

“When the Saints Obey Marching Orders”

Acts 9:31-43

How do you measure spiritual growth? Spiritual growth is the evidence that the Holy Spirit is speaking to our hearts and minds as we grow in God’s Word and our love for one another and its seen by our changed words, attitudes and actions. We can measure spiritual growth by our increase in the love, joy, peace and patience in our life. That’s a good measuring tool. We can measure it by our involvement in God’s work, how we’re serving Him. Are we still doing the same thing we did 30/40/50 years ago or have we been stretched and have served God in various ways.

Another measuring tool you may never have thought about is geography. Geography is an interesting tool for measuring spiritual growth from the perspective of where have you allowed God to take you as you’ve obeyed His leading? And when I say ‘geography’ I don’t only mean metres and kilometers, I also mean culture.

When Jesus commanded His disciples to wait on the Spirit who will empower you to be His witnesses He gave geographically targets. Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. With each geographical section comes a change in culture. Sometimes the culture change can be literally across the street because our neighbours are from a different country and have different beliefs and practices. Sometimes it can be geographical stretches to our faith because we’ve never been that far from home/comfort zones and gone all the way to ... wherever. Whether its leaving Westport to go to Africa or going to Kingston or Nunavut or even Portland, any of those could be major stretches depending on who you are and how you’ve lived.

Geography is a major factor in Acts and when we come to Ch. 9:31-32 where we left off last week we are reintroduced to Peter who has been in Jerusalem almost all this time. But now we see him travelling; first to Lydda, then to Joppa and we’ll follow him in Ch. 10 to Caesarea. And we shouldn’t overlook this because Jesus did command them to be His witnesses starting in Jerusalem, not staying in Jerusalem. So this is a big deal to see Peter spreading the gospel outside Jerusalem.

Jesus has given us marching orders to be His witnesses in our own Jerusalems, Judeas, Samarias and ends of the earth. He has given us all authority to make disciples everywhere. So whether we’re hesitant to go across the street let alone across an ocean what can we learn from Peter here on getting out of our comfort zones and grow spiritually when it comes to sharing our faith?

9:31 is a one of those key summary points of Luke’s:

³¹ Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

A ‘time of peace’ probably refers to a lessened period of persecution brought about by Saul’s conversion. But not the end of persecution because as we saw with Paul, many Jewish people still hated the teaching that Jesus was the Messiah who has risen from the dead. But no doubt the conversion of Paul was extremely encouraging to the early church, a powerful work of the Holy Spirit of which, Paul’s salvation was just one illustration. The church was growing. And Peter decides to venture beyond Jerusalem and he goes west, probably on the Emmaus road and he’s travelling towards the west coast and arrives in Lydda, modern day Lod. Why does Peter leave Jerusalem?

First he was commanded by Jesus a few years prior to move beyond Jerusalem and secondly, the Spirit is working and because as we'll see Peter is growing spiritually

He Sees the Need to Go With the Gospel **(9:31-32)**

The longer we hesitate to go with the gospel (across the room, across the street, city or country) the harder it gets to move. We become complacent. We think the job is for those who are "called" or the "gift" of evangelism. Paul wrote in Rom. 1 of all believers,

⁶ *And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.*

⁷ *To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.*

The word "saint" appears in the New testament for the first time here in Acts 9, referring to followers of Jesus. The word simply means set apart. Paul says were set apart for Jesus because we belong to Him meaning we have a responsibility to do what He says. We're called to be saints meaning to live a set apart life for Jesus which means being His witnesses where-ever we go.

People need the Lord. The path to destruction is wide, Jesus said in Matt. 7 while the path to life is narrow and few there are that find it. Jesus needs us to take the gospel so we need to continue to see need for lost soul to be saved. Perhaps Peter hesitated to leave Jerusalem because he felt we the apostles should stay here. After all this is headquarters, ground zero. Jesus did say Jerusalem needed the gospel so we'll send others out while we stay here. In a few years the headquarters of the church will shift from Jerusalem to Antioch on the coast probably due to persecution by the religious Jews in Jerusalem. James will be martyred and Peter will be arrested in Ch. 12 and Paul will be arrested very quickly when he arrives in Ch. 21. So how does God get Peter to move? Same way He gets us to move sometimes:

Sometimes God has to make us move (8:14)

Back in Ch. 8 when God used persecution to disperse the believers who then took the gospel to Judea and Samaria, Philip's ministry to the Samaritans needed apostolic affirmation. So whether Peter wanted to or not, John and Peter needed to affirm the saving work of Spirit through the gospel to Samaritans because this was new. And so sometimes God doesn't give us a choice. He moves us or moves people towards us. He uses the circumstances of life to make us go where He wants us to go. If we're all called then we're all employed by God and at His will and hopefully willing to serve Him. This is not our life. We will be held accountable to how we used our life for God. Our family, our jobs, our neighborhoods are spheres of influence to live out and share Jesus with others to God's glory. Sometimes God just plops someone right in front of us who asks us about Jesus or spiritual questions.

