

Human interest stories are popular no matter where they are told. We are always captivated by the experiences of others. As we navigate Acts 9:32-43, we are going to be immersed in a theme that I would like for you to think about with me. This passage gives us two miraculous accounts of the apostle Peter as he ministers to people. Here is the theme: God uses obedient people and troublesome circumstances to expand His influence.

Acts 9:32-43

32 Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. 33 There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. 34 And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." And immediately he rose. 35 And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

36 Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. 37 In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. 38 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." 39 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. 40 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. 41 And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. 42 And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. 43 And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner.

Peter

Our Scripture passage introduces Peter as a leading character in this spiritual two-part drama from Acts. Do you remember Peter? He was one of Christ's hand-chosen disciples. One might think that he was chosen because he was a giant in spirituality that towered above all in perfection. Nothing could be further from the truth. Don't get me wrong, Peter had many redeeming qualities, but he was far from perfect. Though he was often fearless and loyal, he was sometimes impetuous, easily distracted, and given to being swayed by peer pressure. He tended to act before he thought, and when under pressure he sometimes used wrong words. When he became discouraged, he shied away from his commitments. You might wonder, "How could he ever become someone that God could use in a great way?" Here's the answer: God looks beyond our problems and sees our potential. Peter chose to follow Jesus and love him. He submitted himself to the process called discipleship so he could grow and transform. Remember, God uses obedient people and troublesome circumstances to expand His influence.

A Disciple

What is a disciple of Jesus Christ? It is a believer who lovingly follows Jesus and intentionally helps others to follow Jesus. Peter had spent time learning from Christ, changing, growing, learning from his mistakes and now he was ministering to others to help them follow Christ. Listen, no matter who you are or how many problems or weaknesses you have, God can transform you into someone of eternal significance. But you must decide to be faithful to the process. Ephesians 2:10 reminds us that "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

In our story Peter is going to places where small Christian congregations were forming so he could give spiritual leadership and help. Though he was an apostle in a large leadership role, Peter remembered that when you minister to one person, you minister to someone whom God deems important.

Aeneas

Peter finds himself in a town called Lydda which is northwest of Jerusalem. This town was a thorough fare for people traveling between Joppa and Jerusalem or from Egypt to Syria. There he finds a man named Aeneas (uh-NEE-uhs) who had been paralyzed. This man's physical condition was humanly hopeless. Aeneas might have experienced a stroke, or an injury or an illness like polio – we simply do not know from this narrative. For eight years he had been confined to his bed. Can you imagine what his life was like? Day after day being confined to a bed, counting the minutes, hours, months, and ultimately years. He must have depended upon others for almost all of life's important activities like preparing food or getting dressed. He would have had to depend upon friends to come and see him rather than going to their homes. He could not go anywhere without the aid of helpers.

With each passing year doubtless the hope of a cure faded like the light of each day. He couldn't take a walk to view the countryside. He could not go to the well to draw his own water to quench his thirst. As a bystander, you or I could have looked at his life and said, "What a shame, the value of his life is over. He can't do anything worthwhile now. His life is useless!" If we had come to that conclusion, we would have been so wrong. God works in mysterious ways to transform suffering into significance. We don't always know the purposes of God or how He uses circumstances to advance His kingdom. Sometimes as we look in the rear-view mirror of life, we can see glimpses of purpose. But we must have faith that God is always working behind the scenes and only eternity will reveal the value of each life.

We must have the attitude of Paul as recorded in Romans 8:28, "And we know that for those who love God (notice the condition) all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." The key is to focus on loving God and surrendering to His purposes that often include only partial understanding. Ultimately, they will be revealed – but we must now walk in faith. How much do you trust God? Are you trusting Him now with your difficult circumstances that have left you without understanding?

Peter asks Aeneas to act in faith that God has done something invisibly wonderful. Peter said you have been made whole. Now get up and roll up your bed and get on with your new life. This is a wonderful picture of what happens to us through salvation. We are sick with a spiritual disease that has left us helpless in curing ourselves. We must respond in faith to what Christ has done for us by paying the penalty of our sin. We must act on the words of the healer and exercise faith. Then we must take advantage of our new life by actions that display our faith. James said, faith without works is dead. What are you and I doing that shows that our faith is real?

In the text there is no information given that Aeneas asked to be healed. The text simply declares Peter telling him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." Though God used Peter, he humbly gave the credit for the healing to Christ and therefore pointed others to the Savior. Aeneas was a catalyst for many coming to faith in Christ. Vast numbers of people in Lydda and the coastal plain of Sharon believed because they saw the power of God through Peter and Aeneas. When we reflect the power of God that transforms lives, many are influenced.

I wonder how many people would have never come to faith in Christ if Aeneas had never had a physical handicap. God can take what we see as horrible circumstances and make something good come out of it. This reminds me of something that happened in my own family. My older brother, along with his wife and four children, lived in Brazil, South America as missionaries. They had faithfully ministered there for years when their youngest child Rachal started to become lethargic and weak. They took her to the doctor and found that she had an aggressive cancer called Ewing's Sarcoma. Hoping to get the best treatment for her, they returned to the United States and fought the cancer. But after two years of treatment my ten-year-old niece died.

