

Up to this point in chapter 9, Luke focuses on Saul. We read about the Damascus Road experience where Saul had an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. The glory of God blinded him, so that his companions had to lead him into Damascus where Saul fasted and prayed for three days. Meanwhile, God called Ananias to go, and place his hands on Saul, so that he could receive his sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately Saul began to preach the gospel.

The Apostles and the other disciples remained suspicious of Saul, thinking that he spoke in Jesus name to set a trap for them. They changed their minds, however, when Saul continued to preach the gospel even when the Jews showed their disdain, and sought to kill him. After Saul escaped with his life, the church enjoyed a season of peace. The gospel spread freely, and the number of Christians multiplied.

We do not read about Saul again until chapter 11. About five years pass before Barnabas goes to Tarsus to convince Saul to join him at the church in Antioch. Four years later, they depart on their first missionary journey to the gentiles. In Chapter 13 they are on Cyprus, a primarily gentile nation, and Saul takes his Greek name. From that point on, Luke refers to him as Paul.

In our passage of scripture this evening, Luke's focus switches back to Peter's ministry and two miracles God performed through him. Let's see what principles we might learn as we read Acts 9:32-43.

During the season of peace in the church, the bible indicates that Peter had freedom to move about, and share the gospel wherever he went. As he traveled, he ministered to, and discipled, local groups of Christians. As he traveled to Lydda, and then to Joppa, his ministry centered in towns that were farther, and farther, away from Jerusalem. In each of these cities, there was a larger gentile presence. While this is not immediately apparent to us from the scripture alone, if we refer to a map we can see that it is in keeping with Luke's theme of the gospel's spread. Where verse 35 indicates that the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord, it suggests that there were gentile believers among their group.

In this passage we see similarities to the account of Jesus healing a crippled in John 5. As in previous miracles of Peter, we see him doing the same things that Jesus did. The difference is that Jesus performed miracles under his own authority, and Peter performed miracles in Jesus' name.

Is God still in the miracle business today? Of course He is. Then why can't we lay our hands on people who are crippled and heal them in the same manner as Peter? Look back at verse 34. It was not Peter who healed the man; it was Jesus. Jesus gets the credit. Jesus gets all the glory. It was important for the disciples to be able to do miracles in Jesus' name, because they helped to spread the gospel to new people groups. Such a demonstration of God's power led all of the residents to turn to Christ in faith. Their salvation also served as a witness to those who already believed, that the gospel is for all people.

That message is now common knowledge, and there should be no need for the church today to have proof that Jesus' sacrifice covers the sins of all people who come to Him in faith, regardless of their individual circumstances. On the other hand, we do see miracles of God today, when we pray in Jesus' name.

How many times have we seen people from our own congregation receive healing from cancer after we prayed for them in Jesus' name? How many times have we become aware of circumstances that threaten people's quality of life, prayed for them in Jesus' name, and seen how God delivered them, in answer to our prayer?

God is still in the miracle business, and praying in faith, in Jesus' name, is essential to our Christian walk. We pray for ourselves, our families, and we need each other's prayers. We pray in faith, and when we receive God's answer we grow in our faith. We have greater confidence in the sovereignty of God, which gives us His peace in the most trying of circumstances.

While Peter ministered to the people in Lydda, just twelve miles down the road, in Joppa, there arose another ministry need. There was a disciple of Christ named Tabatha, in Aramaic, which translated means Dorcas, in Greek. Her name means Gazelle in English. The bible says that she was full of good works, and acts of charity. She was a believer, with a good reputation among the people. She not only professed Christ as Savior and Lord, she was the real deal, and everyone knew it by the way she lived. People could see the love of Christ in her, and through her.

Tabitha got sick, and she died. The people in the church, and the community, mourned over their loss, in the same way that we mourn over loved ones when they die. In grief, people sometimes question why God allowed their loved one to pass, or question why God did not answer their prayers. Sometimes people get angry or bitter towards God.

We have to remember that all of our days were recorded in God's book before we took our first breath. It is appointed unto man once to die, and then the judgment. We will all die, unless the Lord returns in our lifetime to rapture His church. Death is as much a reality as life itself, and in the end, the only thing that is important is whether or not we have received Jesus Christ in faith, as Savior and Lord, for the forgiveness of our sins, so that we might have eternal life with Him. We are not promised our next breath, but we are promised eternity through faith in Jesus Christ.

God has a plan, and a purpose. We are a part of His plan. I want to live every day of my life to the fullest, so long as I can be productive for His kingdom here on earth, but when the Lord say my time here is up, I'm ready to go. I do not grieve over the prospect of my departure, but I do grieve personally over my loved ones who go before me. When someone dies, whom we care about, it is as if a part of our selves dies with him or her. There is a hole in us that we don't know how to fill. But, people of faith understand, and are able to accept God's will, and His greater purpose, with hope in our hearts: hope of the resurrection, and the hope of being reunited with our loved ones.

