



Paul's Early Work and Peter's Miracles

Acts 9:20-43

The way in which the early church was led is unmistakably the work of Jesus Christ. When at times it seems that the work of the church will soon be cut off, the Lord gives its whole history a new turn. What would the early church have been like without the conversion of Paul? What would have become of the mission work of the early church had not Paul stood at the head of the missionary endeavor? We can speculate about various directions the church might have taken, but the Lord watches over her and will cause her to flourish. There is really no scenario imaginable for the early church which would have taken it in a different direction from the one in which the Lord led her.

Preaching in Damascus

Immediately after his conversion and baptism, Paul is ready to preach. This city of Damascus, which was to see one of his triumphs in destroying the church of Christ, becomes the place where he first preaches the gospel. He stays with the brethren for some time. He needs this after his recent experiences. Here, with the brethren, he is strengthened in the faith. This kind of communion he has never tasted before. Now it is time to get to work. How well is he qualified? His classical education has been very good; his religious education has been thorough, but biased; and his present relation to the Lord gives him great boldness. He preaches in the synagogues, the places of worship, but also the places for disputation. Here he preaches, not some moralism, but – going right to the heart of the matter – proclaims that Jesus is indeed the Son of God! For the first time in his life he has a message! No longer will he have to teach the way the scribes taught. He now comes with the authoritative Word.

The reaction to the preaching of this man is understandable. All knew his purpose in coming to Damascus. He was going to waste the church. What has happened? He is now preaching the Word which they themselves believed. It is understandable that these people who are listening to him stand amazed. He is now using his considerable logic to defeat his former beliefs! Something unusual has happened. That all of them do not immediately flock to him is also understandable. They will have to get used to hearing this former blasphemer. But, this Paul is a remarkable man. He grows stronger in the faith and in the proclamation of the faith as time goes on. His knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures enable him to best all the Jews who seek to debate with him. He simply slays them! He proves from their own Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ. The people in Damascus soon realize that they have a formidable antagonist in this Paul of Tarsus. What an addition to the group of the twelve!

However, this can't go on. Soon the Jews here in Damascus come to an agreement to get rid of this man. If you can't overthrow his logic, then overthrow the man who uses it. Again, they do not hesitate to make plans to kill him. It is amazing that this people who had been brought up on the law of Moses are so soon able to trample on the commands of God and be ready to kill someone whom they do not like or one who opposes them. Their plot becomes known to the Apostle. He does not give himself to a false piety and say "The Lord will take care of me," but moves to thwart their plans. The disciples in Damascus also realize the value of this man, and, although the opposition is watching the gates day and night, they let him down over the wall in a basket. We are reminded of the way the spies escaped from Jericho.

In Jerusalem – gaining acceptance

On to Jerusalem. There are various problems which arise concerning the time Paul was in Jerusalem and the length of his stay there, as we compare this passage with Galatians 1. However, we are here only interested in the things Luke tells us about his coming to Jerusalem. Should not the brethren receive him with open arms? Perhaps so – but this does not happen. Apparently they do not know all the things which have happened to him since he has left Jerusalem. They do not trust him! A man who has done the things which he did had better show that he is a new man, and that over a period of time. The Bible is very realistic when it relates these things. It does not demand the unrealistic attitude demanded by many today. Besides, had not Jesus also warned them: *"Not everyone who says Lord, Lord?"* They are afraid of him and do not accept him into their circle.

However, a Barnabas, of whom we will hear so much later, does honor to the meaning of his name ("son of consolation") by bringing Paul to the Apostles and telling them what has happened to this man and how he has already preached the Christ at Damascus. This breaks the ice. He now *"was with them going in and going out at Jerusalem."* This is a Hebrew way of saying that he was now welcome in their company. But, though this is a big relief, this is not the most important matter. He has to preach! He preaches boldly in the name of the Lord and enters into debate with the Grecian Jews. He is well qualified to do so. They are no match for him. These, when they cannot win the debate, also seek to kill him. Then the disciples bring him on the way so that he may return to the city of his birth, Tarsus. In Chapter 22 he mentions the fact that the Lord commanded him to leave Jerusalem. That would be about the only way this man would leave his work. But, he should be alone a while and rest.

