

Lesson 14: Acts 9:32-43 Gospel witness through signs and charity

Introduction

The Jerusalem Church Acknowledges Gentile Inclusion	
9:32-11:18 The Gospel Released from Jewish Social Isolationism	11:19-12:23 The Gospel Freed from Jewish Administrative Centralism
9:32-35 Peter Heals Aeneas	11:19-26 Believers from Jerusalem Witness in Antioch
9:36-43 Peter Raises Dorcus	11:27-30 Believers from Antioch Give Famine Relief
10:1-48 Peter Witnesses to Cornelius' Household	12:1-19 Peter Rescued from Herod
11:1-18 Peter Defends His Witness to Gentiles	12:20-23 Herod Struck Down by God
12:24 But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.	

David Gooding, *True to Faith*.¹

We enter into the third major part of Acts with the two miracle stories of Aeneas and Tabitha. And I can't help but wonder why Luke gives us these two very brief accounts of healing. The highlighted sections in Acts part three are clearly the conversion of Cornelius' household and the planting of the church in Antioch. The Gospel is spreading both geographically and ethnically. Peter himself has preached to Jews, to Samaritans, and now, in this third part of Acts he is going to preach to Gentiles. The Church back in Jerusalem, though shocked, will affirm Peter's baptism of Gentiles without requiring obedience to the Old Covenant laws of circumcision, or food restrictions, or Sabbath obedience. Recognition of Gentile inclusion as full members of the people of God along with their Jewish brothers and sisters seems to be the big idea here. So, why these two little accounts of healing?

We cannot get behind the text into Luke's mind to the exact reasons he chose these two accounts over other accounts or why he did not just move straight into the Cornelius story. But we can acknowledge reasons that are apparent to us in the text for these stories. Our clues will come from looking at the structure of Acts, part three and at the content of the two reports. Let's start with the structure. What do these two reports add to the structure of this part of Acts? Four things...

First, Luke uses the stories to preserve his pattern of overlapping main parts. Remember, he doesn't end one part with a clean cut and then start the other, but he overlaps the content of his major parts. Having given us the expansion of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria in part two and having ended that part with the conversion of Paul, we could easily move on to Antioch and then out to the remote places of the Earth from there. Instead, Luke keeps us in Judea with Peter with these stories.

¹ David Gooding. *True to Faith* (Coleraine, N Ireland: Myrtlefield House, 1990) 196.

Second, these two stories give us an introduction to the main account about Cornelius. We get to hear about what Peter is doing and how he got to Joppa, which is where Cornelius' servants will find him.

Third, the story helps create a balanced structure of pairs for this part of Acts. We will encounter four pairs of stories grouped together in two movements. The two pairs in the first movement are these two stories of healing by Peter; and then the two stories that have to do with Cornelius, the first describes how Peter came to bring the Gospel to Cornelius' household, and the second repeats the account for a gathering of leaders in Jerusalem. Those two pairs of stories make up the first movement. The second movement begins with a pair of stories in Antioch. We see how the church was planted and watered. Then we get an account of the believers in Antioch responding to the need for famine relief in Judea. After those two stories in Antioch, we get two stories that have to do with Peter and Herod.

It's a nicely balanced section. To recap, this whole part of Acts has eight stories. Those eight stories are grouped in two movements of four stories each, and the four stories are grouped into two pairs. That's how I'm going to teach Acts part three, covering each pair of stories for a total of four lessons. We are starting today with the first pair of stories.

Fourth, my final reason these stories help Luke build his structure, these two stories, which are the first pair of stories in the first movement, balance nicely with the first pair of stories in the second movement. You could put the two pairs of stories side by side and see connections between each story. That means putting the story of Aeneas beside the story of the Gospel coming to Antioch, and putting the story of Tabitha beside the story of famine relief sent by Antioch.

With the healing of Aeneas, Peter is traveling through the region, and with the story of the Gospel coming to Antioch, persecuted believers are traveling through the region. With Aeneas the believers are called saints, and in Antioch they are called Christians. After the healing of Aeneas many "turned to the Lord", and that same phrase is used next after the preaching in Antioch when many "turned to the Lord".

