

God Ordains Present Experiences to Prepare Us for Future Service

Acts 9:32-43

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We have all had the experience of wondering what the Lord was doing in what He has presently ordained and brought into our lives by way of trials or even blessings. There are no accidents or miscalculations in what you are presently facing. God has made no mistakes. He is not worried or stressed out. There is a perfect peace and absolute calm in the Lord that nothing in this world can possibly shake or agitate in the least. For your loving and sovereign Father has purposefully ordained what you are now experiencing to prepare you for future service.

Abraham was commanded by God to take his family from his homeland not knowing where he was even going, and God prepared a new homeland and better homeland for him (the Promise land and heaven).

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brethren, but God was preparing him to become a ruler in Egypt in order to preserve his family (and the family of Jesus Christ) alive through seven years of famine.

Moses was placed in a little basket while yet a babe to preserve his life and sent floating down the river to be rescued by the daughter of Pharaoh, for the Lord was preparing him to be educated in both literature and in governance, so that he might lead millions of Israelites out of Egypt and to the very threshold of the Promise Land.

May the Lord help you to step out of your world of fear and anxiety and by faith in Christ step into His heavenly peace and rest (where everything is going precisely according to His most wise and loving plan for your life), so that you are enabled by His grace to look beyond your present experience to the other side where He is preparing you for future service.

Let us consider from our text in Acts 9:32-43 the following main points: (1) The Persecution and Scattering of Ministers from Jerusalem Was Preparing Peter for His Ministry in Lydda (Acts 9:32-35); (2) Peter's Ministry in Joppa Was Preparing Him to Preach to Gentiles (Acts 9:36-43).

I. The Persecution and Scattering of Ministers from Jerusalem Was Preparing Him for His Ministry in Lydda (Acts 9:32-35).

A. As our text begins in Acts 9:32, the Holy Spirit draws our attention to Peter once again.

1. Peter was last mentioned in Acts 8:20ff as he confronted Simon the sorcerer in regard to his coveting the gift of the Spirit for his own financial gain. Peter and John then preached to various villages in Samaria on their way back to Jerusalem (Acts 8:25), and we know from the sermon last Lord's Day that Peter was one of the apostles with whom the converted Saul visited in Jerusalem for 15 days (Galatians 1:18).

2. In Acts 1:8, the Lord Jesus (just before His ascension) had given to the faithful gathered around Him the promise that the Holy Spirit would make them powerful witnesses of Jesus Christ beginning in Jerusalem and in all Judea, then in Samaria, and then unto the uttermost parts of the earth (the Gentiles). Peter had a leading role in opening the door to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), in opening the door to the Samaritans (Acts 8), and in opening the door to the Gentiles (Acts 10). The Holy Spirit now brings the ministry of Peter to the forefront once again here in Acts 9:32.

3. Acts 9:32 begins with Peter passing throughout various regions and places where churches or societies of Christians had been formed. How were these congregations formed? Very likely it was due to the fiery persecution that fell upon the Church in Jerusalem through the unconverted Saul (Acts 8:1-4). God ordained severe persecution so as to send preachers and ministers out of Jerusalem and into various areas of Samaria and Judea in order to form new churches and congregations (in fact, Lydda [Lod] was a town in Judea which likely was formed by one of these fleeing ministers from Jerusalem).

4. Thus, we see God's amazing plan at work now in the ministry of Peter. The raging wrath of an unconverted Saul against the faithful was not an isolated event that stood unconnected to events that preceded it or followed it. The devil no doubt had his plan for this persecution, but God overruled it for His glory and for the benefit of the Church to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ and to form churches throughout Samaria and Judea. Saul's persecution was not an end in itself, but was a means to a greater divine end. So when we read in Acts 9:32 that Peter was passing throughout the quarters and regions of the land, it's not because he was bored and wanted some exercise. It was to teach, to establish, to appoint officers, to encourage the faithful in those new congregations brought into being through much persecution.

a. Dear ones, when you lose sight of God's amazing plan that leaves nothing in your life subject to mere chance, you will fail to see that in God's plan all of the dots are connected one to another for His glory and for your good (as His dearly beloved child). When you fail to embrace by faith the most sovereign, most wise, and most loving plan of God for your life, you will fall into the pit of despair and hopelessness. You will fight to keep your head above the waters of fear and anxiety. You will be tempted to throw up your hands in surrender and feel like giving up. And if you do so, it will be because you have not believed that God is preparing you to be used in the future by what you are presently facing in the present (whether it be adversity, trial, persecution, illness, isolation, waiting upon Him, or whether it be prosperity, health, and success). You can just as easily misuse prosperity as adversity; for when all seems to be going well, you can become proud, lazy, and apathetic, instead of humble, active, and on fire for the Lord.

b. Dear child of God, isn't it about time that you stopped complaining about what you are presently facing and rather began to believe and learn that God is now training you for greater use and service in your family, in the church, among your friends, and at work? Peter had been through the persecution of Saul of Tarsus and had sent out ministers and preachers, and now God was using Peter to build up those same congregations formed by ministers fleeing persecution.

