

Main Idea: The Lord can do amazing things to get the world’s attention, so that people will give Him His rightful place in their lives. In Acts 9:32-43 we see Him working in two ways through His people, through weakness and loss.

- I. The Lord works through weakness (32-35).
  - A. A man became a paralytic (32-33).
  - B. The Lord healed him (34).
    1. The miracle was initiated by Peter, not Aeneas.
    2. The miracle was accomplished by Jesus, not Peter.
    3. The miracle was instantaneous and complete.
  - C. The people were impacted (35).
    1. They saw the man.
    2. They turned to the Lord.
- II. The Lord works through loss (36-43).
  - A. Tabitha honored God in her life (36).
    1. To do the same, we must follow the Lord.
    2. In addition, we must love people in practical ways.
  - B. Tabitha honored God in her death (37-39).
    1. God doesn’t bless us so we can live like a sponge.
    2. God blesses us so we can serve others and advance His kingdom.
  - C. Tabitha honored God in her return to this life (40-43).
    1. The church was encouraged.
    2. Many lost people believed in the Lord.
    3. Tabitha received more opportunity for service.

Make It Personal: We need to learn three lessons...

1. Needs are merely opportunities for God to work.
2. Needs are also opportunities for me to work.
3. In all cases, the purpose is the glory of God.

*Scripture Reading: John 14:11-21*

Distracted. I keep thinking about that word. I think it sums up the condition we’re battling in our society today. We battle it in our churches too, in our families, in my life.

Thankfully the Lord knows how to capture the attention of distracted people. How does He do it? He has many ways to do so, and we’ll see two this morning.

Back in February we began a journey through the New Testament record written by Luke called the book of Acts. We’ve been learning where we came from as a church, and why we’re here. We’re now halfway through chapter 9, after some twenty-three messages over the course of seven months. If you want a title for the next leg of our journey, it’s “*Moving Out of Our Comfort Zone*,” for that’s exactly what the early church did beginning in chapter 10.

The book of Acts begins following Jesus’ resurrection, just prior to His ascension. In Acts 1, Jesus gave His followers what in essence was both a charge and a prediction: “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 (8).”

And that’s precisely what happened. After Jesus returned to heaven, the Holy Spirit came and the followers of Jesus began to tell people about Him. The Church began in Jerusalem. Then it spread throughout Judea. In time, it took the message of Christ to those on the “other side of the tracks,” the Samaritans. It was “full steam ahead” for the

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<sup>\*\*</sup>Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For an earlier development of this text, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

church. Luke provides this summary at about the ten-year mark (Acts 9:31): “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.”

One phase yet remained in the church’s mission. According to Jesus’ command, the believers had evangelized Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Now it was time to go to the Gentiles. This would be no simple task, for the obstacles were huge. We’ll see how the church began to reach out to the Gentiles when we come to chapter 10.

But before we get there Luke gives us two interesting snapshots of miracles at the end of chapter 9. Both snapshots involve the apostle Peter, and both snapshots illustrate a vital truth. The Lord can do amazing things to get the world’s attention so that people will give Him His rightful place in their lives.

I love reading the book of Acts because Acts is full of *action*. We see things happening. The church is moving. The Lord is revealing His greatness, and thus capturing a lost world’s attention. We discover that He does so in two ways in Acts 9:32-43. The Lord works through weakness (that’s verses 32-35). And the Lord works through loss (36-43).

#### I. The Lord works through weakness (32-35).

There are three scenes. First...

**A. A man became a paralytic (32-33).** “As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the saints in Lydda. <sup>33</sup> There he found a man named Aeneas, a paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years.”

As the story begins, the spotlight is on Peter. We saw Peter a lot in the first nine chapters of Acts. He’s the main character in the first half of Acts, a role Paul will fill in the second half of the book. Up until now we’ve seen Peter in Jerusalem, but in this episode he moves outside of Jerusalem. He travels to Lydda.