The second stories in these two pairs also connect. We hear about Tabitha and her good deeds of kindness, then we hear about the believers in Antioch giving for famine relief.

Luke's structure balances very nicely, connecting in several different ways. If it is all too hard to see in your mind, I encourage you to check out the transcript for this lesson at observetheword.com. When I post the transcript, I will put a chart in with the text of the lesson. And I will post a file with all my structure charts for Acts which I have taken from David Gooding's book, *True to the Faith*. Check that out sometime.

So, why did Luke choose these two stories about Peter to start off this part of Acts? Just looking at the structure we see several reasons why these two stories work well here. The content is also important. These stories are not just filler. There is more going on here than we might catch if we move too quickly from the conversion of Paul to the story of Cornelius. Luke is communicating several ideas in the content of these accounts.

Let's consider that content now, starting with the healing of Aeneas reported in Acts 9:32-35.

Peter heals Aeneas from paralysis (9:32-35)

³² Now as Peter was traveling through all *those regions*, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. ³³ There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years, for he was paralyzed. ³⁴ Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed." Immediately he got up. ³⁵ And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

We are not told that Peter came down to the church at Lydda, but to the saints at Lydda. Luke does use the word, “church,” through Acts, though the English word does not convey the most accurate meaning. “Church” typically reminds us of a building, or of a place. The Greek, “ekklesia,” is literally, “assembly.” It only brings to mind a gathering of people. In the Greek it doesn’t bring the place in mind at all. Recognizing that, we see the idea of, “ekklesia,” or, “assembly,” here. The saints who are at Lydda are the assembly, they are the Church.

Most often in Acts, Luke refers to the people of the ekklesia or assembly as, “the brethren”. Sometimes they are called, “those who have believed”. And just four times they are called, “the saints”.

They are called saints when Ananias points out to God that Paul did much harm to God’s saints in Jerusalem. That was earlier in this chapter. The second and third “saints” use comes once each in our present pair of stories. The saints are the believers in Lydda and the believers in Joppa. We get a fourth reference in chapter 26 when, referring back to the harm he did to the Church, Paul tells Agrippa how he locked up many saints in prison.

That English word, “saint,” is also a little problematic. The Greek simply reads, “the holy ones.” To be holy is to be both pure and set apart. The holy ones, the saints are the ones cleansed by Jesus Christ and set apart for special use. The reference is not to some particularly holy person, more holy than the other holy people. Peter is not the saint here, or not the only saint here. This is a reference to all believers. And that is the consistent use of this word through the entire Bible. Peter came to the gathered believers, to the saints, the holy ones of Lydda.

And there is an interesting idea there. It’s worth pausing. Just pause for a moment and think of yourself as a holy one. If you belong to the Church, if you’re a believer in Jesus Christ, then you are a holy one. Just try that on. Say it to yourself. I am a holy one. I am cleansed by the sacrifice of Jesus and set apart as one of God’s own for a special purpose. I am a holy one. How does that make you feel just to say that? I am a holy one. Maybe it makes you feel a little uncomfortable. Maybe it motivates. Maybe it gives you a sense of the weight, or the seriousness of who you are in Jesus Christ. I am called to be holy as my God is holy because he has already made me holy in Jesus. We are the saints.

How is it that we have a gathered church of saints in Lydda? I’ve read the opinion that Philip stopped here on his way up the coast from Azotus to Caesarea. The direct route by the ancient coastal road that runs all the way from Egypt to Syria would have taken Philip through Joppa, not through Lydda.² So we don’t know if Philip had anything to do with this fellowship. He may have stuck to the coast road, he may have ventured inland. Maybe he was in Lydda, maybe not.

The best guess for most young churches around this period is that the founding nucleus came from the Jerusalem Awakening, where thousands attending the feast of Pentecost had believed. Some may have returned home after the feast and others may have fled because of persecution.

The Church, born in Jerusalem, had almost immediately begun to spread out into Judea. And now Peter is making a tour of some believing assemblies in the region. Based on his ministry in Jerusalem and then in Samaria, we can assume that he is giving witness to Jesus Christ as he goes and teaching the Good News of the New Covenant. He is strengthening believers and inviting non-believers to believe.

