

‘JESUS STILL TURNS THINGS AROUND’

Acts 9:19-43 *“Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?”*

Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews,[a] but they tried to kill him. When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. As Peter travelled about the country, he went to visit the Lord’s people who lived in Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. “Aeneas,” Peter said to him, “Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat.” Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, “Please come at once!”

Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, “Tabitha, get up.” She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.”

I want you to be encouraged today by the truth from this text that Jesus still turns things around. I want you to have an open-ended expectancy about the world and about our society and about your work and your family and your personal life - that Jesus still turns things around. Believing in the living, free, sovereign, loving Lord of the book of Acts means living with the possibility and even the likelihood that bad situations are going to turn around, perhaps when you least expect it.

One of the most devastating feelings in the Christian life is fatalism - the feeling that this is the way it is going to be for ever and nothing is going to change it and that's that. This is the way I am; this is the way the my spouse is; this is the way my kids are; this is the way work is (or no work); this is the way society is - and nothing is going to change it. It's been this way for so long - it will go on this way forever and probably get worse. That kind of fatalistic mindset is deadly to our faith.

But one of the messages of the book of Acts is that this is emphatically not true. Jesus Christ is not dead and He is not distant and He is not silent and He is not weak and He is not uninterested in the world and the progress of His mission and your part in that mission. He is alive and what He began to do in His earthly life He is continuing to do. He is full of surprises for churches, for communities, for nations, families and for individual people. The broad persecution of the Church in the book of Acts began back in Acts 8:1 after the death of Stephen: *"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."* (Then v. 3) *"But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison."*

Now that is the way it was for quite some time. Imagine yourself in that early Church with no legal protection and all the power structures are indifferent or hostile toward you. Would you not be tempted to murmur and feel fatalistic? The Romans (like Pilate) are against us, the Jewish council (the Sanhedrin) is against us, the priests are against us and they even give authorized letters to have us imprisoned and killed. This is the way it will be for a long time. Nothing is going to change this. Nothing is going to turn this around. The momentum is too great. The powers of evil are too entrenched. There won't be any peace for the church for a long, long time, if ever.

Too often, we find ourselves in that same fatalistic spiral. But that is emphatically not the way we have to be - or should be, because Jesus is alive and He still turns things around. He is full of surprises. He is not locked into any fatalistic pattern of continuity. He is infinitely creative and infinitely resourceful. And He dislikes coming across as boringly predictable. So suddenly, out of the blue, He takes the key player in the persecution of His people and turns Him totally around on the Damascus road. This man Saul who was breathing murderous threats against Christians doesn't just drop dead - which would have been a big enough reversal for the enemy - he actually gets converted to Christianity. But not just converted, he is wildly converted, beyond anybody's imagination. So converted that he turns totally around - from being the worst enemy of Christianity to the strongest advocate and most powerful missionary for Christianity.

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, drives this home by showing the persecutor becoming the persecuted. First, in verse 23 he tells us that the Jews in Damascus plotted to kill Saul. The hunter becomes the hunted. And Saul escapes (v. 25) in a basket through the wall. Second, in verse 29 Luke tells us that the Hellenists in Jerusalem were seeking to kill Saul. The hunter becomes the hunted again but he escapes by taking a ship to Tarsus.

So what's the upshot of this amazing turn around? Verse 31: *"So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up."* Nobody would have dreamed it could happen - and happen so suddenly. Persecution, violence, conspiracy, suspicion, scattering - and then suddenly, out of the blue, Jesus turns things around. That's the way He is and that is the way we should think about life. He is the same today as He was then. He is surprising people and nations all over the world. He is alive and He is turning things around. Read some of the stories coming out of the Middle East and China and other countries that people said only a handful of years ago were totally closed to the gospel; read many of the sudden turnarounds which are happening as much now as when Luke wrote the books of Acts. The Lord is doing the same thing He was in the book of Acts. He's turning things around. He's reversing the course of human events.

It is written, *"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart. Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"* (1 Corinthians 1:19-20)

The book of Acts was written to encourage us again and again that the Jesus who began to do and to teach on earth is now alive and present with omnipotent power and continues to do what He began to do and teach what He began to teach. He is turning things around all over the world - from huge political upheavals to personal periods of gloom and discouragement giving way to hope and light.

