

Acts 9:32-43

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[0 : 01] Would you turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Acts, chapter 9, looking today at Acts chapter 9, verses 32 to 43. If you're looking in a pew Bible, that is page 918.

Acts chapter 9, beginning at verse 32.

Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas.

Bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Rise and make your bed.

And immediately he rose. And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and they turned to the Lord. Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which translated means Dorcas.

[1 : 08] She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days she became ill and died. And when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.

Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, please come to us without delay. So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room.

All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. But Peter put them all outside 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. And he gave her his hand and raised her up.

Then calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner.

[2 : 10] One of the interesting aspects of living in New Haven is that you never know who you might run into. If you walk around the Yale campus, you may rub shoulders with some of the present and future leaders of the world.

If you're a freshman at Yale, your randomly selected suite mate could easily be the most accomplished violinist in the state of Arkansas, or their parents might own a Fortune 500 company or an island off the coast of Florida, or perhaps they might even become the President of the United States.

You never know. Your professor could be the world's leading authority in their field. Your law school classmate could become a prominent judge and make a decisive vote in a precedent-setting case. Now, even outside of Yale, New Haven is filled with people seeking to make their mark on the city. Whether it's through reforming the public schools or establishing charter schools, starting a business or beginning a non-profit, campaigning for public office or writing for the independent. And the more rooted you become in New Haven, the more time you spend around here, you sort of begin to recognize who's who around town. Who are the big players in the non-profit world?

[3 : 30] Who are the up-and-coming leaders in City Hall? Who are the influential decision-makers at the Board of Ed? New Haven can be an exciting place to live, but it can also be an intimidating place to live.

A place full of accomplished, busy, important, influential people. Now, this morning, the passage we're considering in Acts is sandwiched right in between two extensive accounts of massively influential people.

The first three quarters of chapter nine describes the conversion and calling of Saul. Saul, later known as Paul, was an intellectual giant.

He was an elite religious scholar who became the most prominent apostle of the first century Christian movement and the author of several books that are still read 2,000 years later. Not bad.

Probably better than most of your professors. Chapter 10, which we'll look at next week, describes the conversion of Cornelius, a centurion who commanded 480 men, a cohort in the Roman army. [4 : 36] And in the book of Acts, chapter 10 marks a major turning point because the gospel of Jesus is received for the first time by large numbers of Gentiles. But in between these two extensive accounts about influential people, well-known people, Luke includes two brief stories about two obscure characters, Aeneas and Tabitha.

We know nothing else about these two people apart from what we learn here. They would not make it into many lists of who's who in the New Testament or in the ancient world.

And if you're reading quickly through the book of Acts, you might skim through these stories and not give them much second thought. As I was preparing this week, since I had to say something about this text, I was asking myself, why did Luke choose to include these two stories here in Acts?

Now, some people say they established Peter's authority as an authoritative messenger of the risen Lord Jesus. And there's some truth to that.

Peter seems to be following in the footsteps of Elijah and Elisha, two of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament who not only healed the sick, but also raised a dead person to life.

[5 : 53] First Kings 17, Second Kings 4. Even more so, Peter's following the pattern of Jesus, who also told a paralyzed man, rise up and walk, Luke 5, and who raised Jairus' daughter from the dead with very similar words in Luke chapter 8.

And in Acts chapter 1, Luke reminds us that his gospel was about what Jesus began to do and teach. And by implication, the book of Acts is about what Jesus continues to do and teach by the Holy Spirit through his apostles.

So it's, now it's true that we see in this passage God approving of Peter as an authoritative messenger of the risen Lord Jesus. But you know, I don't think this passage is mostly about Peter and his role.

Because Peter's role has already been well established in the book of Acts. If you read chapters 1 through 5, he's teaching, he's preaching, he's healing, he's leading the church in Jerusalem. He's already been introduced to us.

Other people say this section is a transition, leading up to the main event in chapter 10, about the gospel of Jesus gradually moving toward Gentile territory.

