

Acts 9:19-43

Saul did not waste time after his baptism. He was with disciples in Damascus for certain days. What relief and joy Saul's conversion must have brought them! Obviously news of Saul's conversion quickly reached the ears of the disciples, possibly through Ananais. Disciples in Damascus were aware of the Saul's purpose in coming there and would have had, as Ananais had, apprehensions as to brethren's fate. It was good news that Saul would no longer persecute disciples; news too good to keep.

Saul "straightway" proclaimed Jesus to be the Son of God in the synagogues and initially amazement was the Jewish reaction. But Saul grew stronger and bolder and confounded the Jews there (Acts 9:22). The word "confound" means to "trouble, confuse, stir up." They had no answers and it is no surprise that we next read, "and when many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel together to kill him," the first of many similar plots that would be made against his life (Acts 9:23).

The historian does not give detailed account of this time of the apostle's life. In fact, there is one item that is omitted altogether, Saul's visit to Arabia (Gal. 1:17). There Saul mentions a period of three years; his conversion in Damascus; his sojourn in Arabia and his return to Damascus (Gal. 1:17f). It is difficult to fit that into the Acts text. It seems evident that Saul preached Christ before he went to Arabia for the word "straightway" seems to demand that. It is equally evident that he preached Christ after returning from Arabia. His life was in peril and that necessitated his escape from Damascus. Disciples put him in a basket, passed him through a widow and let him down the wall. Paul's own account of this escape is recorded in 2 Corinthians 11:32f and conforms to Acts 9:25. The most logical place to record Saul's sojourn in Arabia, to my mind, would be between verses 22 and 23 in Acts 9.

Saul arrived in Jerusalem and "assayed to join himself to the disciples." Christ adds the saved to the church, but when disciples move from one locale to another, they "join" the disciples in their new place of residence (Acts 2:47; 9:26). Saul's efforts were met by fear and rebuff on the part of Jerusalem brethren. They were afraid of him and did not believe he was a disciple (Acts 9:26). Jeremiah asked: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or a leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23). The leopard cannot change his spots, but Saul did change his way! Barnabas came to his rescue and convinced brethren Saul's conversion was genuine. He had seen the

Lord; he had preached Christ boldly in Damascus synagogues. So, through assistance from Barnabas Saul was received by brethren. Saul just couldn't stay out of trouble! Once more his boldness and courage brought wrath of the unbelieving Jews and they, as Jews in Damascus, plotted against his life (Acts 9:28f). Saul was commanded by the Lord to leave the city (Acts 22:18-21). So, Saul fled Jerusalem, being carried to Caesarea by brethren (some years later he escaped the city again to Caesarea, but that time Roman soldiers provided protection to him (Acts 22:31f). Saul went to his hometown of Tarsus, where certainly he must have preached Jesus is the Son of God. Like the prophet of old, he could not remain silent. "And if I say I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name, then it is as it were a great burning fire shut up in my bones and I am weary with forbearing and I cannot contain" (Jer. 20:9). Here the text leaves Saul momentarily and resumes a chronicle of Peter's labors.

Peter went through various regions edifying the saints and came to Lydda (9:32). There he met a certain Aeneas who had been bedridden with palsy for eight years. Peter healed him "and all that dwelt in Lydda and in Sharon saw him and they turned to the Lord" (Acts 9:35). This verse tells us these folks believed and obeyed the gospel, and their faith came as the result of the signs they had seen. This was the promise Jesus had made the apostles in Mark 16:17-20, and it will be fulfilled many times.

Near Lydda was a city called Joppa, the city in which Jonah boarded a ship for Tarshish, attempting to flee from God (Jonah 1:3). There were disciples in Joppa, one of which was a sister named Tabitha or Dorcas (Acts 9:36). This sister was full of good works and almsdeeds that she did. She made garments for widows (Acts 9:39). She knew that religion is not something one "gets," but something one "does" (James 1:26f). Dorcas grew ill and died. Brethren had heard Peter was at Lydda so two men were sent to entreat him. "Delay not to come on to us" (Acts 9:38). Peter did come and entered the upper chamber where Dorcas had been laid. Grieving widows showed him the coats and garments Dorcas had made for them "while she was yet with them" (Acts 9:39). Their sister and benefactress was dead and they wept for their loss. The phrase "while she was yet with them" is a sermon within itself. The body of Dorcas was visibly there, but Dorcas was not, she was gone. Our body is just a tabernacle in which the real person dwells. The body goes back to dust at death but the spirit returns to God who gave it (Eccl. 12:7). The scriptures teach that "the body without the spirit is dead" (James 2:26). Nowhere do the scriptures teach that the spirit without the body is dead!

In fact, we are not to fear those who can destroy the body, but not the spirit (Mt. 10:28).

Peter awakened Dorcas and gave her back to her brethren. Such would be temporary for "the living know that they shall die." Dorcas's goodness being what it was, she doubtlessly continued to be a blessing to all by her good works and alms deeds.

So, Peter is in Joppa. Is this providential? Whatever, the stage has been set for one of the truly inspiring chapters in man's history: the conversion of the first Gentile. Such will be the topic for our next episode from Acts.

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