Lydda is the center of a small region just on the southern border of the Plain of Sharon, a fertile land running north all the way to Caesarea, with sandy Mediterranean beaches on the western side and Judean foothills on its eastern side. Peter will end up following Philip’s path up to Caesarea, as he follows God’s lead. We have him starting here at Lydda.

² J. J. Bimson and F. P. Kane. *New Bible Atlas, electronic ed.* (Wheaton, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 65.

The account at Lydda is very brief. Aeneas has been paralyzed eight years. Peter tells him to get up and make his bed. And immediately, he does. The healing is instantaneous. This is the special gift of healing we see so rarely through the pages of Scripture. You may have this impression it happens a lot. It does not happen a lot from Genesis on through Revelation. But we are seeing it here. We do see several cases. There's a major cluster of this kind of miracle at the beginning of the Church through the ministry of Jesus and through His disciples. Peter's command for the man to make his bed reminds me of Jesus telling the lame man in John 5, "Take up your mat and walk." And the immediate action of the healing suggests the power of the healing. This is immediate healing.

So, what does the content of this story add to Luke's narrative? We learn that Peter did not stay in Jerusalem, for one thing. You know, he is out visiting the growing Church. Also, the awakening begun in Jerusalem continues to expand. The text says, "and all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw [the healed man], and they turned to the Lord." This is the awakening at Lydda. Even if the "all" is a generalization, not meaning every single person in Lydda, but practically all or the multitudes, it is an amazing report. And it is not limited to Lydda. Luke says, "all who lived at Lydda and Sharon". And Sharon is not just a town. Sharon is the fertile plain, spreading northward from Lydda up to Caesarea. All heard and believed. You know, this is throwing out a little bit of seed that's multiplying hundredfold. This is very fruitful.

And while many hear, and believe, and rejoice, tragedy falls on the saints in Joppa. So they call Peter to come quickly. This is the second story recorded in verses 36-43.

Peter raises Tabitha from the dead (9:36-43)

³⁶ Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated *in Greek* is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did. ³⁷ And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, "Do not delay in coming to us." ³⁹ So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them. ⁴⁰ But Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body, he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. ⁴² It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³ And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner *named* Simon.

Joppa is northwest of Lydda, on the coast. It is a long storied town. Looking backwards in time from Peter's day, Joppa was mentioned in the Armana letters written from Canaan to Egypt in the 14th century B.C., around the time of Joshua's conquest. Looking forward in time from Peter's day, Joppa, called, Jaffa, is merged with Tel-Aviv as the second largest city in Israel. Researching Jaffa, I discovered that my favorite cookie to serve for student Bible study in Croatia, Jaffa cakes, get their name from Biblical Joppa. The succulent oranges from the fruitful Plain of Sharon are Jaffa oranges. Jaffa cakes are a sponge cookie with an orange jelly dipped in chocolate. And I really wanted to make that fit with our story somehow, but just can't. I don't have a good illustration for Jaffa cakes. I just love Jaffa cakes. Wish I had a box now. And I'm excited that they come from this region.

Our story has to do with a particular saint who was not an evangelist and not a missionary. Her gifting was one of mercy, or care. Our gifting is the particular way the Holy Spirit motivates and empowers us to love other people. You know, we have this way to love that's coming out from us. We're being moved by the Spirit of God. And Tabitha was motivated to love other believers by meeting their emotional and material needs. She "was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity." She just must have been a delight. And her actions were empowered by the Holy Spirit. The fruit of her love is displayed at how the church responds after her death. The saints send to Peter,

“Come quickly, come urgently. Something awful has happened. Tabitha has died.” And then the widows are gathered in her home, and when Peter arrives, they show him the garments Tabitha had made for them. Her kindness made an impact on the saints.

Tabitha is her Aramaic name. Luke is able to translate the name into Greek because it has a meaning. Tabitha means, “gazelle.” That’s what the word, “Dorcas,” means in Greek. Graceful and beautiful in her acts of love. I assume you know a Tabitha, a woman or a man who communicates genuine affection through words and actions. That’s their gifting by the Holy Spirit.