[7 : 01] And again, there's something to this. So far, the gospel has spread from Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified and resurrected, where the temple was located. And it's spread to all kinds of people on the fringes of Judaism.

So to people visiting Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost, to the Samaritans, to the Ethiopian eunuch. And here we see Peter gradually moving away from Jerusalem toward Gentile territory. Verse 32, he comes to Lydda, which was a primarily Jewish city, 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Verse 36, he goes further northwest to Joppa, a primarily Greek city on the coast.

Chapter 10, he goes all the way up the coast to Caesarea, which was named after the Roman emperor himself. Where Cornelius, a Roman military officer, comes to faith in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit's poured out on the Gentiles for the first time.

But you know, the question still remains, if this passage is simply a transition leading up to the main thing in chapter 10, why does Luke bother mentioning these two people, Aeneas and Tabitha, who play no further role in the story?

[8 : 12] Well, I think the main reason that Luke puts this story where it is, and arranges his book in this way, is not only because it happened that way, there were lots of events that happened that he knew about that he could have included, but he deliberately arranged it this way to remind us of this, that God's work in the world proceeds not just through influential intellectuals, like Saul in chapter 9, not just through political and military leaders, like Cornelius in chapter 10, but also through ordinary people.

Through people who don't hold a lot of political power, through people who aren't distinguished by their academic degrees, through people who aren't well known outside their local community, through people that some of us might be tempted to ignore or overlook.

In our passage this morning, we're introduced to two ordinary people, a pair of them, a very inactive man and a very active woman.

First, we see Aeneas. He's described in verse 33 as having been bedridden for eight years because he was paralyzed. Perhaps he was in an accident, fell down somehow and off a building and never

recovered his mobility.

Perhaps he had a stroke, which left him unable to move and take care of himself. Whatever happened, from that time on, he had been confined to his bed for eight years.

[9 : 44] Unable to work, unable to care for his family if he had one, unable even to take care of himself or to move around freely. He had nothing to show for himself.

It would have been a depressing, isolating experience, especially in comparison to the freedom of movement he had enjoyed in the past. Even today, motorized wheelchairs and disability accommodations, being paralyzed can be a frustrating and lonely experience where you're easily forgotten and excluded.

By contrast, verse 36, we see a very active woman, Tabitha. Now, that was her given name, her Aramaic name, which indicates her Jewish heritage.

Luke also gives her the Greek translation of her name, Dorcas, for the benefit of his readers. But he describes Tabitha as full of good works and acts of charity. In other words, she was characterized by deeds of kindness and compassion.

Things like visiting sick people, feeding hungry people, and especially, in her case, caring for widows. Now, in the ancient world, widows were some of the most vulnerable and neglected people.

[10 : 57] Women had few opportunities for honorable work, and there were no institutions in the broader society that assisted widows. Widows basically had three options. Live off an inheritance, if you were lucky enough to have gotten one.

Live with extended family, if they existed and were willing to take you in. Or remarry. For some widows, there were no good options.

But Tabitha took on these neglected, vulnerable women's burdens as her own. In particular, she made clothes. In an age when there were no clothing stores and no clothing factories.

For some widows, this might have made the difference in cold months of the year between keeping warm and shivering while alone at night. For others, it provided a sense of dignity and honor.

Knowing that despite their loss, they were loved in the family of the church. Now, in order to support all these widows, it's likely that Tabitha had at least some spare time and resources.

[12 : 01] If the upper room, verse 37, where her body was laid, was in her own home, that would indicate that she had a good-sized house. Not everyone had a two-story house back then.

So she may have been a relatively well-off widow, living off an inheritance, or she may have been happily married. We don't know. But what we do know is this. Tabitha sacrificially and generously shared, out of her abundance, in order to help some of the most vulnerable people in her culture, because the spirit of Jesus Christ was living and active and working in her.

Now, we also see the Apostle Peter in this story. And important and influential and busy as he was, he didn't hesitate to spend time visiting these ordinary Christian believers.

You know, Peter was one of the most prominent, if not the most prominent at this time, of the Twelve Apostles. He was a powerful preacher, well-known speaker, traveling here and there and everywhere.