5. There were already "saints" living and worshipping in Lydda. Saints are not those who are more holy than other Christians, nor are saints those who have been recognized by the Church and canonized by the Pope as those to whom we can pray or from whom we can receive a surplus of righteousness in order to reach heaven (as is taught by the Roman Catholic Church). The word, "saints", means "holy ones" (i.e. those who are separated from the world unto a holy use by God). Saints very often simply refers to all those who are members of the visible church (whether adults who profess faith in Jesus Christ or whether the children of those who do so—Ephesians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 7:14).

B. In Lydda, Peter found Aeneas (Acts 9:33). It was not Aeneas that found Peter, but Peter who was looking to serve Christ—are you?

1. Aeneas had been bed-ridden for the past 8 years due to a severe case of palsy or paralysis (due to some injury or illness to the brain or spinal cord). Perhaps he was not merely a paraplegic (paralysis of the lower body and legs), but also a quadriplegic (paralysis of the arms and the legs); for we read, he "had kept his bed eight years" (Acts 9:33). Here is the picture of one who was totally helpless, who had to be fed, to be moved, to be cleaned, and who could not hug his loved ones. This pictures our absolute helplessness by nature. We are not merely a little sick with sin; we are helpless to do anything for ourselves before God. Apart from the grace of God in healing us of our spiritual paralysis, we can do nothing for the Lord nor offer anything that He will find acceptable. This is where salvation begins—in confessing our helplessness

due to sin, and our need of Jesus Christ alone to heal us.

2. We read that Peter immediately heals Aeneas of his complete paralysis and Aeneas is commanded to arise and make his bed (Acts 9:34).

a. First, there is no self-glorification in Peter (“Jesus Christ maketh thee whole”). Peter is not exalted, but rather humbled because it is the authority and power of Jesus Christ. Pride is a constant enemy of us all. However, it is truly sad when pride oozes from us as ministers who in various ways point to ourselves and to our knowledge and learning rather than humbly pointing to Jesus Christ. I dare say that pride is usually the sin that underlies the backsliding of ministers who fall into the sin of adultery, love of money, and coveting of power. The ministry has then become more about the minister than about Jesus Christ and His gospel and His doctrine, worship, government, and commandments. What about you, dear ones? Is it pride in commending yourself and boasting in your abilities that your family, brethren, friends, and people at work or school hear in your speech and see in your conduct? Or is it boasting in Jesus Christ and the gospel of Jesus Christ that family and friends hear and see?

b. Second, Peter commands Aeneas to rise and make his bed. It’s as if Peter said, “You’ll not need your bed any longer during the day as a place of confinement (for rest at night, yes, but not during the day because you are going to be active in serving the Lord).”

c. Third, the healing of Aeneas was not an end in itself, but was a means to glorifying Jesus Christ and a sign of Christ’s power to heal the soul of spiritual paralysis. For we see (as is always the case when such miracles are worked by the apostles) that many saw Aeneas and turned in faith to the Lord Jesus (Acts 9:35). Dear ones, the purpose of healing and miracles was never about following whoever claims to be able to do so. In fact, we are strictly warned against doing so (Deuteronomy 13:1-3; Matthew 7:21-23; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10)—you will know them by their fruit (Matthew 7:20). How many times does the Spirit of God warn us against following a man because of the miracles he performs (many times)? How many times does the Spirit of God warn us against following a man because of his sound teaching and pure worship he leads (never)? Those who are faithful will be known by the fruit of their doctrine and pure worship, and by their character and marriage.

II. Peter’s Ministry in Joppa Was Preparing Him to Preach to the Gentiles (Acts 9:36-43).

A. Because the persecution of Saul of Tarsus sent ministers from Jerusalem to Lydda, and because Peter was ministering to these newly formed congregations he visited Lydda, and because Peter found Aeneas in Lydda who was healed by the power of Jesus Christ, we see that this news spread to nearby Joppa (modern Jaffa), and Peter was then called to come to Joppa, for a godly woman among them (Tabitha in Hebrew and Dorcas in Greek) had just died. This will in turn prepare the way for Peter to be used by the Lord to open the door (in Acts 10) to the Gentiles. But all these blessings sprang from persecution and adversity.

1. And so we see so clearly this connecting of the dots (events) here in Scripture; but what the Holy Spirit wants you, dear Christian, to see by way of application is that the very same connecting of dots (events) is being worked in your life day to day, week to week, month to month, and year to year.

2. Don’t freak out. Don’t stress out. Don’t panic. Don’t throw a temper tantrum. Don’t crawl into a cave and die or bury yourself in your bed never to get out again. Dear ones, these are all sinful approaches that will befall you when you will not believe that God is in control and that He is right now preparing you for the next step in your sanctification and in your service to Him and to others. Just because you cannot see where the present dot is going to connect to the next one is no reason to act as though the sovereign God who has given a whole revelation of amazing events He has connected has now suddenly ceased to do so.

