

Trusting His Sovereign Hand

Acts 9:31-43

Up until now, our journey through the book of Acts has been a slow process. Not only as we tried to sufficiently cover the text at hand, but also because of the several breaks from the text we have taken, either in my absence or due to the holidays.

If you will remember, Luke introduced this Hellenistic Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus to us back in chapter 8, following the stoning of Stephen. From there he went on to become the chief persecutor of the Church. Then in Chapter 9 we read of his conversion on the road to Damascus, as well as the beginning of his ministry experience – an experience where, because of his boldness in proclaiming the Gospel, he was hustled out of Damascus at night in a basket – over the wall because of threats against his life; and then rushed out of Jerusalem when the Hellenists themselves “*attempted to kill him.*”

It’s then in 9:30 we read –

³⁰ When the brethren found out (about the attempt on his life), they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.

It’s at this point where Luke leaves the life and ministry of Saul of Tarsus – soon to become Paul the Apostle and brings us back to the life and ministry of the Apostle Peter.

We actually have to go back to chapter 8 for the last time we had heard anything about the Apostle Peter. Peter and John had gone down to Samaria after the Church in Jerusalem had heard that many of the Samaritans were being saved, healed and delivered. It’s in Chapter 8, verse 25 where Luke tells us Peter and John went down...

²⁵ (Testifying and preaching the) Word of the Lord, (and) they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.

Luke then finishes up chapter 8 by spending some time on the continued ministry of Philip in 8:26-40, where we find Philip moves up the coastline to Caesarea. Then, once again, it’s in 9:1-30 where Luke speaks of the conversion of Saul.

Now Luke once again moves the scene and the focus: he now moves to more on the life and ministry of the Apostle Peter. From what we saw thus far in the early chapters of Acts, then in chapter 8, and then picking it back up again in 9, beginning in verse 32 we see Peter's life is in **this growing progression with the Spirit of God** - moving from sharing the Gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem..., then to the Samaritans..., then eventually ministering to **Gentiles in Caesarea, in particular a centurion by the name of Cornelius** – as well as his whole household. As a matter of fact, this transition is so important that Luke spends the entirety of chapter 10 on the conversion of these Gentiles and how God was breaking down the walls of division.

The conversion of Cornelius and his household will set into motion the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles as a people group – but **not so much by the Apostle Peter**, but **by none other than Saul of Tarsus**.

But before we get there, the Lord has a couple of other areas of ministry for Peter as we finish up chapter 9 of Acts.

Now that everyone is back on track and up to date, let's look at our passage today in Acts 9, beginning actually with verse 31 –

³¹ Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.

Now don't forget, there was **still a measure of persecution going on in the Church**. Simply because Saul of Tarsus had been converted, doesn't mean that the totality of the attacks on the Church had ceased. What we actually find is that **even in the midst of the persecution, the Church continued to grow**. And this truth **isn't just a First Century truth, it remains even today**.

Places where we see the **deepest commitment to Christ and fastest solid growth of the Church is in places where it is difficult to take a true, Biblically orthodox stand due to persecution**.

In an article by Charles Colson, he reminds us that what we see and know of as Western Christianity is only a small percentage of what God is doing in His Kingdom's work today. And in many ways that work doesn't even resemble Western Christianity.

Colson quotes an article by Penn State Professor Philip Jenkins, as he writes of the explosive growth of Christianity outside of the West in his article *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. For instance, in 1900, there were approximately 10 million Christians in Africa. By 2000, there were 360 million. By 2025, conservative estimates see that number rising to 633 million. Those same estimates put the number of Christians in Latin America in 2025 at 640 million and in Asia at 460 million.

Colson goes on to remind us that *"the story of Christianity's explosive growth is one of the great untold stories of our time -- a story that North American Christians need to hear. It's a story that repudiates those who say that Christians must compromise their beliefs to remain relevant. The opposite is the case. Biblical orthodoxy is winning converts while churches that have lost their biblical moorings languish."*¹

But Colson isn't the only one telling us these truths. What we find in the reports of missionaries the world over is that where it would seem that the persecution is the worst, the Church continues to grow: Reports from Indonesia where Islamic terrorist physically come against the Church and her leadership; Russia (which was open for a short season, but is now closed again to the free distribution and proclamation of the Gospel); and even China, where anything other than the sanctioned State Churches face severe persecution, arrest and imprisonment; these and others, such as the Middle Eastern countries where conversion to Christianity is punishable by death to both the convert and the one responsible for the conversion – yet the Church grows.