That’s a good thing. Remember, Jesus told His followers to *start* in Jerusalem, not finish there. The two events we’re about to study show us that the power of Christ is not restricted to Jerusalem. Though the church began in Jerusalem the Lord never intended for it to remain in isolation there. Jesus said, “*Go*,” and in the text before us we’ll see Peter leading the way, *going*. Not sitting in some hierarchical office at headquarters, but obeying the Master’s commission.

We’re in trouble when we stop *going*, when we start getting comfortable where we are, when we think that God blesses us so our lives will be easy.

Lydda was about twenty-five miles from Jerusalem, some twelve miles from Joppa on the Mediterranean Sea. In the Old Testament it’s known as Lod. Today it’s the location of Israel’s international airport. It’s possible that this area was evangelized originally by some of the people who had been to Jerusalem for Pentecost in Acts 2. Quite likely, Philip the evangelist also ministered in this area (Acts 8:40). Now Peter goes to Lydda.

Why? Luke tells us that as Peter traveled about the country he went to Lydda for the purpose of “visiting the saints,” that is, the believers. He went to see the church. His aim was to encourage the young believers there by giving them truth and support, as well as to correct false teaching that so quickly enters on the heels of the truth. We can assume that as an apostle he also went there to tell lost people about Jesus, to spearhead

new ministries, to open doors to yet unreached pockets of people. As an apostle Peter had the God-given ability to authenticate the truth of the gospel by use of miracles, as we'll see momentarily.

While in Lydda Peter found a man named Aeneas. Notice that Peter *found* him. The man was a paralytic and he didn't initiate this meeting, nor the healing that will take place. Again, Peter did.

We might assume that Aeneas was a believer, although Luke doesn't specify. In fact, while Luke later refers to Tabitha as a "disciple," he simply calls Aeneas "a man."

Life was hard for Aeneas. He'd been bedridden for eight long years. The KJV says he was "sick of the palsy." The NIV simply says he was a "paralytic." The term just means to be paralyzed, and Luke doesn't specify how. Had he had a stroke? A spinal injury? Was his paralysis due to some illness like polio? Dr. Luke doesn't tell us. All we know is that Aeneas had endured eight years of immobility, of *weakness*.

But that was about to change. In scene 2...

**B. The Lord healed him (34).** "Aeneas," Peter said to him, 'Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat.' Immediately Aeneas got up."

"This was really power!" says Charles Swindoll. "Some of us for years have been saying, 'Arise and make your bed,' to our teenagers with no result!"<sup>2</sup>

Take a close look at this miracle. You'll see a vivid contrast between this healing event and those of so-called "faith healers" in our day. The text points out three important details.

1. *The miracle was initiated by Peter, not Aeneas.* Remember, *Peter* found him. And then Peter approached him and spoke to him, announcing that he would be healed. Aeneas didn't go to some "healing service." Indeed, he didn't initiate this miracle. Peter did. Peter, unlike modern healers, didn't blame his healing failures on the sick person's "lack of faith," for there were no failures. Peter had a 100% track rate.

2. *The miracle was accomplished by Jesus, not Peter.* What did Peter say? Notice his words. "*Jesus Christ* heals you." So to be precise, Peter didn't heal this man. Jesus did. Peter was the instrument, the tool. A hammer can't build a house unless the carpenter picks it up. A human being can't restore lifeless limbs apart from the energizing work of the Creator. *Jesus Christ* heals you.

Please notice that this miracle brought attention to the *Lord*, not to Peter. He doesn't need us, but He does work through us. And the appropriate response when He does is to make it clear to all that *He* did the work.

3. *The miracle was instantaneous and complete.* This wasn't a "progressive healing." There was no hesitation on Peter's part, no stumbling around for dramatic effect. The healing was instantaneous ("Immediately Aeneas got up"). And complete (Peter told him to "take care of your mat," since he wouldn't be needing the mat again).

So God chose a very weak man to do something very great. And it produced a ripple effect, as we see in scene 3.

**C. The people were impacted (35).** "All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord."

This is quite a statement. Luke says two things happened to the people.

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<sup>2</sup> In K. Hughes, p. 142.

1. *They saw the man.* For eight years they'd seen a man who was bedfast, totally dependent on others for movement and care. Now they saw the same man healed, no longer dependent on others, but rather carrying his mat.

