

# Sunday 14th April 2024

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Preacher: John Ross

[ 0 : 00 ] A very good morning to you. Nice to see you. My name is John and I hang around here as a member.! A word to the men. A month away from our next guest breakfast. If you haven't received a fly through the WhatsApp group, let me or Richard Honeysett know and we'll add you to the group.

But it's time to invite our friends to a guest breakfast in a month's time. And I don't know if you've followed the situation in the Middle East, but it's pretty dramatic, isn't it?

So I thought we ought to just pause. We're going to look at the Middle East in our Bible text. So let's pray for Israel and Iran and the pressures upon that region. Let's pray.

Father God, we thank you that you rule the world. We often think that we do, or that the nations with nuclear weapons do, or the most powerful people on earth do. But actually you rule the world and you're the sovereign ruler. And we ask, therefore, for real help. Help for Israel. Help for Iran. Help in Gaza. Help that terrorists will no longer be terrorists.

And help that people's ideology won't be so strong that they're unwilling to bend to you, the living God. We ask, O Lord, that you would have mercy on that part of the world. And that you would bring your kingdom to bear.

[ 1 : 29 ] We pray that there will be an opportunity for people to cry out to you, the living God, for forgiveness. And find that through Jesus Christ, your son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Do you think your friends know that they are lost? Do you think your friends know that they're lost?

Or perhaps put it another way. At what point does someone realize that they're going the wrong way and they need to change?

Or how long do you have to walk through the woods before you realize it dawns on you that you're actually lost?

The Bible is all about lost people being found. Lost people being redirected. The good news of Jesus and his resurrection started in Jerusalem.

[ 2 : 34 ] But it didn't stay there. It made its headway through the rest of the region, Judea. And then it went north up to Samaria.

And then it started to fly all over the world. That's the story of the book of Acts. And that's where we are this morning in Acts chapter 9.

We're going to have to work hard this morning and I'm going to ask you to follow me in the text.

Philip went up to Samaria in chapter 8.

Let's start in 8.5. There was persecution in Jerusalem and the church was scattered. And we read in 8 verses 4 and 5 that Philip went down.

You always go down from the capital city, although physically he went north. He went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. The gospel has started to move out of Jerusalem and into Samaria.

[ 3 : 41 ] In chapter 9, the great Saul of Tarsus, an antagonist to the gospel, becomes a believer through his Damascus Road experience.

He follows Jesus. But now, at the end of chapter 9, the focus goes back to Peter. First of all, in 9.32, Peter goes to the countryside to visit the Lord's people in Lydda.

We're still north of Jerusalem. We're not yet into Gentile country. We're still just on the edge of Judea. And he finds this man called Aeneas, who's been paralyzed and bedridden.

And he heals him. Jesus Christ heals you, he says. Get up. Roll up your mat. And the man is immediately healed. All who saw it, in both Lydda and the nearby Sharon, saw him and turned to the Lord.

And then he moves on to the coast, just a little further north. And there he goes to Joppa, which is very near today's Tel Aviv. He meets Tabitha, and she is extremely unwell and dies.

[ 4 : 58 ] Peter brings her back to life. And we read at 42 that this became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. And Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

So there are two stories, two miracles, one healing, and one raising from the dead. What are we to make of the two stories?

That's our section for today. What are we to make of them? Well, as it's Sunday, it's confession time, some bits of the Bible puzzle me, and they still do.

This one does. I can read the words. I know there are two miracle stories. I know people turn to the Lord. I can see what's here. But why?

Why is Luke placed these two stories here? We're moving towards Gentile territory. When we get to chapter 10, we're going to Caesarea. A Roman centurion is going to become a believer.

[ 6 : 01 ] We're not there yet. We're almost there. Why these two stories? Why are they here? And the key is context. What comes before and what goes afterwards?

In other words, I'm asking myself the question. I'm doing it publicly, although you might call this my desk work, because I think this is crucial to understand the stories. Why has Luke placed these two stories at this point here at the end of chapter nine?

Before we get to the first Gentile convert with Cornelius in the next chapter. And I want us first to look at the flow. There is a flow through Acts.

