

Two Miracles

Acts 9:32-43

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There are a lot of events in life that you can't see the real significance of until you look back. I think of several years ago when Ashlee was working at a nursing home, and the nursing home closed. She was suddenly out of a job for the first time in her life. But it opened the door for her to get a job in the field she had trained for, but didn't think she'd be able to work in! And she got to work in town to boot!

Maybe you can look back at your life and see similar circumstances. Maybe it's a conversation that didn't seem like anything special at the time, but later proved to be a turning point in your life. Maybe it's a class you decided to take without realizing just how much it would affect you. Or maybe it was just going about your business on a seemingly normal day, not knowing how that continued faithfulness would shape and fashion who you became.

My point is that when we read the book of Acts, we need to remember that Luke was writing with the benefit of hindsight. He was not making a record of every event that happened in the early church; he was telling the story of the early church. He included only those events that he saw as significant milestones in the formation of the church; milestones that could only be discerned with the benefit of hindsight.

Today's passage is just such a milestone. While it records two significant miracles, the greater significance won't be seen until we move into chapter 10, as we see the bigger picture of what God was doing. Peter was simply being faithful to the Lord, but didn't realize that in everything he was doing, the Lord was preparing him for something monumental. Each of these events was serving to prepare Peter for what the Lord had planned next.

Back to Peter

The last several weeks, we have been looking at the account of Saul's conversion, and the events that followed it. We mentioned that these events spanned several years, even though Luke's account reads like everything happened at once. Remember, Luke was hitting the highlights, so he often didn't explain the full timelines of things—he was more concerned with communicating the big picture.

So, Luke had been focused on telling us about how the Lord was preparing Saul for the ministry to which he had been called. Saul's process of preparation probably lasted 10 years or so. For a good chunk of that time after his conversion, we don't really know what he was doing, but we know the Lord was using that time to prepare him.

Luke now returns to the story of Peter's ministry. Peter and Paul (Saul) are the two primary characters (apart from God) in the book of Acts. Most of the first part of Acts focuses on God working through Peter, and most of the second part focuses on God

working through Paul. But God was working in both of them throughout. This middle section bounces back and forth between these two men just a bit. Today's passage focuses on what God was doing through Peter.

³² Meanwhile, Peter traveled from place to place, and he came down to visit the believers in the town of Lydda. ³³ There he met a man named Aeneas, who had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. ³⁴ Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you! Get up, and roll up your sleeping mat!" And he was healed instantly. ³⁵ Then the whole population of Lydda and Sharon saw Aeneas walking around, and they turned to the Lord. (Acts 9:32-35, NLT)

Luke introduces this section with the word "meanwhile", indicating that this happened during this time when God was preparing Saul. We don't know the exact time frame of these events, but most likely, the events we read about today happened several years after the events at Pentecost. The church had become somewhat established, and the Christian faith was beginning to become an accepted part of the religious landscape of Israel.

It appears that Peter had decided to make a trip to visit the various churches in the region. Peter felt a burden for these churches, and checked in with them from time to time to give them direction and encouragement. It is important for us to note that these churches were still made up of people who had previously viewed themselves as Jews. They likely even thought of themselves as Jews still, though they started calling themselves "The Way". So, Peter traveled throughout Israel, visiting the groups of Jewish believers meeting in each town.

We are told that he first traveled to the town of Lydda (which is also known as Lod). Lydda was a bit over 20 miles from Jerusalem. It was not a huge distance, but Peter felt the need to check in and meet with the believers there.

While Peter was in Lydda, he met a man named Aeneas, who had been paralyzed and bedridden for 8 years. Since he had only been paralyzed for 8 years, something must have happened to him to cause him to be paralyzed. He clearly wasn't born with this malady. Nonetheless, 8 years of paralysis is a long time, and he was surely known to many in the region. We don't know whether Aeneas was a believer or not, but what we do know is that Peter healed him, and he was able to get up and walk!

Any time we read about these healings, I'm left with questions. I have no doubt that God can perform such miracles. God created the universe, therefore it should be no surprise that He can heal any physical ailment we might encounter. But I still wonder about the timing of such healings. Why was Aeneas not healed 8 years earlier? Surely there were others who were paralyzed, why were they not healed? More to the point, why does God allow some to deal with illness and disease today, when He is able to heal all of these things?

The answer, I think, is that God is usually doing something that's much bigger than just solving a problem for a single individual. Don't get me wrong, I believe God cares about

the problems, big and small, of each one of us. But I also think that sometimes God understands that the things we see as problems or inconveniences are things He uses to teach us and mold us into who we should be. But other times, it seems He chooses to do something miraculous because that will accomplish His greater purpose.

