

Peter's Ministry in Western Judea

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Date: 09 February 2025

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, February 9th. My name is Kent Dixon, I think, last time I checked. And it's my joy to be the pastor here. This morning we're returning to our sermon series that we started last spring called Acts to All the World.

And you may remember that this series that we've been exploring in the New Testament Book of Acts through this series, right? So a quick refresher for you. The Book of Acts was originally a letter written from Jesus' disciple Luke to a man named...

Louder? Theophilus. Thank you. Paul, hey. Pastor's cheating. And Acts was actually the second letter that Luke had written to Theophilus.

And the first being what we know as the Gospel of... Paul, don't answer. Louder? Luke. Thank you. So Acts is essentially part two of Luke's reporting.

So first, Luke is reporting of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And then second, continuing in Acts, the story of the first 30 years of the early church.

[1 : 15] That's what Luke is telling us about in the Book of Acts. And so you can definitely go to the church website to listen or re-listen to any of those sermons in the series so far.

You can go to the sermon page and it's all searchable. So you can search by this series. So we began this series with some introductory and background info before we launched into a weekly series as we've been digging into the Book of Acts together.

And before we pause that series in November, we looked in Acts at Acts 9, verse 31, which says, Over the course of two Sundays, we kind of did a two-parter there, We considered what it means first to live in the fear of the Lord, and then also to walk in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

It's a two-part equation. Maybe you remember that. So our passage for this morning as we return to Acts, we're picking up in Acts 9, verses 32 to 43.

So let's look at that together now. Acts 9, 32 to 43. As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the Lord's people who lived in Lydda.

[2 : 38] There he met a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. Aeneas, Peter said to him, Jesus Christ heals you.

Get up and roll up your mat. Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. In Joppa, there was a disciple named Tabitha.

In Greek, her name is Dorcas. She was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time, she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room.

Lydda was near Joppa, so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, please come at once. Peter went with them, and when he arrived, he was taken upstairs to the room.

All the widows stood around him crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room.

[3 : 37] Then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, Tabitha, get up. She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up.

He took her by the hand and 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, and many people believed in the Lord.

Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. So with the conversion of Saul, which happens shortly before these events, Saul was, as we remember, the main instigator behind this intense persecution against the followers of Jesus.

Do you remember that? Saul was the villain. And as we heard in Acts 9.31, I read just a moment ago, the churches in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria kind of enjoyed a bit of a breather, right?

A bit of a reprieve from this intense persecution that they had come to know all too well. And in fact, Scripture tells us that they experienced peace.

[4 : 46] They experienced instruction and enlightenment, and ultimately growth as well. And then from our passage this morning, we learned that the Apostle Peter took the opportunity to travel, go on a little trip.

And our sermon this morning is titled, Peter's Ministry in Western Judea. Peter's travels may have taken him into the areas of Galilee and Samaria, but they definitely included regions of Western Judea, and especially two cities in particular, Lydda and Joppa, which we've heard about this morning, where Philip may have also preached earlier, potentially.

And as we've heard this morning, it was at these two cities that Peter performed two miracles that Luke recorded in the book of Acts. So this morning, we're going to learn a bit more about the circumstances.

We're going to consider these two cities that Peter visited, the miracles that were performed there, and then what we can learn, hopefully, from these events. So you'll be getting a bit of a biblical history lesson this morning.

Nicest part is that I have done the heavy lifting for you. So here we go. Speaking of heavy lifting and history, Michelle and I have started re-watching The Crown recently.

[6 : 06] And so it's historotainment is what I've started to call it, because it is history, it is true, but it's also entertainment. And so I'm a history buff, and so I'm enjoying that.

And so in digging through the book of Acts and the history of the early church, I am really engaged in this. So if I bore you, I apologize. But here we have it. So Lydda, what can we learn about this place?

Well, Lydda was the city's Greek name, and its Hebrew name was Lod, L-O-D. Lydda was located 11 miles southeast of the city of Joppa in an expansive region known as the Plain of Sharon.

The Plain of Sharon was an area of ancient Israel that was bordered by Mount Carmel and its mountain range up to the north, the city of Joppa in the south, and then the Mediterranean Sea to the west.

And this city still exists today, believe it or not. It has a population of approximately 85,000 people, and it's located southeast of Tel Aviv, 40 kilometers northwest of Jerusalem in the central district of Israel.

