

"RAISED TO LIFE"

After telling us about Saul's conversion and early ministry in the cities of Damascus and Jerusalem, Luke's focus now turns back to Peter. We learned at the end of the preceding passage that Saul's conversion resulted in a period of peace for the church in the regions of Judea and Galilee and Samaria. In this passage, we see Peter taking advantage of this peace by traveling to other Judean towns to minister the gospel. And as you can see, Peter's ministry in these towns was a smashing success, largely due to the miraculous signs that accompanied it.

As we begin our study of this passage, I want to say something about how texts like this are sometimes applied by Christians today. Over the past few decades, it has become increasingly common for preachers and teachers to point to the healing miracles that were performed by Jesus and the apostles and argue that these miracles show us that the church's mission involves ministering to people's physical needs and well as their spiritual needs. Of course, it is true that our Lord instituted the office of deacon in order to care for the physical needs of the members of the body of Christ. But that is not what these people are talking about. They are saying that the Bible's healing miracles give the church an institutional mandate to engage in various forms of social action and relief.

I call your attention to this because it reflects a serious misunderstanding of the miracles of Christ and his apostles. In the words of one writer, those who interpret and apply the Bible's miracles of healing in this way have ended up making a Great Addition to the Great Commission. [Jon Payne, "The Great Omission" *Modern Reformation*, Sept./Oct. 2011] The miracles of our Lord and his apostles were not given in order to establish a pattern for the church's future ministry. They were given as signs of the arrival of the kingdom of God and as foretastes of what will take place on the day when Jesus returns. They were given to confirm the divine authority of those who performed them, so that the people to whom they preached would believe their message.

This is exactly what we see in this passage. Luke does not say that the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Tabitha caused the people of Lydda and Joppa to build hospitals or send out relief teams. On the contrary, these miracles caused people to embrace the gospel in faith. Luke tells us that the residents of Lydda and Sharon responded to the healing of Aeneas by turning to the Lord. He tells us that those who lived in Joppa responded to the raising of Tabitha by believing in the Lord. This is not to deny that it is good to extend help and relief to people who are in need. In fact, it is a good for anyone, whether they are Christian or not, to do such things. And for Christians, caring for those in need is

one of the ways we can be faithful to God's command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Nevertheless, the Bible does not tell us that the church, as an institution, has been given a mandate for social action. That is not what the Bible's healing miracles are about.

### **Peter in Lydda**

In the first part of our passage, Luke tells us that Peter went down to the saints who lived at Lydda. In our culture, the term "saint" is typically used to refer to people who are exceptionally virtuous or to those who have been officially canonized as saints by the Church of Rome. In the Bible, however, the term 'saint' is used to refer to all Christians as those who have been sanctified, or set apart, by Christ's blood. We see this in Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, where he addressed the Christians there as "those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." (1 Corinthians 1:2) Similarly, Hebrews 10:10 says that "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." (Hebrews 10:10) In such passages, the term "sanctified" is not being used to refer to the process of sanctification, which takes place over the course of the entire Christian life. Instead, it refers to the definitive sanctification that takes place at conversion. Christ is our sanctification. If we are united to him by faith,

then we are positionally sanctified. We are set apart as holy to the Lord. That is what it means to be a “saint” in the biblical sense.

That being said, there is a connection between our status as saints and the behavior to which we are called as God’s holy people. In other words, there is a close relationship between definitive sanctification and progressive sanctification. While we do not become saints by the good things that we do (which is essentially what the Church of Rome teaches), we are called to conduct our lives in a manner that is consistent with the fact that we are positionally holy in Christ. In the words of Michael Horton, “Where most people think that the goal of religion is to get people to become something that they are not, the Scriptures call believers to become more and more what they already are in Christ.” [*The Christian Faith*, 652] Another way of putting it is to say that our conduct needs to be brought in line with our identity. We are to live holy lives because we already are holy in Christ.

As Peter arrived in Lydda, he found this man Aeneas, who had been suffering from paralysis for eight years. Clearly, this was not a case of temporary paralysis, like we occasionally see when a football player is initially paralyzed after a vicious hit but quickly regains the ability to move his limbs. Aeneas’ case of paralysis was a permanent one. This is what made his healing so amazing.

Paralyzed people do not get up and start walking. But this one did, immediately after Peter commanded him to do so. And he did not even have to undergo any physical therapy to rebuild his atrophied leg muscles. He was able to get right to work making his bed!

Notice also that Peter does not call attention to himself in this healing. Instead, he points to Christ. He says, “Aeneas, *Jesus Christ* heals you.” The healing was not done by Peter but by Jesus. This is something that we always need to keep in mind when it comes to evangelism. We are not to call attention to ourselves, but to our Lord.

### **Peter in Joppa**

After telling us about how this healing resulted in many conversions in Lydda and the surrounding region, Luke transitions to the second part of the passage, which takes place in the coastal town of Joppa, a present-day suburb of the city of Tel Aviv. Luke begins this section by describing a Christian woman named Tabitha. She was a Christian whose faith was bearing the fruit of good works. She was an exemplary Christian, the kind of disciple we should all strive to be. And she was dearly loved by her fellow believers, especially by those who benefited from her acts of charity.