We need to keep the lost before us. God challenged me as I watched the tragedy in Afghanistan to pray for the Taliban – persecutors of Jesus followers – that His Spirit might change some Sauls into Pauls. Instead of getting angry at those who annoy you or even hurt you see them as God sees them; lost, directionless, deceived or misguided people who need forgiveness of sins and salvation in Jesus.

But Peter's brief trip to Samaria got him out of Jerusalem. And now he's done it once so maybe he can do it again. And v.31 seems to indicate this was a good time. And that's important as well. When we sense God is wanting to move us (whether its across a room, street, mountains or

ocean) let's

Pray the timing is right (v.31)

Paul's salvation improved the atmosphere. The gospel was definitely spreading meaning people were receptive. So Peter, sensing the timing is right somehow, moves westward and encounters believers. Now, Lydda is like going to Kingston for us which for most of us is no big deal, especially since we can drive there in less than an hour. And Peter's desire is to visit believers, to encourage them in whatever way God sees fit. So he may not have went to intentionally share the gospel. He goes to help the work of God and the people of God. But God always has bigger plans for us.

When it comes to praying for God's timing, some of us get caught up in looking for "signs" from God that will almost directly tell us when to go and where to go. I have seen more people use that as an excuse not to serve than to serve. So here's a better question: what is really holding me back from doing what I need to obey God in? Often if we're honest the answer is nothing really. Remember, Peter was made to go to Samaria but when that went okay he chooses to go again (even if its away from Samaria – but God has other plans as we'll see next week!).

As Peter comes to Lydda he is told that a brother named Aeneas who has been paralyzed and bed-ridden for 8 years is there. Led by the Spirit of God, Peter declares 'Aeneas , Jesus the Messiah heals you'. And immediately he got up. News of Peter's presence in Lydda reaches Joppa and they have a beloved sister in the Lord named Tabitha who has sadly died, one who made clothes for people.

So, now that he's more comfortable travelling, Peter follows God's leading and travels to Joppa, a little north west, maybe another 15-20 km. Again, sensing the leading of the Holy Spirit, he asks to be alone with her and says 'Tabitha arise' and she comes back to life! What was Peter doing? Really he was just ...

Continuing the Ministry of Jesus Through the Spirit **(9:33-41)**

Jesus said in Acts 1:8 be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, etc., and Peter was doing exactly that. When we do what Jesus says things will happen. Believers will be strengthened and people will get saved. Can't predict how it will happen, but God says He will accomplish the purpose for His Word whenever it is sent (Is. 55:10-11).

9:31 says the church was being strengthened by the Holy Spirit and was increasing and Peter went out believing by faith that God's Spirit wasn't done working yet. And Luke began the books of Acts saying that his former book (the gospel) was the account of what Jesus began to do, implying that Acts is the continuation of what Jesus is doing even today by His Spirit. Peter was just continuing the work Jesus started still by the same Holy Spirit.

Literally, because don't these two miracles seem familiar? When Jesus healed the paralyzed man lowered from the roof into the house He told him to pick up his mat and walk (Luke 5). Here Peter tells Aeneas to get up and take care of your matt. In both cases the implication was, you don't need this anymore.

And Peter's healing of Dorcas/Tabitha is almost identical to Jesus' healing of Jairus' daughter where in Mark 5:40-42 Jesus clears the room and says 'Talitha koum' meaning little girl get up. And here Peter would have said Tabitha get up! Peter led of the Spirit healed these two people the way Jesus would have.