[7 : 17] I don't have a map, but you can picture it. Turning to the Old Testament then, in 1 Chronicles 8, verse 12, we learn that the city of Lod, or Lydda, was built by a man named Shemed.

And this man, Shemed, was from the Israelite tribe of Benjamin. Interesting. In Ezra 2, verse 1, and then in verse 33 as well, Ezra 2, 1 and 33, we learn that the city was repopulated after the Babylonian exile and captivity.

So the city was evacuated, all the Israelite people were moved out, and then eventually it was repopulated by God's people down the road.

And so in the context of our passage this morning, we learn that Peter went to Lydda to visit, we hear, the saints there, right? We hear those words. So this suggests to us that there was a church or other community of believers in the city, right?

This had a Christian component to it. Followers of Jesus were there. So that gives us a bit more context around this city of Lydda where Peter made his first stop.

[8 : 28] So what about the miracle? Well, in Acts 9.33, it says, there in Lydda, he, Peter, found a man named Aeneas.

And I find this interesting. So my question to myself and to God, I guess, was, was Peter looking for Aeneas specifically? We don't really get a sense of that.

You know, did he have on his list see Aeneas in Lydda? Or was he mainly looking for, was Peter just responding, following God's leading to take him there, and looking for the potential, being open to the potential to perform a miracle in that place that would draw attention to or give glory to God? We don't know. We can ask him one day. When we're sent by God, when you or I are sent by God, or we're open to listening to and serving him, I don't think anything happens by chance or by accident, does it?

Does it? Partly a rhetorical question, but not completely. I think I've shared this before. When I was considering leaving my government job and honestly crying out to God, saying, I will do whatever you want me to do, but you need to make it clear.

[9 : 50] Hit me over the head. I'm not smart. Hit me with a holy two-by-four and make the direction clear. Nothing. Silence. I would go for an hour-long walk on my lunch breaks around the parliament building, around the legislature grounds, and pray and listen to my Bible on an audiobook.

And I said, God, you tell me. You tell me and I'll do whatever you want. I'm yours. Silence. However, God spoke through Michelle.

So he was messing with me because he said, no, you're just going to have to listen, and will you trust me through her to you?

I love how God triangulates sometimes. So I listened, and now you're stuck with me. So that's the reality, right, is that God doesn't do anything by accident.

God is not a casual, I might get around to it, kind of God. He is intentional. He is seeking for us to surrender to him so that he can and will use us.

[10 : 59] So Peter would have learned fairly quickly that Aeneas was paralyzed and bedridden. He would have learned this about him. And that he had been that way, scripture tells us, for eight years.

So this was not a new affliction. This was something that had become part of who Aeneas was. So let's hear the words of Luke 9, 1 to 2, because it gives us some important context here for when Jesus commissions the apostles, including Peter, and sends them out.

You probably remember it. When Jesus had called the 12 together, it says, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases.

And he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. So it's in this power that Peter has received from Jesus himself that Peter tells Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you.

And Aeneas immediately gets up, scripture tells us. He is completely healed. So it's interesting to me, I was reflecting on this as I was rereading this passage over and over.

[12 : 11] Peter commands Aeneas to get up, and the words Peter uses, the word scripture uses there, is Peter tells him to take care of his mat. Interesting, right?

Why does he need the mat anymore? He doesn't. So I've always found it interesting that generally, if you look through scripture, paralyzed people who are healed by Jesus or in his name are told to pick up their mats, where that has been a feature of their lives.

So it's as though the healing also involves intentionally, practically moving on from some of the things that have become features of their lives due to their physical challenges.

Things that now that they have been healed, they no longer need and must close the book on. So the miracle certainly is reminiscent of Jesus, I believe, healing the paralytic man in Luke 5.

So what was the result of the miracle? Well, Acts 9.35 tells us, all who lived in Lydda and Sharon, so the greater region, the plain of Sharon, saw him, saw Aeneas after the miracle, and they turned to the Lord, scripture says.

[13 : 26] So remember, Lydda was the city where the miracle happened, and then Sharon was that broader region, right? So God used this one miracle to spread this key message to large groups of people.

The message that Jesus is Lord. The message that Peter is Jesus' disciple. His apostle, in fact. Scripture doesn't tell us how long Peter stayed in Lydda after the miracle.

