

BIB204 NT2 Early Church

Unit 2c

Saul's Conversion, Part 1

Presented by the



LANCASTER BIBLE COLLEGE
CAPITAL SEMINARY & GRADUATE SCHOOL

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In this segment, we're looking at chapter 9, Saul's conversion. And of course, we have to correlate this with chapter 22 and chapter 26. We've done part of the job in 26 where we learned that Paul figured he must do things contrary to the gospel, to Jesus of Nazareth. And he talks about how he arrested men and women, voted against them in Sanhedrin council, and basically supported the death sentence against them, persecuting them even to foreign cities. So we have that. That's part of chapter 26. So when we read about Saul's conversion, it's important to have chapters 9 and 22 and 26 taken together so that we can have a fuller picture, the fullest picture possible based on Luke's narrative of what happened to this individual. He is still called Saul at this juncture. So let's read.

"But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." So we notice in verse 1, he is still breathing threats and murder. And I don't think that's accidental on the part of Luke, given what we have examined briefly from Acts 26 where he gave his voice against them, sentenced them to death. He's breathing threats and he's breathing murder. So that's not just some sort of literary license. That's not hyperbole. Paul has actually...many believers have died on his watch, it seems. So that's the first thing that we read in the first verse. It's against the disciples of the Lord.

And Saul kicks it up another notch, as it were. He throws it into a higher gear. He goes to the high priest and he requests letters. He wants to go to Damascus, which is in the region, the province of Syria. So he wants to travel north. He has to get letters from the high priest at Jerusalem and he has to travel through Judea. He has to take a circuitous route through Samaria because he's a good Jew. He's going to travel into the province of Galilee. And then from there, he's going to push on into Syria and into the capital which is Damascus. I'm sorry. That's not the capital. Antioch was the capital. But he's going to push on into Damascus because he's heard that there are believers there. And so if he finds any, he wants to have them bound. And those letters would give him authority via the local synagogue to break up this group, these people, the people of the Way.

Verse 3, "Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'" So he's on his way. He's approaching Damascus. Suddenly, a light from heaven shines all around this individual. He falls to the ground and he hears a voice. And what we're going to read, we'll see it when we look at 22 and 26, is that this voice addresses him in Aramaic. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" The next few lines seem to reflect a man who is shocked beyond the range of his senses. He is absolutely flabbergasted. If they are speaking in Aramaic and we have no record that 1st century Jews were afraid to pronounce the name Yahweh, I mean, there's some evidence but it isn't ironclad. They were known to use the term Adonai, but we don't have any clear indication in the Old Testament that they weren't supposed to pronounce the name Yahweh.

So if we keep that in mind and we look at the next few lines, then what we find is this. Verse 5, he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And of course, the word "Lord" there is the word "curios," which translates the term or the name Yahweh in the Greek Old Testament, otherwise known as the Septuagint or the LXX. So he's shocked. He says, "Who are you?" And you can almost imagine him saying "Yahweh?" because the experience is transcendent. There's a light from heaven. He is an instructed Jew. He's a trained

Pharisee. Light from heaven read God must be appearing to me, right? But he hears words that he never expected to hear. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Probably not the question he expected to hear. So he answers, “Who are you? Yahweh?” You can almost imagine that. That makes more sense, given the Greek language and the understanding that this conversation is in the Hebrew dialect, Aramaic.

And the next answer that he hears, verse 5, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Oh my! When he hears that, everything changes. If we can all try to imagine what that must have sounded like to him, he’s stunned. He asks the question, “Who are you? Yahweh?” He may have even said, “Adonai?” Either option is fine. If you want to hold to the fact, if you wish to affirm that Jews could not pronounce the name in the 1st century, you’d rather that they pronounce the name Adonai, it’s no less startling because he’s stunned. We will see that in the other passages. And so he asks, “Who are you?” So let’s go with “Adonai?” And the next thing he hears is “I am Jesus.” That is, that Jesus of Nazareth, this man’s blood. We read that. We hear that in the earlier chapters of the Book of Acts. “You intend to bring this man’s blood upon us. Didn’t we tell you not to preach in this name?” And so on and so forth. I mean, the gospel is spread throughout Jerusalem. It has caused pushback from religious authorities. Saul is certainly aware of it. So when he hears “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he has to, at least implicitly, in those intense few instances, he has to equate Jesus of Nazareth with the Yahweh of the Old Testament, which is to say, it is an absolutely shattering experience for Paul.