Jesus alluded to this at the beginning of His ministry, when He spoke about how God used Elijah and Elisha to minister to people outside of Israel. There were surely people in need within Israel, but God, in His infinite wisdom, sent them elsewhere to perform their great miracles. What we need to remember is that God has infinite wisdom! We do not always know why He chooses to act as He does, but we do know His ways are perfect! A lack of physical healing is not always result of a lack of faith—sometimes God has something else planned.

In the case of Aeneas, however, God chose to use Peter to heal him. There are several parallels to Peter's healing of Aeneas and Jesus' healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda. In both circumstances, the men were told to stand up, pick up their mats, and walk. This shows the completeness of the healing. Both men had spent years not being able to use their extremities. As a result, there would have been significant atrophy to the muscles. God did not merely restore sensation to their limbs, but He strengthened them so that they could get up and walk and carry their mats! Aeneas experienced complete healing!

Peter's goal in this was not to draw attention to himself, but to the Lord. Notice Peter's language as he healed the man. He was very clear that Jesus Christ was the One who was doing the healing, not him. But also notice the response of the people. The people of the area (who knew Aeneas, and knew this wasn't merely a hoax), turned to the Lord in faith. Peter's goal was not to build a following for himself, but to point people to the Lord. And that's exactly what happened.

In Joppa

After healing Aeneas in the town of Lydda, we learn that Peter was summoned to another nearby town for another healing.

³⁶ There was a believer in Joppa named Tabitha (which in Greek is Dorcas). She was always doing kind things for others and helping the poor. ³⁷ About this time she became ill and died. Her body was washed for burial and laid in an upstairs room. ³⁸ But the believers had heard that Peter was nearby at Lydda, so they sent two men to beg him, "Please come as soon as possible!"

³⁹ So Peter returned with them; and as soon as he arrived, they took him to the upstairs room. The room was filled with widows who were weeping and showing him the coats and other clothes Dorcas had made for them. ⁴⁰ But Peter asked them all to leave the room; then he knelt and prayed. Turning to the body he said, "Get up, Tabitha." And she opened her eyes! When she saw Peter, she sat up! ⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then he called in the widows and all the believers, and he presented her to them alive. ⁴² The news spread through

the whole town, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³ And Peter stayed a long time in Joppa, living with Simon, a tanner of hides. (Acts 9:36-43, NLT)

Joppa was about 10 miles away from Lydda, where Peter was. Luke tells us that a believer there named Tabitha (or Dorcas) died. She was a faithful and beloved member of the Christian community there and had been a faithful servant of the Lord. She was engaged in helping the poor and serving others, and her death was felt strongly in the community.

Apparently, the people in Joppa heard that Peter was nearby, and they sent people to summon him to come to them at once. Why did they call for Peter? Were they hoping he would raise her from the dead, or were they just looking for comfort? I'm occasionally summoned to a family immediately after someone has died, but I've never thought the people were hoping I'd raise their loved one. But there does seem to be an urgency with which they summoned Peter. He was about 10 miles away, and they told him he needed to come at once. So, I think they were indeed hoping for Peter to raise Tabitha back to life again.

But why did they need to call Peter? Didn't they have the same Holy Spirit as Peter? Couldn't God have worked through any of these men or women to raise Tabitha? Certainly He could have, but remember that God often works in ways we don't understand. Sometimes He gives one person an ability that He does not give to others. Though we may not always know His reasons for doing so, we trust that He knows what He is doing. In this case, the believers knew that God had given Peter the ability to do many miracles, and they were hoping for another one here.

After Peter arrived in Joppa, the account of him raising Tabitha bears a striking similarity to the story of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter in Mark 5. Peter was present with Jesus when He performed this miracle. Only Peter, James, and John went with Jesus into the upper room with Jesus to heal the young girl.

When Peter arrived, the people in the house were weeping and telling him all the wonderful things Tabitha had done. As Jesus did, Peter asked everyone else to leave. Interestingly, Peter didn't just command Tabitha to get up. His first order of business was to kneel and pray. Peter understood that he had no power on his own, but it was the Lord who would need to heal Tabitha.

After praying, Peter turned to Tabitha's lifeless body and told her to get up. When Jesus spoke to Jairus' daughter, he said something similar, "little girl, get up!" Mark tells us that Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and the words he said were "Talitha koum!" I wonder if Peter said almost the same thing, "Tabitha koum!" If so, I have to imagine a smile coming over his face as he remembered his time with Jesus.

Whatever the case was, Tabitha indeed got up and came back to life. Peter then called the crowds back into the house to see her. I can only imagine the scene of joy that followed.

Once again, we see the purpose of this miracle was about more than just Tabitha or those who mourned her death. The effect of this miracle was that word of what had happened spread throughout the whole town, and as a result, many people came to faith in Jesus. This was the bigger picture of what God was doing.