That is a horribly sad story isn't it? Here my brother and his family had surrendered to God to serve Him in a foreign country, away from family, and this catastrophe happens. It would be easy to grow bitter and walk away from it all. But that isn't the full story. Remember, God uses obedient people and troublesome circumstances to expand His influence. As a little girl Rachel would pray for her friends to come to Christ. People did come to Christ after her death and many were challenged to be serious with the time they have to serve the Lord with passion. And they made these decisions because of troublesome circumstances. Please mark these words: the key to surviving troublesome times is to allow our expectations to be subservient to God's will and concentrate on loving Him. If we do not surrender ourselves to God and His purposes, we create personal expectations that can turn our hearts to anger if they are not fulfilled. To become an angry person is to give up opportunities to exalt God in difficult circumstances and live in a state of bitterness and disappointment.

Back to our story. Peter tells Aeneas he is healed in the name of Christ. Can you image the thrill of being connected to this miracle? If you could heal someone, it would be easy to start thinking that you were something fantastic. But Peter kept his focus on the Lord and recognized that anything he could do miraculously came because of who Christ was rather than who he was. Humility is a characteristic that God honors. In fact, James 4:10 says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you."

As I was reading this passage a question came to my mind. "Why doesn't God heal every person who has a disease?" The Scriptural answer is that it is not God's will to do that for everyone here. But if Christ is our Savior, there will be an eternal healing that will never be taken away." This life is not eternal life, but it is the time God grants us to prepare for eternity. Jesus told us this when He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). It is possible that because our inherent tendency to live for immediate gratification, we would only focus on healings rather than pursuing faith and a personal relationship with God if every person were healed of every disease. But God does use and create circumstances that seek to propel us to trusting and serving Him rather than our short-sighted desires and wishes.

We are told in this story that there was a great geographical influence because of Aeneas. Luke tells us that "all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord." Sharon is a very fertile plain ten miles wide and fifty miles long running along the Mediterranean Sea in Palestine. Never forget, God uses obedient people and troublesome circumstances to expand His influence. Please remember that the power of the gospel is not subject to geography but rather the willingness of God's people to obey and seek to be influential to others.

Verse 35 tells us that the residents of Lydda and Sharon "turned to the Lord." This phrase is used to describe someone who recognizes that he is going the wrong direction and makes a conscious decision to go another way, a better way. It is always a good thing to ask, "Where am I going in life?" The problem is that we have a penchant to seek a self-centered approach to life. The book of Proverbs, on more than one occasion, tells us "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death (Proverbs 14:12)." Self-deception is a condition that God seeks to break through and lead us on a path of truth discovery.

What do you think they turned from? Some answers might be leaving God out of their lives, ignoring the commandments of God, or elevating self-centeredness and sin over the Savior. In short, turning to the Lord means allowing God to have the central focus of life rather than self. Every person who becomes a Christian must do this. One cannot turn to the Lord without changing direction. The power of the gospel is what makes this life transformation possible. And God offers it to each of us.

Two Messengers

This story now develops into act two. Two men are sent on a task to request Peter to come from Lydda to the coastal town of Joppa. These men's names are not mentioned but God knows who they are and how they served. No task is unimportant when serving the Lord. These men were chosen to be messengers. When Jesus sent out his disciples, he sent them two by two. Having a partner in ministry lends support and encouragement. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"

The message they carried was an urgent one: "Please come to us without delay." What was so important? A lady named Dorcas had died. Family and friends of Dorcas had heard of the healing of Aeneas and were hopeful that Peter could minister in some way. Peter goes with the messengers to Joppa, a major seaport town on the Mediterranean Sea about thirty miles northwest of Jerusalem. Jonah left from this port city as he was running from the will of God. This city had a significant mixture of Jews and Gentiles due to its commercialism.

Dorcas

The story takes us to the funeral of Tabitha (Aramaic) or Dorcas (Greek) which means a gazelle. She was a big-hearted person who made clothes for people who could not afford them. The text insinuates that the ladies were wearing the clothes that Dorcas made them and spoke of these clothes to Peter. Most likely she made clothes for those who could only make enough money for food. Widows had a difficult time financially. There were very few employment opportunities for them. If they did not have family to help them, they were often destitute and poor. What little money they could earn was used for the necessary staples of life.

Notice that Dorcas was described as a "disciple" in contrast to Aeneas who was described as "a man." What is a disciple? It is a believer who lovingly follows Christ and intentionally helps others to follow Him. Christians have been called by many names throughout history: believers, people of the Way, Bible believers, Jesus people, followers of Christ. But one the strongest is to be called a disciple. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke calls Dorcas a disciple. What Christian identity do you have?

Dorcas had made a tremendous impact on her community by her generosity and service. In the text she is described as a lady that was "full of good works and acts of charity." She made garments for the poor and there were many mourners at her passing. She used her talents to make a difference.