When this woman became ill and died, the Christians in Joppa decided to summon Peter to come to them. While Luke does not tell us what these Christians were thinking when they made this request of Peter, it would seem that, having heard about the healing of Aeneas, they wanted Peter to come and raise Tabitha from the dead.

There are interesting parallels between the raising of Tabitha and Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter. In both, there are a lot of people in the room when Jesus and Peter arrive. In both, the mourners are sent outside the room. In both, the dead person is commanded to arise. And in both, the dead person obeys the command immediately. These parallels, paired with the fact that Tabitha really was brought back to life, underscored the fact that Peter was Jesus' authorized agent. His apostleship was not from man, but from God.

As you know, there are a number of people today who claim to have a supernatural ability to do works of healing. It is interesting, however, that such people do not typically claim to have the ability to raise the dead. That is very telling. It underscores the fact that the healing ministry of Jesus and the apostles was something very unique. The miracles that they performed belonged to the foundation-laying era of church history. I do not say this in order to try to put limits upon what God can do. God can do whatever he pleases. But the fact of

the matter is that God has only chosen to perform miraculous healings on a few occasions. The overwhelming majority of people throughout history who have experienced sickness or injury have not been miraculously healed. I am not denying that God sometimes causes people to recover from sicknesses in ways that we cannot fully understand. And I am certainly not saying that God does not sometimes grant healing in response to his people's prayers. I am simply saying that the kind of healing that Aeneas experienced was a special kind of healing. And as far as people being raised from the dead, apart from the resurrection of Jesus himself, there are only five New Testament instances of this: three by Jesus, one by Peter, and one by Paul. Clearly, God wanted that miracle to remain unique.

This leads to a question: why did God choose to heal Aeneas and raise Tabitha from the dead? First of all, as I have already said, these were signs that accredited Peter as one who spoke for God. They demonstrated that his ministry as an apostle was of divine origin. In addition, these signs would have had an important effect upon Peter himself. The Lord was about to work through him to bring the first full-fledged Gentile, the centurion Cornelius, into the church. The miracles at Lydda and Joppa would have strengthened Peter's faith at a time when the Lord was going to tell him to do something that he would have found

very difficult to comprehend. And lastly, as we have already said, these signs were used by God to cause people to respond to the gospel in faith.

The miracles that Peter performed in this passage do not take place today. But this does not mean that the Lord does not work in ways that are analogous to what takes place in this passage. There are times when the Lord works his grace in peoples lives in surprisingly powerful ways, so surprising that it causes non-believers to turn to him and causes Christians to be renewed in their faith. This is especially the case during periods of revival, when one conversion often leads to another or causes believers to be brought to a deeper sense of love for Christ. In his biography of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Iain Murray talks about how this happened during Lloyd-Jones' first pastorate at a church in Wales. One example that especially stands out is the conversion of an unemployed man named Harry Wood. Listen to Murray's account of the impact that this man's conversion had upon the church that Lloyd-Jones pastored:

[After Wood's conversion,] "No one was more fully involved in the life of the church, and especially at the prayer meeting. After one especially memorable prayer meeting on the morning of Good Friday, Dr Lloyd-Jones was surprised when Wood expressed his

disappointment as he left. In response to his pastor's enquiry why he should feel like that on such an occasion, the older man replied that it had been his prayer that he should be allowed to go 'straight Home' from just such a prayer meeting.

Each week [at the prayer meeting] a different male member was asked -- without prior notice -- to commence the meeting with a reading from Scripture and with prayer. At a prayer-meeting early in 1931 Harry Wood was called upon to open the meeting. He did so by reading Christ's High-Priestly prayer recorded in John 17, and then he prayed with such 'glorious unction' that Dr Lloyd-Jones felt that he had heard nothing like it. The man seemed to be more in heaven than on earth. When he stopped, and went to take a seat in the front row, Dr Lloyd-Jones heard heavy breathing and, opening his eyes, had only just time to catch the beloved Harry Wood as he fell to the floor, dead. Although there was no more prayer in the church that night, for the pastor pronounced the benediction and asked the people to leave quietly, the departure of Harry Wood was one of the events which marked the beginning of an extraordinary spiritual stirring. In the winter of 1930-31 the

whole church seemed moved as by a consciousness of the presence of God and Dr Lloyd-Jones traced a quickening of his own spirit to this same period." [Murray, vol. 1, 211-12]

The point that I want to underscore is that it is a great encouragement to the saints, and a powerful testimony to unbelievers, when the Lord causes someone who seemed to be a highly unlikely candidate for conversion to become a vibrant Christian. When that happens, it becomes so evident that God is really there and that he is truly at work in people's lives. So don't stop witnessing to people, even those who seem very unlikely to respond to the gospel in faith. If it were up to us, no one would ever turn to the Lord. You would have a better chance of healing a paralytic or raising someone from the dead than you do of bringing a sinner to saving faith in Christ. But the God who performed these astounding miracles through Peter is the God who causes people to be born again to a living hope. He still raises people to new life. So don't stop praying and living with the hope that he may very well work through your witness to do so.