He was a busy man. But, you know, he wasn't too busy to visit with Aeneas, who was lying in his bed at home, or with Tabitha and the widows, who she had cared for, who no one else really thought about.

[13 : 22] He wasn't too busy to visit with them and to pray for them. Verse 38, the disciples sent word to Peter after Tabitha died. And Peter immediately got up, left whatever he was doing, and went with them to Joppa.

That was ten miles away. And, you know, the way people got from one place to another back then was they walked. Unless you were very wealthy and could hire, could ride a mule or ride a horse and carriage or something like that.

But very few people were able to do that. Peter got up and walked ten miles. And he did it quickly. I mean, there's only so much time that could have passed in this story.

Maybe a day. Now, it's not completely clear what the people were hoping. Were they hoping that Peter would raise her to life again? Or were they simply wanting him to officiate the funeral and comfort the mourners?

We don't know. But Peter dropped everything and he went. Verse 43, we learn another interesting detail. That Peter stayed for many days at Simon the Tanner's house in Joppa.

[14 : 25] Now, probably not many of you know what tanning is. I didn't know what it was until I Wikipedia'd it. The solution to everything in the ancient world that you don't know. Not really.

But tanning is the process of making animal skins into leather. And in the ancient world, it was an incredibly stinky process. It involved cleaning off a bunch of decaying animal skins. Removing the hair fibers by soaking them often in urine. And then softening the skins by smearing them with dog poop. It was foul smelling. There were rules that tanners were not allowed to live downtown.

They had to live outside of town. Chapter 10 says Simon lived by the sea. Some distance from everyone else.

But it says Peter stayed with him in his house for many days. The most prominent traveling apostle of the early church stayed in a really stinky house.

[15 : 28] Now, like Peter, some of us here are busy. Right? Going here and there. Perhaps speaking to large groups of people placed in prominent positions of leadership. Maybe you can identify with that.

More emails in your inbox than you can possibly answer. And so many requests for help that it would be unwise and unloving to your family to say yes to them all. But how do we interact with the Aeneases and the Tabathas in our world?

Or in our church? The cashiers at Stop and Shop. The workers in the dining hall. The elderly. The disabled. The disabled. Who spend their days in nursing homes and day programs.

The awkward people. Who don't take social cues very quickly. The people who smell bad. For those of us who are busy. Perhaps accomplished.

Influential to some extent or another. Have we bought into a lie that some people are not really worth our time and attention? Does our busyness become an excuse for simply ignoring people that we can't figure out how to relate to?

[16 : 39] Do we make ourselves not just busy but also frantic and anxious? And so we reject potential interruptions to our schedule out of fear. Rather than exercising discernment.

Peter, great apostle, spent costly time and allowed a couple days of interruptions to his schedule to spend time with ordinary Christians.

Because his master, the Lord Jesus Christ, had done exactly the same. One of Jesus' final acts before his crucifixion was to get down on his knees and take a towel and wash his disciples' feet. It was the task that was normally relegated to the lowest servant. And none of the other disciples were even willing to do it. At first, Peter resisted.

Peter would have remembered this. Because he didn't want it. He said, Jesus, no, not me. And Jesus says, no, I must do this. You don't get it now, but later on, you'll understand. And then he said, if I, then your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

[17 : 51] A servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If we are servants, messengers of Christ, no matter how accomplished and influential we may become in the church or in the world, we are not greater than the one who sent us, who became the servant of all.

We're not greater. Peter not only spent time with ordinary Christians, He also accepted hospitality from the brother who lived in a foul-smelling house on the outskirts of town.

How did he do that? Well, he knew that his Savior had done so much more. He knew that his Savior, Jesus, had left behind a heavenly palace in order to be born and laid in a feeding trough for animals at his birth.

And he knew that his Savior had left behind a throne of glory in order to be hanged on a tree.

Bloody, naked, despised, in order to bear our sin and remove our shame.