B. Let us briefly consider this wondrous act of the Lord Jesus through His apostle, Peter.

1. The message to Peter came not because the brethren in Joppa had no hope for Tabitha (as if life on earth were more glorious than eternal life in heaven). We may wonder why the saints in Joppa would want Tabitha to return to this sinful world after having a glimpse of the glory of heaven. This plea for Peter to come was obviously ordained in such a way as to reveal the almighty power of Jesus Christ over death (a foretaste of the resurrection). Paul wrestled with this very issue himself, whether it was better to die or to remain with the churches (Philippians 1:23-24). It would seem that here in the case of Tabitha, it was likewise more needful for the saints for her to be with them though better for her to be with the Lord. What a blessed woman this must have been, that the Lord brought her back from heaven to serve and encourage the saints by her faith, love, and good deeds. Dear women, this is the kind of service you can likewise have with the women in the church. Your service is needed and is important to the life of the church. May we all be of such use and service to our families and to this church that it would be deemed needful by the Lord for us to remain and serve one another.

2. The miracle of raising the dead physically points to the need of all men spiritually if they would enter the kingdom of God. In the previous miracle wherein Aeneas was healed of paralysis we see in part the natural and sinful condition of us all, but in this miracle of raising the dead is the most clear analogy of our spiritual condition before a holy God. We are all like Tabitha in Adam (conceived and born in sin—spiritually dead); and there we remain until God speaks to us as did Peter to Tabitha: “Tabitha arise” (Acts 9:40). We do not need a little help or a little push in the right direction—we need life, we need faith. Until we are graciously and powerfully raised from the dead and given new life (born again), we cannot see or receive by faith the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

3. Peter dismissed everyone from the room where the body of Tabitha lay. Peter sends everyone out, so that he can remove all distractions and bow and humble himself in prayer before the Lord Jesus. This is not a theatrical show performed in front of an audience, nor a ritual that merely utters words from some church manual. There is no shouting nor loud music. There is simply the prayer of this apostle who has been humbled by the love, power, and mercy of Jesus Christ.

4. Peter’s prayer was heard and Tabitha was presented alive to the church with great rejoicing, and witnesses bore testimony concerning this miracle throughout Joppa, and once again the purpose of the miracle was realized in drawing sinners to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

C. Finally, note where Peter lodged while staying in Joppa—with Simon the tanner (Acts 9:43). This becomes just another dot that connects Peter to Cornelius—an outsider, a Gentile.

1. A tanner was one of the most unclean trades in ancient society. The nature of their work with unclean animals kept them in a state of ritual uncleanliness (Lev 11:35). Though not forbidden in the Law of God if working with clean animals, the rabbis mention tanners or tanneries in the context of other “unclean things.” A tannery is in the same category as a bathhouse and public urinal (*m.Meg 3:2*). A tanner is lumped together with “he who is afflicted with boils, or who collects dog excrement” (*m.Ket 7:10*). Because of the stench of the tanner’s shop, most towns required the tanner to live on the outskirts of town. The Mishnah states, “They put carrion [decaying animal flesh—GLP], graves, and tanneries at least fifty cubits away from a town” (*m.Batra 2:9*). <https://readingacts.com/2013/02/16/acts-943-peter-and-simon-the-tanner/>

2. Even in Peter’s place of lodging, the Lord is preparing Peter to receive the vision of unclean animals in Acts 10 and to receive the call to preach the gospel to “unclean Gentiles” in Acts 10. All the dots are connected in God’s plan. What is the Lord using today to prepare you for His service tomorrow? Despise not the day, week, month, or year of preparation. We would all like to skip over the times of preparation and just arrive at the place of usefulness and service. But that is not the way the Lord usually works. There is first preparation; then there is service. Pray that you learn and grow in patience. Find rest in the God whose amazing plan for you involves submitting to and learning in the present distresses before moving on to future usefulness and service in the kingdom of Christ.

The Lord Jesus told His disciples when preparing to cross the Sea of Galilee, "Let us pass over to the other side" (Mark 4:35), and yet a terrible storm enveloped these experienced fishermen to the point that they even despaired of surviving the mighty winds and waves that were sinking them. But Jesus was in perfect peace and rebuked the wind and the waves which obeyed at His sovereign command, so that rather than being destroyed they were all preserved and safely brought to the other side (just as Jesus said). The Disciples of Christ did not remember the words of the Lord and were overcome by fear (even with the Lord in the boat with them). But dear ones, you are no less in the boat with Jesus in whatever overwhelming circumstances you presently face (Hebrews 13:5-6). He has said to you who trust in Him for your eternal salvation, "Let us pass over to the other side" even in the midst of your present experiences; for through all these experiences (trials or blessings), He is preparing you for further service in His kingdom.

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