God did not punish Tabitha in death, but He used her death to accomplish His purposes. Some might try to argue that she had not really died, but that she probably just passed out, or went into a coma. The bible says that she was dead. The widows washed her and laid her in an upper room. Her body had become cold, and perhaps rigor mortise had set in. Since Peter was in Lydda, and Joppa was 12 miles away, it was at least a day or two after her death before Peter would arrive, so there could be no doubt that Tabitha was dead.

Up until this point, we have not seen an account of anyone being raised from the dead in the book of Acts, other than Jesus, so what happens next is a tremendous demonstration of faith. Somehow the disciples in Joppa heard that Peter was in Lydda, so they sent two members of their local church to get him, and to urge him to come quickly. This suggests that although Tabitha died, the church held on to the hope that she might live again, and they had faith that God might use Peter to resurrect her from the dead.

This reminds us today of the importance of faith in our Christian walk. The bible says that without faith it is impossible to please God. Jesus said that if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, "Move from here to there, and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." Faith is one of those words in Greek that is both a noun and

a verb. We believe, but we also act upon that belief. We live in faith, and we ask the Lord in faith when we pray.

The bible says that Peter went with them to Joppa. They took him to that upper room where Tabitha's dead body lay. The widows were there grieving over this woman that meant so much to them. They showed Peter the garments that she had made for them.

Tabitha expressed her love towards others by making clothes for them. With love in every stitch, my grandmother, who has gone to be with the Lord, made a quilt for each of her grandchildren. Debby's mom did the same for her children and grandchildren. One of my prized possessions is an afghan that Debby made for me. Because I am so tall, she made it extra long and it keeps me warm on cold winter nights. I am thankful every time I use it, and I remember how much work she put into it, just so I might be blessed.

Christian love is best expressed in personal sacrifice, and efforts we make in order to be a blessing to others. This is the reputation Tabitha had among her peers, and their grief was so great, that in faith, they asked God for a miracle.

The bible says that Peter asked them all to leave, and then he knelt down, and prayed. When, through the Holy Spirit, he knew that God answered his prayer, he turned to the dead woman, and commanded that she arise. At that point she woke up, and Peter presented her alive to her friends.

Can you imagine the joy and excitement among the believers in Joppa? Tabitha was dead, but now, in Christ, and in answer to their prayers, she was alive. Today, God sometimes uses people in the medical profession to bring people back to life, often in answer to our prayers, but I have never seen this happen in people who have been dead for a day or more. So we might question why God does not work in this way today. To understand, I think it best to explore why God raised Tabitha from the dead back then.

Remember that the church was still in its infancy. The gospel was still in the early stages of its spread. Central to the gospel message is the promise of the resurrection from the dead, which was first demonstrated by Jesus Himself. The resurrection was a hotly debated concept among the Jews, but with the demonstration of Tabitha's resurrection, there was hope for all people who trust in Jesus, and the people who witnessed the miracle were filled with thanksgiving, and praise to God.

This reminds us that when we see God's answer to our prayers, we should recognize Him and give Him the praise and glory He deserves. This takes a certain amount of discipline, for I find that in my flesh, I get so consumed with the concerns of today, that I sometimes do not reflect properly on the answers to my prayers from the past. On the other hand, when I see God's hand at work in answer to my prayers, and I take time to thank Him, my faith grows stronger in dealing with any of the concerns and challenges I face today, and in the future. I am reminded of God's goodness, His power and authority, His sovereignty and His love. I also live in the hope, and assurance, that God hears and answers my prayers. My faith is made stronger, and so are my prayer life, and thus my relationship with Him.

With such a demonstration of God's power, Peter saw that the Lord was at work in Joppa, so he stayed there for a while to become a part of what God was doing. These are principles taught in the Experiencing God class, which will start here this Sunday evening. If you have not gone through that class, or have not gone through it for some time, I encourage you to consider signing up. Look for where God is at work, and join Him. Look around in our church and see where God is at work. Look around in our community, or at your work, or within your circle of

friends. Be alert. See what God is doing, and join Him. Invest yourself in the work of Christ in the world, and see the miracles that happen all around us every day.

The good news is that the miracle of salvation and eternal life is available to everyone who is willing to come to Jesus Christ, confessing their sin, and receiving Him into his or her heart as Savior and Lord. If God is calling anyone here tonight, I pray that you will not let the moment pass. If you need help with knowing how to be saved, we will be glad to help you with your first steps of faith.