At this point, I would like us to hold our place and toggle back and forth, kind of have a synoptic view of Acts 9 and 22 and 26. We know that a light fell from heaven, flashed around him (verse 3). And we know that he fell to the ground in the midst of that. Before we go to chapter 22, however, let me read verses 6 and 7. Jesus says to Saul, “But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” Verse 7, “The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.” So this wasn’t merely an inward experience that Saul had. This experience had legs. It was an external event that was remarkably nuanced. Saul received the full brunt of the event. The people with him, the men with him received only a partial transmission of the event, but they perceived the event too. So it wasn’t inward. It had inward effects, but it was indeed an external objective event.

With that said, let’s look at chapter 22. Hold your place here, please, in chapter 9. And let’s start with verse 3. “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness.” “I persecuted this Way to the death.” I just wanted to highlight that. To the death. So he was indirectly, at least, responsible for some deaths. “From them I received letters to the brothers (continuing in verse 5), and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.”

Verse 6, “As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon.” There’s an added detail. And Paul is telling this from his vantage point, in the first person, whereas in chapter 9, Luke renders it in the third person. He speaks about Paul’s experience. Here, he records for us Paul’s words to the crowd at Jerusalem that tried to kill him when they saw him near the temple. So it was about noon. There was “a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to

me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’” So far, so good. The material is the same. “And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’”

So what that immediately tells us is that in Acts 9, what we have here is basically a summation, a detailed summation of Paul’s experience. Luke records in chapter 9, probably from earlier notes that he took, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” But in point of fact, we see more of what Jesus said in chapter 22. “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.” So chapter 22 adds a punch, a retrospective punch to chapter 9. And remember, Paul asks the question. Light from heaven. So to a trained Pharisaic mind, that’s God. That’s Yahweh. That’s Adonai. That’s the Most High. That’s El Elyon. Whatever names Paul likes to use. That’s heavenly. That’s divine. The thing that he hears is “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” “Who are you?” Take your pick: Yahweh or Adonai. And the next thing that this man hears, “I am Jesus of Nazareth.” Can you imagine? Can you feel the weight of that? Can you feel the impact on this man realizing that he was persecuting God himself? Now, of course, he won’t work all of that out right now. Right now, at the moment that this thing happens to him, he is just stunned and he’ll be blind for three days. And we know this if we know the story, if we’ve read the story.

And so in chapter 22, we have some added detail. “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.” And we see some more detail. Verse 9, “Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me.” If you correlate that with the material in chapter 9, all we see in chapter 9 is they heard the voice but they didn’t see anyone. Take that blurb, that detail. Correlate it with what we see in chapter 22. They saw the light. They did not understand the voice. They heard the voice. They didn’t understand it. Understanding was sealed off from them. They couldn’t understand what was being said to Saul because they were for Saul alone.

Verse 10, “And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’” That correlates well with chapter 9, although Paul doesn’t say that in chapter 9. But in his self-referencing of the story, he says, “What shall I do, Lord?” And of course, the question here in chapter 22 has to come from a place of deep regret. “What should I do?” It almost echoes what the Jewish audience said to Peter in the sermon that Peter gave in Acts 2. “Men and brothers, what shall we do?” Peter says to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you from your sins. Be saved from this evil generation, so that you are filled with times of refreshing.” They had to repent and be baptized, cleansed from their sins. Paul says to him, “Lord, what shall I do?” And Jesus tells him what to do. “Rise, go into Damascus. There you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.” And we know that he could not see. That correlates with chapter 9. He was led by the hand by those who were with him, and they came to Damascus. Chapter 9 and chapter 22 speak of Ananias being sent by God to put his hands on Saul’s eyes and to give him back his sight. We know in chapter 9 that Saul spends some time, after getting something to eat, believing, being baptized, he spends time with the Damascene disciples and immediately begins to preach the gospel. So that’s a correlation of 9 and 22.

But when we look at chapter 26 in light of 9 and 22, we have a bit more detail. Look at 26:12. He “journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday (that correlates with 22),” he “saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shone around him and those who journeyed with him,” he says. So everyone was surrounded by the light. It wasn’t just Paul. That’s an added detail. You don’t see that in 22. You don’t see that in 9. “When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language.” That should be the Hebrew dialect. It’s Aramaic. “‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’” So there was more to that question then, which we don’t see in 22 or 9. “And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’”

And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.’” So Paul himself, assuming that this is what he says, he may have said, “I am Jesus of Nazareth” as he’s talking to King Agrippa II. That’s possible. Or he may have simply said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

But then we see more detail of what Jesus said to him. “Lord, what shall I do?” “Rise and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” You don’t see that in 9 or 22. So Saul heard some other things from the risen Christ, and it is only here at this time period that’s depicted in Acts 26 that he shares it.