on **Galatians As – Paul Meets Peter and James in Jerusalem**) **When Sha'ul arrived in Jerusalem** for the first time since **his** salvation**, he made** repeated **attempts to join up with [other believers] – but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was** really saved**. He** must have seemed like the quintessential wolf in sheep's clothing, now trying to destroy from within what **he** had previously tried to destroy from without **(Galatians 1:18-20)**. **He** wanted to become a part of **the Messianic Community** in **Tziyon**. **But** fortunately for **Sha'ul, Barnabas took him in and brought him to Peter and James**, the head of **Messiah's Community** there**. He described to them how Sha'ul had seen the Lord on the road and the Lord had spoken to him, and how he had spoken boldly in the name of Yeshua in Damascus (9:26-27).** With the highly respected **Barnabas** to vouch for **him, Sha'ul** was finally accepted.

So he finally gained acceptance, **Sha'ul was with the apostles, going in and out in Yerushalayim** for **fifteen days (Galatians 1:18), speaking boldly** to **the Jews** in **Yerushalayim in the name of the Lord.** Picking up where **Stephen** left off, **he was** also **speaking and arguing with the [unbelieving] Hellenists, but they were trying to kill him.** So **Sha'ul** did the same thing to the same group that **Stephen** did, but with different results. But **Sha'ul** discovered this plot **in a vision at the Temple (Acts 22:17-21)**. **When the brothers found out** the plot**,** for **his** own safety **they brought him down** from **Tziyon to** the port of **Caesarea** with a protected escort. Then **they sent him off to Tarsus** (**his** home town in **Cilicia** populated by a half-a-million people) by ship for ten years so that other aspects of **Sha'ul's** spiritual life could grow to match **his** zeal **(9:28-30).**

Therefore, **Sha'ul** disappeared from the scene for ten years. During that time, however, **he** was far from idle **(Second Corinthians 12:1-4)**. Between this time and the time when **Barnabas** found **him** in the seaport of **Tarsus** and brought **him** to **Antioch (11:2-26), he** was aggressively doing what **ADONAI** had called **him** to do. According to **Galatians 1:21, he** went **into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.** At least some of the churches of that region mentioned in **Acts 15:23** must have been founded by **him** in those years.[198]

This is a transition statement that provides reasonable clues to the

development of Luke's material that follows, the shift in ministry to Judea, Galilee and Samaria. So Messiah's community throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had shalom and was built up because the chief prosecutor, **Sha'ul/Paul**, had become a believer**. The Messianic Community/Church** had then spread to **Galilee and Samaria**, well outside of **Tziyon**. **Walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Ruach ha-Kodesh, the Messianic Community/Church kept multiplying (9:31).**

It is important to understand that the change in **Sha'ul's** life wasn't because of the prophecies in the TaNaKh, although **he** knew them well. **He** just didn't believe them. If **Sha'ul** had gone to the cross after **Yeshua's** death, that wouldn't have changed **his** life. And even if **Sha'ul** had gone to **Messiah's** empty tomb, that wouldn't have changed **him** forever. Salvation is not knowing *about* **Yeshua** . . . it is *knowing* **Yeshua**. **Sha'ul** personally met **Yeshua** on **the Damascus road** and everything changed. **He** turned from murderer to worshiper of **Messiah**.

***Lord Jesus**, though **You** have sought and found us in various ways according to **Your** perfect will and knowledge, **Your Spirit** testifies together with our spirit that we are **Your** children, and if children, also heirs – heirs of **God** and co-heirs with **Christ (Romans 8:16-17)**. Far from being for our sakes alone, this causes us to praise **You** for **Your** glorious grace – the grace with which **You** have favored us in **the Beloved (Ephesians 1:6)**. We who deserve so little have been lavished with **Your** love. How can I begin to thank **You**?* [199]