As a matter of fact, in 2017 one missionary wrote the following:

China with a population of 1.37 billion people and growing will one day become the cradle of Christianity, for His WORD is growing there exponentially. The growth of Christianity in Russia is slower than China, but is GROWING VERY FAST. No matter how crazy, how scary the world becomes, hold on to your faith, for HIS WORD WILL NOT FAIL. Not even Satan at his best can change that.

¹ <http://www1.cbn.com/how-christianity-growing-around-world>

According to 2010 report by Operation World, a prayer guide published by InterVarsity Press, “*In Iran, the Evangelical population is growing annually at 19.6 %. In Afghanistan, the rate is 16.7%.*”²

I am sharing this information with you today to remind you to pray for the persecuted Church... and understand that **they are praying for you and me**, that once again the fire of the Holy Spirit would ignite the Western Church and cause us to come alive in these Last Days.

But understand also that God is intimately aware of their situation and none of their persecution escapes His eye: *but great is their reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before them.* (Matthew 5:11-12)

Back to Acts 9, as the persecution continued, we find the Church *walked in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and they were multiplied.*

In verse 32 we read –

³² *Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda.* ³³ *There he found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed.*

³⁴ *And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed." Then he arose immediately.* ³⁵ *So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.*

Apparently the Holy Spirit had moved upon Peter to go throughout Judea, visiting the Churches which had sprung up due to the **spreading of the Gospel by a number of people – many of them who will remain nameless** on the pages of our Bibles, but whose names are well known in the Kingdom of God.

As Peter traveled west out of Jerusalem, traveling along the road that went from Jerusalem, through Emmaus, then on down to the coastal city of Joppa (close to modern day Tel Aviv), he came to the town of Lydda. Also known as Lod in the Old Testament. There's not much that we know about Lydda, other than the fact that it laid

² *Operation World* 7th Edition by Jason Mandryk, Biblica Pub., 2010, p. 916.

about 11 miles east from the center of Joppa, across what is known as the Sharon Plain. Today Israel's Ben Gurion International Airport is located on the northern edge of the ancient city or town of Lydda.

Peter's stop there appears to have been short lived and for one purpose. He sees a man there in the town by the name of Aeneas, *who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed*. As he saw Aeneas, the Holy Spirit moved upon him to speak into the man's life a word of healing, *"Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed."* And we see that Aeneas *arose immediately*.

If there is but one lesson to receive from this text it is that whenever the Lord Jesus is active in our life, **we need to be responsive, immediately responsive!** Can you imagine if Aeneas' words to Peter were, *"Thank you very much for the healing, but I do believe I will remain in bed... at least for now. Maybe later or tomorrow I will respond to the Lord's work in my life."*

Asinine..., foolish..., totally ridiculous response! Yes, I agree with you, yet how many today do the very same thing? The Lord Jesus moves in our lives:

- *Perhaps it's through the hearing or reading of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit speaks specifically to us... yet we walk on without ever changing a thing in our lives.*
- *Perhaps the testimony of someone has challenged our hearts towards a greater commitment to the Lord... yet we remain the same in our shallowness of faith.*
- *Perhaps situations in our life have risen up to get our attention – this might be an abundance of blessings or an abundance of sorrow... yet, we don't take the time to sit quietly and listen for the still small voice of the Lord and move in obedience to it.*

For some of you here today, I want to tell you on the authority of God's Word:

- If Jesus Christ has saved you, you need to now walk in the newness of life.
- If Jesus Christ has set you free, now you need to allow the Holy Spirit to direct you and deliver you from all evil.

- For some of you, the Lord HAS healed you. Trust Him for that. Believe Him for that. And receive His healing in your life.
 - This healing can be of the body, of the mind, or of the spirit – believe Him and walk in the power of His might.
- For some, the Lord has called you. Called you into service. Called you into ministry. Are you ready to step out and follow Him? Are you willing to say, “*Here am I Lord, send me?*”

When Aeneas was obedient to the move of God in his life, people got saved... many people got saved. As a matter of fact, the Word tells us –

³⁵ *So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.*

That wouldn't have happened if Aeneas remained on his bed. The purposes of God would not have been completed **that day... at least not through Aeneas...**

Does that mean that people wouldn't have come to the Lord if Aeneas hadn't been faithful?

Personally, I have a much stronger belief in the Sovereignty of God than that – the Lord knows those who are His (Numbers 16:15; 2 Timothy 2:19).

But, be assured of this – Aeneas would not have received the blessing of being a part of that move of God had he been disobedient... that I do know.

I am reminded of a story about D. L. Moody, the great evangelist of the late 1800's. One night in October of 1871 during a revival meeting in Chicago, it had been a busy week and Moody was overly tired. He simply closed the meeting with a prayer. The usual invitation to receive Christ given at the end of the meeting was not offered. That night, Sunday, October 8 of 1871 was the beginning of a three day fire within the city, later to be known as the great Chicago Fire. At the final count, the fire had taken 300 lives into eternity.