The point of the book of Acts; the point of the kingdom of God; the point of the Christian life - is that Jesus is alive and in charge of the world and that He intervenes and changes things. He does not like fatalistic attitudes. He does not like pessimistic cyclical views of history or personal life or family life. The world is not a machine. It's a living drama and there is a live author-director, named Jesus who can and does jump on the set anytime He wants to and boggles the minds of the actors who think they know the script. I want to encourage you today because Jesus is alive and He still turns things around. I want you to have an open-ended expectancy in your life because Jesus is alive.

So verse 31 says that the Church had peace and was built up. Jesus turned Saul the persecutor around and he became Paul the Apostle and devoted follower of Jesus and a period of peace followed for the Church. But during this time of peace Jesus did not stop being the Lord of surprises. He did not stop turning things around. Luke gives us two stories about the ministry of Peter to show us how Jesus was still breaking into life out of the blue to turn things around.

In verse 32 Peter goes down to Lydda, northwest of Jerusalem, and finds a paralysed man named Aeneas. In verse 34 he says to him, *"Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you."* And Jesus breaks into the drama of Aeneas' life and turns everything around. He heals him. Then in verse 39 Peter goes from Lydda down to Joppa on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea where a disciple named Tabitha had just died. In verse 40 Peter puts all her friends outside and kneels down and prays. Prayer is the expression of faith that Jesus is alive and can turn things around in this life. With the answer to his prayer in his heart, Peter turns to the body and says, *"Tabitha, rise."* And Jesus steps into the drama of Tabitha's life and turns death around. And she lives.

And just like today in nations around the world when God dramatically turns things around people turn to the Lord. Verse 35: *"And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw [Aeneas healed], and they turned to the Lord."* Then verse 42 *"And [Tabitha's return to life] became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord."* Jesus turns things around so that people will turn to Him!

Now my own conviction is that Jesus is just as much alive today as in the book of Acts and that he means to do a lot more things like that today than we are willing to see or receive. He has surprises in store for this world and for your life and ministry that you have never dreamed.

What then should we do? Take a look at the second part of verse 31. *"And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit [the church] was multiplied."* The atmosphere in which Jesus broke in and turned things around and caused many people to turn to the Lord and multiplied the Church, was an atmosphere of godly fear and spiritual comfort. They seem almost opposites: fear and comfort. But they are not opposites. The fear of the Lord is that sense of awe that the Lord God is infinitely holy and infinitely powerful and will not be trifled with. He is free to break in with indescribable, heart-stopping suddenness and power whenever and wherever He pleases. The fear of the Lord is what the disciples felt when Jesus stilled the storm and when Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead. You do not make light of this God. You do not play games with Him or take His name in jest or treat Him as marginal or negligible in life.

He is living and powerful and unstoppable and infinitely holy. You humble yourself, as Peter says, under His mighty hand and that was the atmosphere of the early Church in which Jesus broke in with healing power and turned around sickness and death itself.

Now the other feature of this early Church where Jesus broke in with such power was that they walked in the comfort of the Holy Spirit (v. 31). Maybe the best picture for us to have of the Christian life where Jesus breaks in with power to turn things around is the picture of flying in the eye of a hurricane. A hurricane is a tropical cyclone with winds well above 100 kilometres an hour that builds to tremendous force and can destroy almost anything in its path. It is a frightening thing to stand in the way of a hurricane. But by contrast the hurricane eye is almost calm, experiences little or no precipitation, and is often exposed to blue sky.

When Luke says in verse 31 that the Church walked in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, I picture them flying in the eye of a hurricane of divine power. There is calm and peace within and the blue sky of hope overhead. But there is the fearsome power of the wind swirling all around.

So we need to learn to rest in the eye of His love and grace, tremble at the wind of His holy power, and be on the alert in our own life and in the world for utterly amazing manifestations of His might to turn things around. Let there be in your life an open-ended expectancy that Jesus is going to act. Jesus is going to turn things around. And when He does, be prepared to reap a harvest like we never dreamed of or imagined.