The *"Apostle to the gentiles"* has been chosen and equipped. Now the author leaves him for a time and shows us some of the other preparatory work which is being done for his life's work. The church has a time of peace throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. The persecutor of the church has been rendered harmless. Now the church can be edified, can be built up. The brethren walked in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. These times are necessary in the life of the church. It must consolidate its gains. And the church *"was multiplied."* The church must be strong in order that it may go out with the gospel of salvation to others. Missions? By all means. Building up of the church? By all means. The church which does not take care of itself and its own members will have no message for others. The Lord gives them this short time of peace.

Healing of Aeneas

Although we usually consider Paul to be the Apostle to the gentiles, Peter also makes the claim that he was sent to bring the gospel to the gentiles (Acts 15:7). He uses the time of rest and of peace which the church is now enjoying to go to visit some of the places where the gentiles have come to be believers in Jesus Christ. What a blessing that these "outposts" may have the ministry of one of the Apostles for a while.

He goes to Lydda. There he meets with the believers, among whom is a certain Aeneas. This man has been helplessly paralyzed for eight years! The Lord often makes his children wait a long time for healing. But, healing has come to this city through the instrumentality of Peter. He declares to him that Jesus Christ is healing him. Therefore, *"make your bed and get up and walk,"* so that it may be made evident to all that this declaration of the Apostle is not an idle word. All who see this miracle of healing in this town and the neighboring one believe. That is the purpose of the miracles performed by the Apostles. These acts reveal Jesus Christ in His divine power and they are used to instill faith in the hearts of those who witness them.

Raising of Dorcas

Now the Apostle will go on to Joppa. The name of this city has become well known to Bible readers because of the various things done here and as the place from whence the Apostle is later called out for a very important mission. In this city is a lady by the name of Dorcas. She is not called a deaconess, but she does all the kinds of work which would be associated with such a position. She

was "full of good works and alms-deeds which she did." A wonderful person; a person who would have many friends. She has given her name to many ladies' societies in the churches until today. She fell sick and died. They wash her body and lay it in an upper room. This was the custom of the Jews and was also an indication that the person was really dead. Peter is still at Lydda when this happens and they send from Joppa to him to come quickly. Why? Do they expect that this man who has healed the palsied will also be able to raise one from the dead? Apparently they do. Or do they merely want him to come to lead the funeral service? There is a touching scene depicted by the author. All the widows crowd around Peter and show him the various things this Dorcas has made for them while she was alive. How much they have lost through her death! There is no request made that he raise her from the dead, but, perhaps the hope is present.

Peter sends all of them out of the room. Jesus had done the same thing when he raised the daughter of Jairus. Peter, however, must do it for a different reason. Jesus could simply take the child by the hand and command her to rise. Peter kneels down and prays. He must receive the power from Another. After the fervent prayer of this man of God, he turns to the body and commands Dorcas to rise. Notice how beautifully it is put. She opens her eyes; she sees Peter and sits up; he gives her a hand to help her rise completely! Now he can call those whom he has put forth only a little while before and present her alive to them!

Naturally, this episode becomes well-known throughout the city. Regardless of how large the city was, such a deed would be known very quickly from one end of it to the other. Also as a result of this miracle, many believe on the Lord.

Now there is added that Peter stays at the home of Simon, a tanner. Why he should stay with a person who makes his living dealing with many unclean things has baffled many commentators. I suppose that he stays here because this man is a believer and has room for him!

The gospel conquers. Not only in Israel but also among other peoples.

Henry VanderKam

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Questions for Discussion:

1. Was Paul "reckless" in his proclamation of the gospel?
2. Was it right for the brethren to be afraid of him? Not to trust him?
3. Is it important that the church now has one who is able to confound the Greeks? Is scholarship necessary for the church?
4. Are the times of peace for the church to be received in gratitude? Or are they often times of real danger?
5. Do you think the Lord cut off the possibility of performing miracles too early in the history of the church?
6. Is it all right to speak of the "good works" which Dorcas did when these consisted of making clothes for others?
7. The effect is the same, but, is there a fundamental difference between the work of Christ raising the dead and the Apostle doing so?