Moody was heartbroken and totally distraught. He couldn't help but imagine that some of those 300 might have come to Christ that night had he given an invitation. Now a Christ-less eternity was sealed for them.

As much as I appreciate his fervor and desire for men to be saved. The fact is salvation is still a God thing and not a man thing.

The real question is, *do you want to be a part of what God is doing around you, or do you want to.. “stay in bed”?*

When God desires to move in our lives, we need to be ready and willing to *rise up immediately* and **perhaps** God will use us for His glory... **perhaps** through the testimony of our lives others *will see and turn to the Lord*.

Nothing else is said of this city or of the man, but in the library of heaven the names of many men and women are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

It was while Peter was in Lydda that other events were happening on the coastline some 10 miles away in Joppa. Look here in Acts 9 at verse 36 –

³⁶ *At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did.* ³⁷ *But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.* ³⁸ *And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them.*

³⁹ *Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them.* ⁴⁰ *But Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up.* ⁴¹ *Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive.*

⁴² *And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord.* ⁴³ *So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.*

When I look at this verse there are a few things that suddenly jump up and hit me right in my face:

*A certain disciple..., full of good works and charitable deeds..., **became sick and died.***

Do you know what I mean? So far as we know, this isn't someone full of years and having lived a long and blessed life is now dying. But neither is it someone who was so self-centered that one night they heard the words of the Lord coming to them, "*Thou fool, this night your soul shall be required of you.*"

Here we have someone who apparently loved the Lord and loved her fellow man, serving in a ministry, particularly serving those who were widows and she *became sick and died.*

Have you figured out yet that there are a lot of times when the plans and purposes of God are so different than ours that we just cannot even begin to venture to guess what His purposes are?

Is that a time to doubt God?

A time to turn away from Him?

No!! Just the opposite.

That's when we need to **run** into His presence and throw ourselves at His feet **or better yet into His loving arms and cry out to Him:**

"Lord, I don't understand what or why these things are happening, but I know that You are a good and righteous God and King, so I place my trust in you... I place my faith in you... And I know that there is substance in that faith... there is evidence in that faith... Because my faith isn't in the things I know and understand, my faith is in the greatness of who You are!!"

It's when we get to that point in our Christian journey that we find the reality of His peace. That's what Paul reminds us of in Philippians 4:6-7 when he tells us –

⁶ Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; ⁷ and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

If you haven't figured it out yet, even as a Believer, there are going to be a **lot of things happening in your life that will rock your world.** If you are not secure and founded

on the greatness and the goodness of God, you will never truly know His peace in the midst of those storms.

Tabitha was Aramaic. Her Greek name was Dorcas. Both names meant *gazelle* – I believe it spoke of beauty and gracefulness. **But now Tabitha, had died.** The people of Joppa didn't know what God was doing, they were mourning and weeping. Someone special to them had been taken from them and in the context of the event it would appear she was taken well before the time they figured she should have been taken. They didn't know what to do, but they had heard that the Apostle of the Lord, Simon Peter was just down the road. Someone needed to go and get him.

As the two men explained the situation to Peter, it says he *arose and went with them.*

When I read things like this my mind always wanders a bit:

Did Peter have a plan?

Did God already speak to him about what was needed?

Or, was it simply a pastor's heart that urged Peter to follow after these men and see if he could minister God's grace and mercy on these poor suffering people?

When he got there he found the people mourning and showing him the handiwork and craftsmanship of Tabitha. Luke simply tells us: *Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed.* Peter needed a **time of privacy** before the Lord. He **needed to hear the voice of the Lord** and the weeping and the moaning was a distraction from it all.

Personally, I believe he **knelt down in worship** and **he prayed in desperation... and in faith.**

Yes, in desperation, knowing exactly how incompetent he was for the task in his own strength...

But, **also in faith,** knowing exactly to Whom he prayed and that all the resources of heaven were available through Christ.

And turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up.

No, **not the work of any man**, but the miracle work of Almighty God. And because it was the work of Almighty God, Luke tells us *many believed on the Lord*.

So here we see:

1. The Church still growing, even multiplying – Despite the persecution they continued to Believe because they knew Who and what they put their trust in was real.
2. One man healed from a sickness that left him paralyzed for eight years, yet he was immediately obedient to receive and respond to the work of God in his life.
3. The Apostle Peter, being faithful to be found where God wanted him to be. Knowing that it wasn't within him to do the work, but only by the grace, mercy and power of God, performing the will, the plans, and the purposes of God in God's way and in His perfect timing.