

Leaving Philip in Caesarea Luke's narrative returns back to Jerusalem. Saul, a deeply religious Pharisee, was enraged by the imposition of the believers upon the traditional Jewish way. He aggressively attacked the saints threatening them and if that didn't stop them he saw to it they were killed. Saul was unstoppable humanly speaking and he had the enthusiastic backing of his peers and formal authorization from his superiors. Before the end of this chapter of his story the superiors had turned against him and sought more than once to kill him. What had happened?

While he was trekking off to distant Gentile cities to arrest "errant" Jews following Christ and return them to Jerusalem for punishment or "reprogramming," he himself was arrested by a higher authority, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, in heaven. Struck down by the sight, blind from the light, he was instantly turned about in his tracks. Blind! But the last sight of his eyes was the gloriosus One standing in unapproachable light at the right hand of God and a voice of unquestionable Authority.

1 Timothy 6:14 That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: 15 Which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; 16 Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.

Immediately a vanquished, humbled man he cried, Who art thou, Lord? Not exactly a saving confession that Jesus is Lord, but a start. After all, every knee shall bow. . .

Philippians 2:9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: 10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; 11 And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The Lord answered Saul personally and compassionately "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." Now there was a clearly humbled and submissive response,

6 And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do.

This was no mere affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Saul is ready to do His will. The Lord sent him into the city to those he had been intending to persecute. A simple, humbling and merciful command, but which if obeyed, would confirm the reality of his heart's conversion. He went! Sovereignly chosen by God—called literally out of the blue—no boasting on his part. Actually, he was set apart before his birth to for the work God had planned for him,

Galatians 1:15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace,

We too, whom He has saved, though less spectacularly,

each have our specific place in His body.

1 Corinthians 12:18 But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.

12:11 But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.

Each of us was saved only because of the sovereign love of God choosing and calling us, Romans 8:28. Otherwise none of us would have come,

Romans 3:10 As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: 11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.

As to Saul the rest is history. He prayed and prayed, unseeing but assuredly submissive prayers of repentance. The Lord hadn't answered his second question, what do you want me to do? In due time he received his sight again upon the obedient intervention of a faithful local disciple, Ananias, who obeyed despite his fear of Saul. The Lord told Ananias what He wanted Saul to do, both immediately and for his career, the rest of his life.

15 . . . for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: 16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.

Saul's charge was to bring the Lord's name to:

First the Gentiles.

See Acts 13—28 and Paul's 13 epistles to Gentile believers and assemblies.

Second to kings,

Agrippa, Nero and his appointed governors, 2 Timothy 4.

Third, and lastly, to his people Israel,

Acts 21:11; much of Acts chapters 21 - 28; Romans 1:16; 9:1-5.

He was told his life's mission would entail suffering. He would share in the suffering of his Lord, although, of course, not in His redemptive suffering.

(And we may add the thought that one aspect of his suffering may have included righteous, sovereign reaping of what he had sowed, although accompanied by God's all sufficient grace to bear it.

Galatians 6:17 From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks [brands] of the Lord Jesus.

Galatians 6:7 Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

2 Corinthians 12:5 Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities. 6 For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me. 7 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. 8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. 9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10

Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Philippians 3:10 That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;

Many surmise Paul's thorn in the flesh was weak eyes due to the glorious light that blinded him until healed. However he calls his thorn a messenger of Satan. Certainly that wicked one was not associated with the blinding light of the glory of God.)

Saul immediately, as soon as he was physically able, was baptized and began to preach in the Jewish synagogues there. He had been filled with the Holy Spirit just after his eyesight had been restored. Note the order, private, personal repentance (deepened through prayer and fasting), physical healing, filling of the Spirit, fed and nourished back to health, then baptism and preaching. (Baptism does not save. It is a public testimony that we trust in Christ's death for our sins.)

He was so effective that soon the Jews there in Damascus were seeking to kill him, the hunter was now the hunted. The saints hid him then helped him escape, letting him down over the wall in a basket. Paul refers to this in his reluctant recital of his sufferings, 2Corinthians 11:22-33, his pedigree of faith in contrast to the Corinthian's intellectualism.

Having escaped that danger, Luke's narrative finds him having gone up to Jerusalem. However other scriptures demonstrate it was three years before he made even a brief visit to Jerusalem. Compare Galatians 1:16 - 2:10. Barnabas a Jewish believer, a native of Cyprus introduced him to the wary believers in Jerusalem. While in Jerusalem, to the dismay of the officials, he boldly preached Christ in their synagogues, particularly in the Grecian synagogues where he had once been a leader. Soon they also were anxious to kill him. The disciples, discovering this, sent him away via Caesarea (the seaport where Philip then lived) to his home town, Tarsus in Cilicia, a Roman province in what is now extreme southeastern Turkey. So came a universal relief from the first persecution. Ironically Saul had first energized the persecution in hatred, then had renewed it by his preaching. How like God's ways. But the Jews remained unchanged and unrepentant. Still are.

31 Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

Now the story shifts away from Saul back to Peter for a few chapters. Peter the Apostle made the rounds of the assemblies in Palestine. (Later we shall see he went further abroad, as far as Babylon to the east, 1Peter 5:13, but not

to Rome, contrary Romish wishful thinking.) Peter traveled to western parts of Judea into territory Phillip had successfully evangelized. Peter stopped in Lydda (Lod, a city of Benjamin, 1Chronicles 8:12). There he healed a man sick abed of palsy (paralysis) eight years. The people living nearby heard of it and "turned to the Lord." Those at Joppa, a nearby ancient seaport, heard also, and when a beloved disciple died called him to come. He did, and subsequently raised her from the dead. Was this the one and only raising the dead after the crucifixion?

Why did they call Peter to come? Were they expecting more than simply his fellowship in their sorrow? They seem urgent in their request that he come. Yet there was little precedent for what happened when he did. Very few cases of raising the dead are reported in scripture. This sister, Dorcas, was full of good works and acts of charity. In the New Testament healing of bodily ills and handicaps seems to be restricted to the unsaved. They were usually done as a powerful sign of God working in those who were able to heal, accrediting the gospel of Jesus Christ which they brought. Several cases of believer's illnesses are described in apostolic days but which were not subjected to the healing power the apostles and other believers used. Raising Dorcas was an extreme exception to this general "rule." She was not healed but raised after not being healed. Why? And why her? She was highly regarded and deeply loved by the widows group she worked with. (Was she a widow also? Doesn't matter.) She was not a public "hero" of the faith such as Stephen who wasn't raised from the dead, nor Phillip nor Peter. All she did (!) was gentle good deeds, visiting the needy and with her hands making clothing for them. God allowed her to get sick and die. Hearing of what Peter had done "many believed in the Lord" in the area. They didn't bury her immediately and two brothers came to get Peter. Her death and raising was the occasion for the salvation of many. May her life's testimony help us put the correct godly perspective upon the value of each Christian believers' life and works.

When believers die it is far better for them.

Philippians 1:21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. 23 For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: 24 Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.

When believers die God has others ready to step in.

1Corinthians 15:29 Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?

Are we each ready? Ready to go? Ready to stay a while longer? Ready to step in?

Joppa is a beautiful place as well as a busy place and Peter stayed there with a Christian brother for some time. Until he was called to Caesarea to participate in a landmark event in the history of the Church.

By Ronald Canner, September 2, 2009