And because Peter had encountered Jesus, he could never look at anyone else in the same way.

So that's what we've seen so far. Two ordinary people and an apostle who spent time with them.

[19 : 16] But you know, we also see in this passage God's extraordinary work. In these two ordinary people. The striking thing about this passage is not just that Peter spent time with Aeneas and Tabitha, but that the Lord Jesus displayed his transforming power in Aeneas and Tabitha in amazing ways.

Aeneas was healed. Tabitha was raised to life. And in both cases it's clear that it was Jesus who did it. Peter looks at Aeneas and it's almost as if he observes Jesus doing something.

And he says, Aeneas, Jesus Christ is healing you. So get up. Make your bed. In the case of Tabitha, he knelt down and prayed. In utter dependence on the Lord Jesus. And then he said almost exactly the same words that Jesus had said to Jairus' daughter. In Mark 5.41. Jesus said, Talitha cum. Child, arise.

Peter said, Tabitha cum. Tabitha, arise. Now of course we might wonder, so what exactly are we supposed to take away from these examples?

[20 : 27] Aeneas was healed, but surely there were other sick people in his city who were not. Tabitha was raised from the dead, but this was not the normal pattern in the early church.

Stephen was stoned. James was executed. Both of them died what we might call an untimely death. Neither was restored to life. So what do we take from these examples?

Well, what we see in Aeneas' case is that Jesus set him free from unhealthy inhibitions and called him to work. It's interesting. That's the first thing Peter tells Aeneas.

Jesus Christ is healing you, so get up and make your bed. In other words, you haven't done a thing for eight years because you couldn't. But that's going to change right now.

The minute that Jesus heals you, he also calls you to work. He has important work for you to do.

And you know, Jesus is still at work setting people free from unhealthy inhibitions and calling us to meaningful activity in his kingdom.

[21 : 31] You know, some of you may feel like you're not worth very much here in New Haven. You walk around the city, or even you look around the church, and you see Yale professors, medical doctors, married couples with kids, and you see accomplished, influential, important people, and you think, man, I didn't even finish high school.

I might never get married at all. Or I'm at home all day taking care of little kids. I'm struggling to find a job and just pay my bills. I'm battling my own demons from the past.

I'm dealing with chronic pain. I've got a criminal record. Maybe I'll come here and listen. But I don't have much to offer in this church. But if that's you, brother, sister, let me tell you, we need you.

We need you here. That's why Luke puts this story right here. Right between the conversion of Saul, the scholar, and Cornelius, the military commander, Aeneas, the paralyzed man, and Tabitha, the woman who cared for elderly widows.

This is how the gospel of Jesus Christ goes forward. Through high-status leaders, but also through ordinary people. And Luke calls us all saints.

[22 : 47] Verse 32 and verse 41, that means holy ones, called, set apart for God's purposes in the world. And let me say this to us as a church. This isn't an either-or.

Throughout the gospel of Luke and throughout Acts, Luke makes it a point to show us that the gospel of Jesus is for the lost and the least, as well as for the accomplished and the influential. It's for all kinds of people.

Because Jesus is the Savior of the whole world. Of all kinds of people. So as a church located in downtown New Haven, we're not making a choice between one or the other.

Between strategic ministry to Yalies, or compassionate ministry to the poor, or sustainable ministry with families. In fact, those aren't even the best labels to put on it.

Sometimes you need as much compassion to minister among Yalies as you do among the poorest people in town. I'll say that myself. Right? We need all of you to come as you are and be transformed by God's grace into what he's called you to be, and to use the gifts God's given you in order for us to be who God has called us to be as a church.

[23 : 59] We need all of you. Now let me speak to you if, like Aeneas, you are disabled, or chronically ill, or in pain.

Maybe you're wondering, how is God supposed to work in my life? Now that could look like miraculous physical healing. The New Testament never rules that out.

And the book of James tells us if we're sick, call the elders of the church and have them pray over us. So if you haven't had someone pray for you, ask someone to. But you know, that's not the only way that God's power can be displayed.