Jesus of course is a great example to follow for ministry. How did Jesus treat people? With compassion. Follow His example. How did Jesus react to people with obvious sin? Without judgment. How did Jesus pray? How did He worship? How did He do ministry? Follow me means, watch me and do as I do. The more we grow in Jesus the more we become like Jesus. And have the faith of Jesus who,

Believed God Can Change Anyone's Life **(9:35, 42)**

If we're going to make an impact for Jesus we must believe that He and His Father and Spirit have the power to change anyone's life. These physical miracles are also reminders that God can do a miracle of salvation in anyone's life. Salvation is the Spirit-empowered process of bringing physically alive but spiritually dead people to real life, eternal life. Every saved person is a living miracle. You are a living miracle. God changed you and me and He can change anyone. He can make what looks impossible and make something brand new and fully alive.

Peter felt led of God to go out of his comfort zone in Jerusalem to encourage God's people in Lydda, where he ends up doing a miracle which leads to v.35;

³⁵ *All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.*

We're not really told how this happened but most likely the changed man's life spoke volumes to the unsaved community around him.

'How are you walking?' Jesus healed me!!

Jesus? I thought He was dead.

'They crucified Him, yes, but He was God's Son and proved it by coming to life again. Only He can forgive sins. Only He offers us eternal life.'

Remember, this all started because Peter obeyed the leading of God to go down the road and see how he could encourage the believers there. And he did! But God wasn't done. The news spreads of the miracle in Lydda and the people from Joppa (20 km away) say 'Peter come here'. So he goes. Emboldened no doubt by this miracle he is told about Tabitha. He believes by faith that God has sent him there for the purpose of raising her back to life. When presented with doing something that we've never done before we often think,

'But I've never done this Lord'

'This seems impossible Lord'

'Send someone else Lord'

Yet Peter uses none of the excuses that we often use and God heals Tabitha by the Spirit through Peter's obedience to be used of God. And that's how God works through us. As we obey,

moving out of our comfort zones to do things we can't do in our own strength but believing God can by faith through His Spirit. But there's more:

⁴¹ He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive. ⁴² This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.

The result of Peter's obedience to serve one person in Lydda and one person in Joppa has spiritual residue; all kinds of people were saved. Did Peter lead them to Jesus? Maybe a few but probably not most. God used his obedience to go down the road 50 km away where he was led by the Spirit to perform a miracle and then another one 20 more km away resulting in far greater work of salvation than Peter probably anticipated. Why did God do that through Peter? Because Peter was growing and changing into being more like Jesus. We see this in v.43,

⁴³ Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

What does a tanner do? Works with dead animals. Touching dead animals makes one 'unclean' yet Peter doesn't seem to have a problem with this. Why? The laws in Leviticus state that if you touch a dead animal you are unclean until evening and that there is a washing process. That's all. The Pharisees and overly zealous rabbis made the law that touching animals made you unclean period and you couldn't attend synagogue. So tanners and shepherds were labelled unclean and unwelcome for worship.

That's man made laws not God's law. So Peter is growing spiritually. And if we're to be used of God to serve Him with His message not only must we believe God can change anyone we must

Believe God Can Change You **(9:43)**

By studying under Jesus for 3 years, receiving the Spirit and obeying God's leading even when it was out of His comfort zone Peter showed that he was growing spiritually. That he could stay with a tanner since he knew that a tanner was only temporarily unclean and that hanging around him didn't make him unclean/unacceptable before God. And I believe this helps Peter for Ch. 10 when he is challenged by God to stretch his comfort zone further and accept Gentiles as fellow disciples.

Perhaps one of the best measuring tools for whether we are growing spiritually is whether we are growing in grace. Was it not Peter who commanded us to

¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

Why grace and knowledge? The more we know what God says the more we understand how gracious and forgiving and compassionate He is towards us, therefore we must be more gracious, compassionate and forgiving towards others. Do you have a lot of Bible knowledge? Wonderful. Are you becoming more gracious, kind, compassionate, patient, loving and full of joy because of that knowledge? No, then you're not growing spiritually. That knowledge is just information that you're not trusting or believing can change you.

Need to change? Need to move out of your comfort zone and go across the room, street, province, country, world and be used by God's Spirit to strengthen believers and share the gospel?

Keep the need of the lost always before you

Stay close to Jesus and live like He lived

Believe God is still in the human miracle business and Jesus' command by the Father's authority to go and make disciples is still the most important thing we need to do.

But we'll only do that if we believe Jesus can change us, a little bit more gracious today than we were yesterday as we let the knowledge His Word change our lives.

* * * * *
If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact
olivet@rideau.net