Luke is writing a very, very careful account to his friend Theophilus. He tells us that at the very beginning. But come back. Back to that persecution in Jerusalem.

You see, so strong were the opponents of the gospel that they killed Stephen. Come back to chapter seven. And it was the religious leaders who were furious.

[ 7 : 12 ] Chapter seven, Luke says what Stephen commented on before he died. And he showed that the people are just like their ancestors.

Look at 7.51, for example. 7.51. If you ever want to get into trouble with people around you, preach like this. You stiff-necked people.

Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. They were Jewish people. And they were circumcised. But their hearts and ears are still uncircumcised.

You are just like your ancestors. You always resist the Holy Spirit. It's really, really strong, isn't it? Really, really strong. They refused to obey God's prophets.

Well, persecution took place. Stephen was killed. He was stoned. And the persecution had the opposite effect from what was desired. It made the Jewish followers of Jesus, the Jesus followers, all the more determined to tell the world.

[ 8 : 19 ] Most of the apostles had stayed in Jerusalem. But Philip went off to Samaria. And we have his experiences in the rest of chapter eight. But then in chapter nine, we met this man, Saul.

We met him last week, if you were here. Well, we met him last week, even if you weren't here. But we met him last week. Saul, who's been an onlooker. He was watching what happened to Stephen. They put, the men who were going to stone him, put their cloaks by his feet. He looked after them. He gets radically converted to Jesus Christ. Chapter nine is almost a shocking chapter for any Jew to read.

He is the most ardent antagonist against the Christian community. He's Jewish and very Jewish, really Jewish. Hebrew of Hebrews. Tribe of Benjamin.

Can't get much better than that, you see. Brilliant pedigree. But at 9:15, have a look at that with me. 9:15, the man, Ananias, was sent to talk to him.

[ 9 : 26 ] And the Lord said to Ananias, go. This man, Saul, is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

The Gentiles. There's the hint of where we're going in the book of Acts, you see. Starting in Jerusalem, going to Samaria and on to the Gentiles.

And Saul looks like he's the man for that task. But then we have Peter. These two stories that we've now got.

Away from Jerusalem, moving up to Lydda and then to Joppa on the coast. The map might help you. You see where Jerusalem is?

And the country of Judea. See a Samaria towards the north. Still Jewish territory. We haven't gone as far as Caesarea. We're at Lydda and then Joppa on the coast.

[10:24] We're moving north slowly. Why have we stopped at Lydda and Joppa? Why is Peter carrying out two miracles there?

My wife Daphne has got fed up with this question because every time we go for a walk, which is most days, I raise the question. What has Luke done to put this story here?

They're Jewish stories. They're Jewish towns. They're two miracles. Why weren't the stories earlier? You know, every good Jew likes to ask questions.

And when asked, why do you ask so many questions? The answer is, well, why not? The movement in the book of Acts is from Jerusalem via Samaria, Judea, Samaria up to the Gentile region, to the ends of the earth.

In chapter 10, we'll be in Gentile territory. But we're not there yet. So why these two stories here? Well, you must remember Acts 1-8.

[11:31] Acts 1-8 controls the whole book. It's worth even looking at it and reading it again. You might know it in your head, but look at it with me. Hold your hand in Acts 9. Come back to Acts 1-8. You will receive power, said the Lord Jesus, to his followers.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

That's the movement in the book of Acts. And it's both the movement geographically and theologically as well. We're on the brink of the world knowing the good news of Jesus.

Still in Jewish territory. We're not yet in 10, chapter 10. We're on the brink of going into Gentile territory with Romans and Greeks. We're still with Jewish people.

Our passage, therefore, is squeezed in between Jewish and Gentile mission. In fact, look at the comments on Tabitha's name at 936.

[12:43] In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha. Why would Luke add, in Greek, her name is Dorcas? Because his book is being written for a Gentile Roman man, a non-Jewish man.

He wants to show that although this lady is Jewish, she's very close to a Gentile world, a non-Jewish world. So her Greek name, her non-Jewish name, is mentioned for us.

Well, we discover that Peter is catching up with people who've become believers.

So 32, 932, Peter's traveling about the country, visiting the Lord's people. He's still in Jewish territory. We're following Peter's travels.