Let me give two examples of disabled people. Some of you may even know Jonathan Sigworth. He grew up in Hamden. Went to Hamden High. Graduated in 2005.

Took a year off before going to college to do mission work in India. He was late to Bible study one day. So he borrowed someone's bike that didn't have great tires. Riding on a high and narrow footpath fell off an 80-foot cliff.

[25 : 02] By a mere miracle, he survived. But he was paralyzed and became a quadriplegic at the age of 19. Jonathan refused to be defined by his injury.

He went through an extensive regimen of physical therapy. He learned from others and trained himself to do as much as he could. Including not only transferring from his bed to his chair. But also, by this time, getting dressed, driving a car. I'm not sure how he does that, but he does it somehow. And playing wheelchair rugby. He now spends half the year in India, where he got injured.

Mentoring spinal cord injury patients. Helping them achieve new levels of activity. And testifying to the grace and the power and the good purposes of the risen Lord Jesus.

A few years ago, he produced a documentary called More Than Walking. He said, life is more than walking. Our value doesn't depend on our capacity to do things. He says, my purpose is to glorify God in everything.

[26 : 05] And knowing that truth gave me hope. I never would have chosen this. But God puts us in places for a reason. Second example, perhaps you've heard of Johnny Erickson Tada.

Paralyzed from the neck down in a diving accident. At the age of 17, she's written some wonderful books. Now, there's at least one of them down on the book stall. I commend her to you as a wonderful resource.

You know, when her accident initially happened, she felt her life was over. She writes, or she said this. She said, I was lying on a hospital bed in suicidal despair.

I couldn't face the prospect of sitting down for the rest of my life without the use of my hands and legs. All my hopes seemed dashed. My faith was shipwrecked. I was sick and tired of pious platitudes that well-meaning friends often gave me at my bedside.

Sixteen good biblical reasons as to why this all happened. I was tired of advice. I was numb, alone, frightened, and angry. Over the next few years, she went to various healing services with well-known faith healers.

[27 : 12] And she would sometimes imagine herself lying by the pool at Bethesda where Jesus had healed a paralyzed man. And waiting for Jesus to come to her and heal her.

But he never did. Finally, she said, I realized after a long time I was into Jesus, mainly to get my pains and my problems and my paralysis fixed.

But he said, but the same man who healed withered hands and paralyzed people also said, if your eye causes you to sin or your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and gouge it out.

I always thought that physical healing was the big deal. But as far as God was concerned, my soul was an even bigger deal. So she says, little things began to matter more.

Looking straight on into the eyes of another person in a wheelchair and sensing their pain. Feeling the rhythm of their heart. God used this injury to develop in me patience, endurance, tolerance, self-control, steadfastness, sensitivity, love, and joy.

[28 : 21] I began to get a lively hope of heavenly glories above. This wheelchair helped me see that the good things in this life aren't the best things. The best things are yet to come.

You see, the Lord Jesus is still setting people free from physical, emotional, social, spiritual inhibitions. And calling them to participate in his redemptive work in the world.

And you know, nothing that you've experienced is too big for Jesus to handle. And for him to overcome and work through.

And you know, the partial healing and restoration that we may experience now is only a sign of what is to come in full one day when Jesus returns.

That's what we get a glimpse of in the story of Tabitha being raised from death to life. She had spent her years on earth making clothes for needy widows.

[29 : 21] For the most vulnerable and neglected people in her society. As a member of the church, she did what no other social institution in the Roman world was doing. She paved the way for future generations of Christian women and men who would follow her example.

Caring for the most vulnerable, for widows and orphans and others. And as the gospel spread throughout the Roman world, the church became the primary institution, the primary community, really, where grieving widows were loved and comforted and supported and valued.

But death had brought Tabitha's work to an end. And most of the legacy of it, she would never see. But you know what, the first thing she saw, when Peter said, Tabitha, arise, and she opened her eyes.

She saw Peter, and then she saw all of the widows wearing all of the clothes that she had lovingly made for them. She saw what most of us, probably all of us, will never see.