Luke reminds us in this story of Tabitha that the Gospel is not *either* proclamation of the Good News *or* care for physical needs. It is not an either/or. It is a both/and. We love people both by helping them come to know true life through Jesus Christ and by caring for their material needs.

We are spiritual, and social, and emotional, and physical beings. We have lots of needs. And not every Christian is best formed to meet every need. We are all called to see people as whole, to recognize that each one is mind, and body, and spirit, and emotion. And we can care for each need. And we can care for each need. Each of us can give some thought to the whole person. Still, the Holy Spirit gifts us differently. As a body, we seek to meet every need through the variety of ways the Holy Spirit motivates and empowers. But different individuals are really gifted in different areas. We need Peters, and we need Tabithas. And I don’t think I am making too big a deal of this from this short story of Tabitha.

Luke connects the Gospel witness with material care in several places. This is a consistent theme. We have Peter and Tabitha together in this story. In our pair of stories from Antioch, we will have Barnabas and Paul conducting a ministry of proclamation along with the story of believers contributing for famine relief.

We can also look back to our first six chapters of Acts and the birth of the Church. Remember, Peter’s speeches are full of witness to Jesus Christ, conviction of sin, and invitation to believe. And in the background of that witness to Jesus Christ, Luke twice mentions how believers share possessions in common, take care for those in need, and he described two threats to the Church that had to do with material goods; the hypocrisy of Ananias and Saphira, and the failure to distribute funds fairly to the Greek-speaking widows.

Now, as the Gospel moves out of Jerusalem to Judea and Syria this same idea continues in the story, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, rightly understood, motivates and empowers believers to both acts of witness and acts of care. The healings themselves show this dual action of love. Peter cured Aeneas from paralysis. That is physical care. That miracle then became a sign, pointing many to Jesus Christ. That’s witness. The same is true of Tabitha. Raising her from the dead is an act of mercy, maybe not to Tabitha, but certainly for those who love her and are cared for by her. And then her resurrection becomes a powerful sign, “It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.”

The details of this particular sign connect Peter to a miracle Jesus performed. I saw it a little bit with the miracle to Aeneas, where He says, “Pick up your mat and walk!” We can see a connection there. And this one is stronger. In Luke chapter 8, the synagogue ruler Jairus comes to Jesus and implores him to come to his home to heal his daughter. Here in Acts 9 saints in Joppa come to Peter and urge him to come quickly to Tabitha’s home. When Jesus arrives at Jairus’ house, he sees women weeping in mourning for the dead girl. Here, as Peter arrives, there are women weeping in mourning for Tabitha. Jesus took the dead girl by the hand and commanded, “Child, arise.” She stood up. Peter here says, “Tabitha, arise.” Then he takes her by the hand, and she stands.

The resurrection of Tabitha is a sign that the power of Jesus is fully working through his servant Peter, even to the point of raising a woman from the dead. And the parallelism of the miracles is just

pointing us right back at Jesus. And then, the resurrection of Tabitha provides wonderful opportunity for Peter to proclaim the resurrection of the dead in Jesus Christ.

I wonder if Peter made for them a connection back to Isaiah 35:1-6, which has several points of reference with what has just happened in Joppa. See if you catch any parallels.

¹ The wilderness and the desert will be glad, Like the crocus	And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom; ² It will blossom profusely
And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, They will see the glory of the LORD,	The majesty of Carmel and Sharon. The majesty of our God.
³ Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. “Take courage, fear not. The recompense of God will come,	⁴ Say to those with anxious heart, Behold, your God will come <i>with</i> vengeance; But He will save you.”
⁵ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened ⁶ Then the lame will leap like a deer, For waters will break forth in the wilderness	And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. And streams in the Arabah.

Did you hear some of the references? There’s a reference to Sharon, to the blossoming profusely, to glory, to strengthening the anxious heart. I love the connection with the phrase, “The lame will leap like a deer.” That one line seems to me to encapsulate both miracles, Aeneas the lame and Tabitha the deer. So, I don’t know if Peter mentioned that.

Peter would have been careful not to let anyone give him credit for this miracle. He would point others to Jesus. We don’t have his words here, but we can remember what he said to the Sanhedrin after the healing of man born lame in Acts 4:10-12. He might say now, “As to how Tabitha was raised from the dead...

¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this *name* this man stands here before you in good health. ¹¹ He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, *but* WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER *stone*. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”

He might have said that. Something like that, not exactly like that. He doesn’t accuse Jews outside of Jerusalem of crucifying Jesus, so it would be adjusted. But he would be sure to let us know that it’s the name of Jesus, not the name of Peter, and that there is no other name. There is salvation nowhere else except in Jesus. We can be sure he is communicating those things. Let’s end by going back to my original question. Why are these little two stories here? Why did Luke include them in his record?

There are several structural reasons. The stories continue the overlapping pattern with the last major part of Acts by keeping us with Peter witnessing to Jews. The stories also provide a good introduction to the story of Cornelius by explaining how Peter came to Joppa, you know, why he is in the house of Simon the tanner. And the stories help create the balanced structure of pairs that make up this third part of Acts. Those are structural reasons to put these stories here.

There are also content reasons to provide these stories. There is important content here in these short accounts that we would miss if the stories were left out. First, these two stories provide examples of the Gospel spreading outwards from Jerusalem. They are not only miracles, but they are both emphasizing that many come to the Lord. We are seeing the Gospel planted in the fertile Plain of Sharon with very positive response.

Second, Tabitha's story gives Luke another opportunity to remind us of the life-changing impact of the Gospel. Witness to Jesus Christ brings forth acts of love and kindness in the power of the Holy Spirit. The widows were not gathered in that house because they had seen miracles. They were gathered in that house because Tabitha made clothes for them with her own hands. While keeping the witness of Jesus Christ firmly in the foreground, and this is our main picture throughout the book of Acts, it's witness, Luke continues to remind us of this material impact on Christian community made by believers living in line with the Gospel of Jesus.

Third, we see the miracles of Peter connecting him to the miracles of Jesus. Jesus said to His disciples they would do greater works. That does not mean they would greater miracles. I think that's the wrong interpretation. Jesus did an unsurpassable miracle when He raised Himself from the dead. "I lay down my life so that I may take it up again (John 10:17)." Peter will not do that. He could never say that. But Peter does raise Tabitha from the dead in a way that mirrors when Jesus rose Jairus' daughter from the dead. So, Peter is continuing the work of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The greater works are the fruit of changed lives. Jesus' followers surpass Him - surpass Jesus - in the scope of the impact they make. Thousands, millions more people are going to be impacted by Jesus' followers than by Jesus physically Himself when He was walking this Earth. And not only millions more but geographically the scope is huge. Jesus stayed in a very small place. His followers are going to take it to the ends of the Earth. The love of Jesus works into more hearts and spread much further than Jesus ever walked. Through followers like Peter, gifted in proclamation, and through followers like Tabitha, gifted in care. Through followers like you, however you are gifted, to love people in the name of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Believers like these, believers like us make an eternal impact on the lives of individuals, Jesus' promise that His followers would do greater works is fulfilled and is being fulfilled. And we can say in reality, these greater works are His works through us. The glory still goes to Jesus. I am not loving, I am not motivated, and I'm not empowered on my own, but it's through the Spirit of Christ with the direction of Christ. We are the body of Christ. We are His mouth, and His hands, His eyes, and His feet, motivated and empowered by the Holy Spirit. So the acts we are doing are the acts of Jesus Christ. By Him, and through Him, and to Him belongs all the glory as His Gospel continues to spread and continues to make an impact on people.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 9:32-43. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Miracles do not always lead to saving faith (Luke 17:11-19), but in both the healing of Aeneas and raising of Tabitha the miracle does led to saving faith for many.
 - a. Do you see parallels between these miracles and the miracles of Jesus?
 - b. Why is it significant that Peter is the messenger who is performing these miracles in these two communities?
 - c. What connection do you see between word and miracles?
3. How would you describe the relationship between word and deed, according to what you see in Tabitha's story?
4. Who in your Christian community reminds you of Tabitha? Why?
5. How would you express the importance of people like Tabitha for Christian communities?
6. How do these two stories set us up for the next story of Peter taking the gospel to Cornelius' household? Without going too much into detail, what similarities do you see? What differences?