Previously, he was God's man in Jerusalem. But here he is now visiting the Lord's people in other towns. Lydda, Joppa, Jewish towns.

[13:47] He won't meet the Roman centurion until chapter 10. And that'll be the breakthrough into the Gentile world. So there's a flow, you see, to get to the Gentile world.

And we're at the squeezed bit, the middle of the sandwich, before we get out to the Gentile world. That's the flow. Look, secondly with me, at what I want to call the purpose.

Why has Luke put these stories here? Because just before the breakthrough into Gentile territory, Peter is ministering in Jewish towns.

What's the purpose of the double miracles? Well, just as Saul, or Paul, had been commissioned by God for ministry into Gentile territory, the question is raised, what about Peter?

Saul was commissioned by God in Acts 9, when he was converted. But is Peter really a true apostle? Or is he only an apostle to the Jews where he was?

[14:57] Is he really an apostle? Is he an apostle to the Gentiles, in fact? How genuine is he? So Luke is going to take for us three incidents.

These double miracles, the first. The Cornelius miraculous conversion, coming next. And then in chapter 12, a miraculous escape from prison under Herod.

Under Herod, the wicked Herod Agrippa, in chapter 12. In each story that's coming up, including this one as the first pair, Peter will act like an apostle.

He will confront disease and death, as he does here. He will confront Gentile alienation, as in chapter 10. And he will overcome political tyranny, in chapter 12.

So as John Stock puts it, conflict gives way to victory. And with the cure of Aeneas, and the resuscitation of Tabitha, and the removal of Herod, Luke is demonstrating to us that this man has apostolic credentials.

[16:15] In other words, Peter is God's effective agent, through whom the risen Lord, by his Spirit, continues to teach and act.

He has the marks of a true apostle. Do you know that phrase, the marks of a true apostle? Just hold your hand in Acts, and come with me to 2 Corinthians 12.

2 Corinthians 12, 12. 2 Corinthians 12, 12. In the letter to, second letter to the Corinthians, Paul says at 12, 12.

12, 12. 12, 12. I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles.

They're the marks of the true apostles. They can carry out signs, and wonders, and miracles. So the healings, which Peter is going to carry out in chapter 9, the healings will show that he is of messianic value.

[17:30] Or to use the language of Isaiah 61, he is anointed to preach the good news, to proclaim freedom and recovery of sight, and to set the oppressed free.

Like Jesus, he too is authenticated as God's man. Paul was, so now is Peter. So, can you see the flow of the text?

What are you trying to show us? Can you see God at work through Peter? Can you see how these two miracles prepare us for what's to come as we move into Gentile territory?

The purpose is to show the authenticity of Peter to lead into world mission. Well, that's just my introduction.

I've waggled on the tea, so let's now look at the miracles. What are we to make of the two stories themselves at the end of chapter 9? Are we to say, here is our mandate for holding healing sessions?

[18:43] Peter was able to heal. We're part of the same church. He was the rock on which the church was founded. We should be able to heal.

Is that right? Or, are these just mere examples that we can now put to one side, and focus on people believing and hearing the gospel, and not worry about them?

Well, consider the two stories very carefully. Very, very carefully. Think of Aeneas, the first person. Aeneas is paralyzed and bedridden for eight years.

Verse 33, 933. Aeneas is paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. Tabitha, mentioned in 36, becomes ill and dies at 37.

Who does Aeneas remind you of? What about the paralytic that Jesus healed?

[19:52] The man from Capernaum, lowered through the roof, where Jesus says, take up your bed, take up your mat, and go home, in Luke 5.

And immediately the man does so. He's healed, his sins are forgiven, and he praises God. Is this not a story that's very, very closely associated to one that Jesus was involved in?

And what do you make of Tabitha? The lady who loves coloured materials and makes beautiful robes. What do you make of her?

Who does she remind you of? Do you remember the story of Jairus's daughter in Luke 8?

Remember, Jesus has to send everybody else out of the room because she's died.

The Jewish wailers are already there. They're official mourners and they've come. They're wailing loudly. He has to push them outside. And Jesus says to this girl, my child, get up.