All the people gathered for her funeral. The tears they shed, the testimonies that they shared about her labors of love motivated by her faith in Jesus Christ. All kinds of things about a person's life come to light only after they die.

[30 : 43] Sometimes at the funeral. And in Tabitha's case, her care for those whom the world largely ignored was now on display for all to see. What a testimony. But also when she saw that.

What a motivation for her to keep on doing that work of loving widows for the rest of her life.

Because she saw some of the result of it standing right before her.

Brothers and sisters, what are you laboring for? What are you laboring for in your career? What are you laboring for in your home? For those of you who are retired, how are you spending your later years?

If you have extra time and resources, how are you using them? 1 Corinthians 3 says that if we are building on the foundation of Jesus Christ, one day our work, like Tabitha's, will be on display for all to see.

Paul says the day of judgment will disclose it. And the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation of Jesus Christ survives, he will receive a reward.

[31 : 57] If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss. Though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. You see, like Tabitha, we too will see our work again.

And that's both a warning, because some of our work, done for selfish reasons, for wrong purposes, will not last into eternity.

It will be burned up in the fire. But it's also an encouragement for us, who trust in the Lord Jesus, to persevere.

To persevere in the labors of love and kindness to which God has called you and me. One day you will see the people you have loved and served in the name of Christ.

You will see the fruits of your labors that you have undertaken for the glory of God and for the good of his people. And so Paul says, in light of the promise of the resurrection, therefore, my beloved sisters and brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

[33 : 08] That's what Tabitha saw. And that's what we're meant to see in her story as well. That your labor in the Lord is not in vain, so do not give up.

Don't stop loving people, even when no one else notices or no one else cares. You see, we see in this passage not only God's extraordinary work in ordinary people like Aeneas and Tabitha, but through them.

At the end of each of the sections, verse 35 and verse 42, we see the result of the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Tabitha.

Verse 35 says, all the residents of Lydda and the plain of Sharon, which was the region north of that city, saw him and they turned to the Lord. Aeneas became a living testimony to the power and grace of the Lord Jesus.

Perhaps the people, excuse me, perhaps the people of Sharon took note of him when they came to visit Lydda. Or perhaps Aeneas took advantage of his newfound freedom to become a traveling evangelist, heralding the good news of the one who had saved him and healed him around the rural areas around his city.

[34 : 26] Verse 42, the result of Tabitha being raised to life was similar, became known throughout all Joppa and many believed in the Lord. You see, Peter was powerfully used by God to do extraordinary miracles, but the result was not that Peter attracted attention to himself.

If anything, he tried to avoid it. The result was not the people turned to him, but the people turned and believed in the Lord Jesus. You see, the message from this passage is this.

God carries out his extraordinary work in the world through ordinary people, transformed by the spirit of Jesus Christ. May he continue to carry on his work through us here.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, you are a glorious and compassionate Savior.

Lord Jesus, you are a glorious and compassionate Savior.

[36 : 05] Lord Jesus, we thank you for the gospel, the good news of your grace. That you receive us sinners when we come to you acknowledging our sin and asking for your forgiveness.

And we thank you that you use us in the particular circumstances that we're in. Lord Jesus, we thank you for the love of your grace.

We thank you that you can work through those particular circumstances hard as they may be sometimes, ordinary or unnoticed as they may be at other times, for your glory in the world.

Lord, we pray that you would strengthen each of us by the power of your spirit to trust in you and to be your ambassadors, your representatives in this world.

Lord, work through each of us individually and work through us as a body, as a church. Help us to reflect what Luke has laid out before us here. Of how the good news of Jesus is displayed and goes forth.

[37 : 19] Through all kinds of different people who encounter you and are transformed. Lord, may that be true for us here.

More and more we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. As the music team comes forward, we're going to sing our closing song that speaks of the good news of Jesus.

That speaks of what Jesus has done to come into our world and to draw us to himself and to give us that great promise of resurrection help. So let's stand as we sing.

Come behold the wondrous mystery. Come behold the descriptions.