But the expression, to be the expression, on a mission came in mind. So we tend to say someone's on a mission when they're focused, right? Wow, is she ever on a mission?

They're focused. Someone is determined. They don't want to waste any time, right? And this seems to have been the case with Peter because he made his way to Joppa without wasting any time.

So what about Joppa? The city of Joppa was the next stop on Peter's trip, as scripture tells us. So what can we learn about this place? Well, today, and maybe you've heard this on the news or in other references and things, Joppa is known today as Jaffa, J-A-F-F-A.

[14 : 40] It's an ancient port city, which is now part of the city of Tel Aviv, and it's in the southern part of Israel. Joppa, or Jaffa, is located roughly 56 kilometers northwest of Jerusalem, and it sits at the top of a naturally elevated outcropping that's right on the Mediterranean coastline.

Excavations at Jaffa indicate the city was settled as early as the Bronze Age. It's very, very old. The city is referenced in several ancient Egyptian and Assyrian documents as well.

Biblically, Jaffa is known as one of the boundaries of the tribe of Dan. It's the port through which Lebanese cedars were imported for the construction of the temple.

The city also, maybe you've already come to this realization, city also features prominently in the biblical story of, anyone? No? Big fish?

Jonah. Joppa was the city where the prophet departed on his ill-fated journey. So what about this miracle?

[15 : 55] What happened there? So it's clear there that there was also a community of believers in Joppa because we read in Acts 9, verse 38, it says, the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda.

So he's talking about, Luke is talking about disciples in the community, followers of Jesus in the community of Joppa had heard Peter was nearby. So there were people in that city who followed Jesus, knew about the apostles, this group of 12, and knew that Peter was on a mission, was on the road, and they wanted to track him down.

So we learn in verse 36 there, Acts 9, verse 36, that there was a certain disciple named Tabitha who was living in Joppa. So why the two names?

Good question. There's lots of reasons that I won't get into because it's a big digression. But know that Tabitha was her Aramaic name. And then her Greek name, the Greek version of her name, was Dorcas.

So that's the two names. The Bible lists both names because readers from both cultural groups would have read this story. So it's helpful to make a cultural connection for them in their own, they would understand her name in their own language.

[17 : 13] But it also, Scripture also notes that the name in both Dorcas and Tabitha means gazelle, which is a beautiful name. Scripture tells us that, I'm just going to say Dorcas from now on, but think Tabitha if you want, if that's easier.

I just didn't want to say Tabitha Dorcas, Tabitha Dorcas. Scripture tells us that she was always doing good and helping the poor. And other translations, you may find, say that she was full of good works and charitable deeds.

So this was a woman of character. She seems to have been someone who had a significant impact on her community as well. Because we learned that she made robes and other clothing to give to people.

Remember that in the description of her and her situation. And it seems that at the height of her ministry to other people, she became sick and died. So this is someone who is meaningful to the community, who is an integral part of their community.

And then Scripture tells us her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. As we noted earlier, the community was aware that Peter was nearby in the city of Lydda.

[18 : 23] And so two disciples from Joppa were sent to get Peter. And so it's important, or at least fortunate, that Lydda is near Joppa. Because, as you may know, corpses needed to be buried right away.

And the distance of roughly 10 miles, 16 kilometers, between the two cities would have meant a trip of maybe three or four hours each way at that time. So for the messengers to get to Peter in Lydda and then for everyone to return to Joppa together.

So because it was Jewish custom to bury a corpse before sundown, even if Dorcas had died early in the day, there was no time to waste. They needed to get to Peter and get him back to this woman.

And so when they arrived back in Joppa, Peter was brought immediately to that upper room where Dorcas' body was being kept. Now you may know this, upper rooms in homes were usually very small.

They were attics, often built on flat rooftops. So this one would have been, based on what we hear next, large enough to accommodate a few people.

[19 : 35] So Dorcas was probably, as we talked about, well-known, well-liked, and they were mourning for her. Someone who cared for other people used her skills and talents to make clothing and other things for people in need.

So it's fair to assume that many of the mourners would have been people who had had a connection to her, people that she had helped personally. And it's interesting, when Peter arrives, we read that he sent everyone out, out of the room, everybody out.

He clearly wasn't interested in putting on a big show, right? He was not a televangelist. He was not wanting to get a lot of attention. Didn't want to put on a public display.