The Poor

If you have never done a study about what the Bible says concerning the poor, it would help you spiritually to do so. Let me share just a few verses that highlight how we should respond to those who are poor.

Proverbs 22:2

The rich and the poor meet together; the Lord is the maker of them all.

This is saying to not assign human value to a person based on their bank account. Every person's value is inherent because God is the maker of all.

Proverbs 14:31

Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.

This verse is telling us that you honor the Lord when you are generous to someone who is poor.

Proverbs 19:17

Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed.

God wants us to know that He gives dividends to those who invest in helping people who are poor.

Proverbs 21:13

Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.

Do you remember the saying, “What goes around comes around”? If you respond to the needs of others, then when you have a need there will more likely be someone who will respond to it.

Proverbs 31:9

Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

This verse is teaching us to not let those less fortunate be taken advantage of – speak up on their behalf.

Jesus reflected this mindset when he said in Luke 4:18

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

This was a quote of Isaiah 61:1 that Jesus read in the Synagogue to show that He was fulfilling it with his life.

One last verse about responding to the poor: Proverbs 14:21

Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor.

This proverb of contrast shows that despising the poor is wrong but being generous is right.

Dorcas lived out this verse and now she is about to be blessed in a way that was miraculous.

Her body had been laid in the upper room. Whether or not the friends of Dorcas had expectations that Peter could perform another miracle we are not told in this text. But I must tell you, if I had been there, and had heard of the healing of Aeneas, I would have entertained the idea that maybe something supernatural could take place.

Peter sent the mourners out and then prayed a simple prayer to resurrect Dorcas as Jesus did when he brought Jairus’ daughter back to life. The text says “Peter knelt down and prayed.” Prayer acknowledges our dependence on God. Even though Peter had just healed a man who had been paralyzed for eight years, he did not let it inflate his ego or cause him to forget where the power of the gospel comes from.

Peter says, “Tabitha arise, and she opened her eyes and sat up.” Can you imagine the joy her friends had when they were invited into the room to see her? The result was that many people around the city of Joppa became believers in the Lord. Extreme personal sadness became joy. People who had not yet turned to the Lord were persuaded to start following Him. This is the power of the gospel. Never forget, God uses obedient people and troublesome circumstances to expand His influence.

Simon the Tanner

This part of the story ends with Peter staying at the home of Simon the tanner. It would be quite easy to skip over the immense importance of this act. Because of the contact with dead animals, the Jews did not think highly of Simon’s business. When Peter decided to stay with Simon, he was breaking down a cultural barrier and resisting prejudice against someone who did not adhere to his Jewish religious customs and traditions. When we allow cultural traditions and our preferences to keep us from loving people and seeking to influence them for Christ, we are revealing prejudice toward someone that Christ died for. God seeks to break through the barrier of prejudice and show salvation to all people groups. And he does this through Christians who are obedient to love their neighbor as their self. Peter was on the cutting edge with this godly initiative.

Action steps

1. Turn to the Lord and away from things that compete for your eternal soul. We live in a society that barrages us with agendas that are not congruent with God's agenda. From self-fulfillment to the pursuit of riches and pleasure, we can become slaves to things that will have no eternal benefit. What is competing for your soul? There is always something that is trying to replace God in your life. Please do not allow the troublesome times to push you away from Christ but rather toward Him. If you have never accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior, listen to his voice from Matthew 11:28-30. He said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."
2. Be a person who seeks to influence your neighbors. We encourage you to intentionally use the BLESS method.
 - B Begin with prayer: "God how do you want me to bless the people in the places you've sent me to?"
 - L Listen with purpose: Take the time to listen to the needs, struggles and pain of people around you.
 - E Eat together: Look for ways to have a cup of coffee, a meal or dessert to build a connection.
 - S Serve in love: Look for ways to respond to the needs, struggles and pain of the people around you.
 - S Share your story: When the time is right, share the story of how Jesus Christ has changed your life.
3. Use your gifts and talents for a higher purpose than just enriching yourself. Paul said it this way in Titus 3:8, "The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people."
4. Allow God's Word to form how you treat others. Prejudice has no place in the heart of a follower of Christ. What we have in financial riches does not give us the right to look down on others but rather to help them.
5. Seek to be a complete disciple. Seek to grow but also seek to be influential. The emphasis we put on discipling others is often so much smaller than the emphasis to personally grow. We must become more balanced. Whether or not you are a mature Christian, you can share what you know with someone. Start with your family. Children need Dads, Moms, Grandpas and Grandmas to intentionally help them to grow in the Lord. The church can help but God has directed you to nurture their faith. Be willing to share what you have learned in your own study of God's Word with others. Share something on Monday about what God spoke to you about on Saturday or Sunday. Speak to those around you of what Christ is doing in your daily life. We are in the formative stages of creating some opportunities for intentional discipleship with young people and adults. If you would like to be intentionally discipled or be someone who intentionally discipled one, two or three others then speak to me about these possibilities.

Prayer