[20:59] Look what happens here. At 39, Peter went with them, the mourners, the crowds.

And when he arrived, he was taken upstairs to the room, an upstairs room. All the widows stood around crying and showing him the robes that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them out of the room.

Then he got down on his knees and prayed. He turned towards the dead woman and he said, Tabitha, get up. Just like Jesus said, my child, get up.

She opened her eyes and seeing Peter, she sat up. He took her by the hand, as Jesus had done, helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive.

This became known all over Joppa. Many people believed in the Lord. And Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. Do you see the parallel with the Lord Jesus?

[22:04] There's two stories with the Lord Jesus. It's so, so reminiscent of what Jesus did, what Peter's doing. Jesus Christ heals you. Get up, he says.

Peter heals in Jesus' name. And Peter mirrors what Jesus did. He is continuing Jesus' ministry. Which is exactly what Luke said Acts was all about.

That although Jesus had died, rose again, ascended, his ministry would be continued. Just as Jesus launched our salvation, Paul and Peter will continue it, not just around the local area of Jerusalem, not even around Samaria, Judea and Samaria, but to the ends of the earth.

There is no reference that we should do what Peter did. Rather, we should see Peter's credentials as a genuine apostle. And we should follow his pioneering ministry into the wider worlds.

So my big takeaway, see if you agree with me, my big takeaway is this. Look how people trusted Jesus.

[ 23 : 29 ] That seems to me the point of it. Did you notice that at Lydda? At 35, all those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

And the same is true with the second story. At 42, this became known all over Joppa and many people believed in the Lord. You see?

All glory goes to God. People have turned to Christ as Messiah, their rescuer. The signs, the miracle signs, authenticate Peter and his gospel message.

People saw, heard and believed. Well, you say, what's that got to do with me? Is this not just historic narrative?

Yes, it is. It refers to a very specific period of early church history. So what? Well, you see, knowing the flow of biblical history, knowing the way the gospel moves from Jerusalem through Jewish territory and out to the much wider world, is that not our world?

[ 24 : 46 ] Is not the same apostolic gospel declared by Paul and Peter, written up here in the scriptures, is it not the gospel that we believe in?

And off for the world. You see, the good news of Jesus is not a call to be more religious. No, it's a call to turn to Christ.

To trust in Christ. To believe in Christ. Personally. Not just because the pencil will go through the bag when you watch it, but even when it's over your head.

We call people to realize that they are lost. They are befuddled. And only Jesus Christ can set them on the right roads.

I met a chap the other day. Is chap the right word to use today? What word should we use? A gentleman aged 52 years old. And for the past five years, his life has been radically turned around.

[ 25 : 54 ] In fact, he describes his turning to Christ like this. He says, when Jesus rescued me, he knew he was lost and he felt that Jesus rescued him.

That's the rescue that we see here in Acts 9. That's the same rescue that's available today. Jesus hasn't changed. The gospel hasn't changed. The apostles have inscripturated it, written it down for us.

And we can read it and believe it. The question is, do we? Do you? Do I? Do we believe it? Have I turned to Christ in repentance and faith?

Have I been rescued? Or am I still lost and confused in the woods? Or am I still lost and confused in the woods? See, Christ alters everything. My friend said to me that for 45 years of his life, he was scared stiff over death.

He would wake up at night and think about it and it would absolutely freak him out. In fact, he would do all he could whenever the subject came up to think of something else.

[ 27 : 06 ] He lived in fear of death, he told me. But then he said, when I was rescued, that fear of death went overnight.

Wouldn't you like to know a similar peace? A contentment? That all is well with your soul. You were lost and you have been rescued.

That Christ is your new leader. Then pray with me. Dear Father God, we thank you for the way you break into different people's lives.

Thank you for your messengers like Peter. Thank you for the scriptures where we read of their stories, their ministry, that many people turn to you. Please help us to turn to Christ here and now. Please rescue us from ourselves, our fears, the consequences of our own foolishness. And please cause us to trust you, to believe in you.

[ 28 : 13 ] Please make me a Jesus follower. From now on, I pray. In Jesus name. Amen.