He knew that he had work to do. He knew that he probably even wanted to avoid unnecessary distractions. This was about him, and Dorcas, and God, and that's all. Peter gets down on his knees and prays. And there's a sense here of him submitting to God's will, that he wants God to work accordingly.

[20 : 49] Peter simply turns to the dead woman and tells her to get up. She opens her eyes, sees Peter, and sits up.

Now, you have to wonder, if part of the reason Jesus and Peter and the other apostles, likely, when they were healing people, cleared the room, is that you don't need someone freaking out, right? So if someone is dead, they're all quite sure she's dead. So for her to suddenly come back to life, he's trying to keep things cool, I think, a little bit.

None of us can likely relate to being brought back to life. Is that fair? Fair, right? But perhaps she would have felt weak.

Maybe disoriented. We don't know where she was. Did she go to heaven briefly and came back? But I think it would have been natural for her to be a bit disoriented, right?

[21 : 54] So, but for whatever the reason, Peter shows care and gentleness. We can see it in Scripture. Because he takes her hand, tenderly, and he helps her to her feet.

Peter knows this could be a disorienting experience. And once this miracle has been completed, Peter then calls everybody back. He calls the widows, the women who would have been mourning for her, calls them all back.

And in many Bible translations, it says in verse 41 that Peter presented her to them alive. I find that word choice so interesting.

It's not like he went, ta-da! Right? But there's a significance to what Peter has done here. Someone has been raised from the dead, right? 100% of us have never experienced that.

Peter is giving everyone the opportunity, a clear opportunity, to witness this. He's providing clear evidence of what has taken place.

[23 : 00] The same people who had just seen her die with their own eyes, many who had even been helping, cleaning, or dressing, or moving her body, were now seeing this miracle of God working through Peter right before their eyes.

I don't know about you, but this miracle as well has always reminded me of when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter in Luke 8. You probably know that story. The circumstances are very familiar. People are asked to leave the room. The dead person is commanded to get up. And then the person who is resurrected needs assistance with help getting food, in Jairus' daughter's case, something to eat, or some other kind of assistance.

He helps Dorcas up. There's familiar things that happen in those two cases. And after Dorcas is raised, Acts 9.42 says, this became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Scripture tells us that Peter remained in Joppa for many days afterwards, and that he stayed with a man named Simon who was a tanner. So Peter's ministry and reputation was spreading through these two events.

[24 : 22] And it was Joppa where someone else would reach out to him, and we're going to see that next week. Peter's reputation and the fact that he was an apostle of Christ was getting out there.

In Acts 9, verses 32 to 42, we can clearly see what I call, this popped into my head this week, an escalation in the miraculous. Because Aeneas is healed of paralysis, and then Tabitha, Dorcas, is raised from the dead.

There's an escalation there. And in other respects as well, the story and person of Dorcas are presented in a more positive light, a more expanded light, than in the story and the person of Aeneas.

Have you ever noticed that? While it appears Aeneas was a believer and a follower of Christ, that's clear, he's not specifically called a disciple, but Dorcas is.

And in the account of his healing, there's no real focus on, and no backstory on the man himself, only the fact of his healing. More focus on the miracle than the man.

[25 : 34] And then by contrast, the story of Dorcas relates in a specific way to the things that she did and the ways that she was important to the community. So there was obviously a personal interest there in the storytelling and how Luke relates it, a personal interest in her.

And that's reflected even in mentioning the details of the funeral preparations. So finally, the story indicates that Peter recognized how important she was to the community. Because, as I said a moment ago, he made a point of presenting her to the rest of the disciples, to the rest of the believers in her community. And that didn't happen in the case with Aeneas. So the effect of these two miracles in the two cities is expressed differently. And maybe you heard it when I read it. In Lydda, it said people turned to the Lord. And in Joppa, it said that people believed on the Lord. But these really are two simple ways of saying the same thing. Because to turn from sin and self means to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ. [26 : 48] To place one's faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ means to believe in Him. Two parts of the same equation.

So this is how evidence that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. And that Peter was his apostle should affect us as well.

As John 20, 30, and 31 so boldly declares, hopefully you can read that. Let's read it together. Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of His disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.

My friends, with the great evidence we have been given, not only here in Acts 9, but throughout Scripture. Let's take great care to not neglect the great salvation that we have in Christ.

[27 : 56] Amen. Amen.