Luke wraps up this section by telling us that Peter stayed a long time in Joppa at the house Simon, a tanner of hides. This seems like a relatively insignificant detail, but I think it gives us a glimpse of what God had been doing in Peter. A tanner was someone who worked with dead animals all the time. He was constantly dealing with death, and therefore was seen as perpetually unclean. Jewish law required that a tanner could not be located in town, but had to be on the outskirts, due to the unclean nature of their work.

So, it seems like a strange choice for Peter to go and stay for a long time with someone who was perpetually unclean. If he had only stayed for a night because that was the only place available, we might dismiss it, but the fact that Peter stayed for a long time with Simon the tanner gives us a glimpse of what God was doing in Peter. It seems like maybe God was helping Peter to see that these ceremonial laws to which he had once clung so tightly were no longer necessary in the light of what Jesus had done.

Jesus had begun to teach this principle during his ministry. He was not nearly as concerned with the minutiae of the ceremonial rituals as the Pharisees were. The Pharisees were deeply committed to keeping the absolute letter of the law. Jesus was fond of pointing out that while they may have been keeping the letter of the law, they were missing the spirit of it. Jesus defended the fact that the disciples didn't follow all the same handwashing regulations (Matthew 15), that they didn't fast the way the Pharisees thought they should (Matthew 9:14-17), and that they didn't follow the Sabbath commandments the way the Pharisees thought they should either (Mark 2:23-27). Plus, Jesus had taught with authority, helping them to see the law with fresh eyes (as he did in the Sermon on the Mount), and He had even changed the script to the Passover meal. All of these were subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) indications that Jesus' sacrifice changed the way they approached the Lord once and for all.

It seems that maybe Peter had begun to internalize some of these things as well, recognizing that it was not what was on the outside that made a person unclean, but what was on the inside. (Matthew 15:11-20)

As such, I think Luke includes this seemingly insignificant detail, because he was able to see, with the benefit of hindsight, that Peter's decision to stay with Simon the Tanner was an indication of how God had been working in him. God had been softening Peter's heart, and now he was ready for what God had in store for him next. Looking back, Luke was able to see what God had seen all along. All of this was significant, and God was working through everything that happened to prepare Peter (and the church) for what He was about to do.

Conclusion

This is kind of a strange passage to examine, because while there are two significant miracles recorded, there isn't much else. It would be easy for us to skate by such a passage and assume there's nothing it can teach us. Of course, we would be wrong. So I've got a few lessons I think we can draw from this passage.

First, God is working even when we can't see it. As I have said, often we cannot discern what God is doing until we look back and see it. Much of our lives is spent doing the things we think are good and right, not really seeing how God is using them to accomplish His purposes. But then, something happens and we see that God had been preparing things for us all along. Let this be an encouragement to you. Wherever you are, seek to be obedient to the Lord. Believe that God has you where you are for a purpose. Your challenge is to ask, what am I supposed to be doing here and now? What lessons does God want me to learn? What ministry does God have for me in this stage of life? Rather than questioning whether God is working, believe that He is and ask what He is doing right now.

Second, ministry doesn't have to be flashy to be meaningful. Tabitha is a wonderful example of the impact of quiet, faithful ministry. She was someone who simply sought to meet the needs of others. She apparently had skill in making clothing, so she used that to provide for others. She was constantly looking for ways to be kind to others and to serve those who were in need. I suspect that few people said much to her about the things she was doing. It might have been easy for her to think that her ministry was insignificant. But when she died, it suddenly became apparent just how big her impact was, as all those she had cared for came out of the woodwork. When you feel like you are laboring in obscurity and wondering whether your efforts for the Lord make a difference, think back to Tabitha, and remember that little things, done consistently, usually add up to big things—even if we never see them in our lifetime.

Finally, growing in faith should make us soft, rather than hard. It would have been easy for Peter to get a big head as the church started taking off. It would have been tempting for him to feel that he was too important to spend time running from town to town dealing with the needs of individuals. But he didn't. He saw that each person mattered, and he devoted time to them. Similarly, it would have been easy for him to conclude that as a church leader, he should not be seen with someone unclean like Simon the tanner, but instead, he chose to stay with him for a long time.

Sometimes, people who have been in the church for a long time begin to lose sight of grace. It is easy for us to begin to believe that we are better than the "sinners" who surround us and forget that it is only by God's grace that we have been saved. But a person growing in faith should also grow in their understanding of God's grace, and in their capacity to extend grace to others. The true mark of Christian maturity is not in how much we condemn in others, but in how we love those around us, even when they're a bit rough around the edges. Peter's example shows us that as we understand grace more, we should also extend it more. That should be the goal for which we strive.

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