It made quite an impact. What did they do?

2. *They turned to the Lord.* The Greek verb is *epistrepho* which means "to turn around." Back in Acts 3, Peter used the same verb in his sermon after healing a crippled beggar. He told the crowd in the Jerusalem temple, "Repent, then, and *turn to God*, so that your sins may be wiped out (Acts 3:19)."

Know this, my friends. Aeneas wasn't the only one who moved that day. The whole city did a 180 and started moving in a different direction. As a result of the work of God, they *turned* to the Lord.

That word tells us something very important about salvation. When a person becomes a Christian, not just nominally but the real thing, it involves more than just a change of mind. There's a *turning*, a fundamental change of *direction* in life, an about-face.

And who turned that day? Notice again, Luke says that "all those who lived in Lydda and Sharon did." The people of Lydda turned. But so did the people of Sharon. Sharon was a neighboring village. The term also referred to a district. The fertile plain of Sharon runs long the Mediterranean coast from Joppa to Caesarea, about fifty miles. Which did Luke have in mind? I don't know. I do know that God got some people's attention that day, quite possibly *a lot of people's* attention, as indicated by the three letter word "all" in verse 35. "All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord." Whether that's saying that everybody in those two locations converted to Christ, or just those who saw Aeneas, this was a great day for the kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, our God knows how to get people's attention.

"You mean by healing people?" you ask. That's one way. While I don't believe that the Bible substantiates that the gift of healing is for today, I do believe God heals. And I also believe that healing the weak is just one way He gets people's attention. Another is by *not* healing them.

Think about Joni Erikson Tada, or closer to home, our sister Nancy Rae Litteral. Paralyzed in tragic accidents, but not healed, testimonies to the sufficiency of the God who does not always heal the body in this lifetime because He's intent on healing something far more significant. He has eternity in mind. He has the salvation of hell-bound sinners in mind. He has everlasting joy in mind.

Yes, the Lord can use lots of things to grip people's hearts. And when He does, people turn to His Son, Jesus Christ, believe in Him, give Him their allegiance, and begin to experience a joy that is eternal.

Perhaps He's working in *your* life right now. What should you do? Stop going your own way in life, and *turn to Him*.

The Lord works through weakness. A man becomes paralyzed. A tragedy? Yes. Tears shed? Yes. Frustration? Yes. But God used it for good, the saving of many people to His glory.

I often wonder, "What's the best strategy for reaching lost people in this community?" I read books about it. I listen to messages. But God's answer stands apart.

*Weakness.* He works through weakness. See Him at work on a hillside outside of Jerusalem. See the Son of God being lifted up and nailed to a cross. See His body being

laid on a stone slab in a tomb. May the Lord give us eyes to see the incredible opportunities we're prone *not* to see in a world that prizes health and strength and power.

To be saved we must believe in the One who became weak for us. He works through weakness. In the second episode, we see something similar.

## II. The Lord works through loss (36-43).

Her name is Tabitha, and she is one of the unsung heroes of the faith. The church needs more Tabitha's. I can say that with confidence in light of what God did when the early church *lost* her. Yes, lost. It was through her loss that God worked to capture the attention of a distracted world.

We learn three things about Tabitha in the story.

**A. Tabitha honored God in her life (36).** "In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor."

Joppa was ten miles beyond Lydda. Interestingly, it's the place where Jonah the prophet found a ship and tried to run from God (Jonah 1:1-3). Ironically, as Wiersbe observes, "Jonah went to Joppa to avoid going to the Gentiles, but Peter in Joppa received his call to go to the Gentiles!"<sup>3</sup> We'll see that next time, the Lord willing.

Living in Joppa was this wonderful Christian woman named Tabitha. That was her Aramaic name. The Greek equivalent was *Dorcas*, both names meaning "gazelle." What really strikes me about Tabitha is her reputation. The KJV says, "This woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did."

Preaching is good, but what would the church do without servants using their hands to do the work of the ministry? Tabitha made clothes for the needy, according to verse 39, especially for the widows. No wonder Luke calls her a "disciple" in verse 36. When you saw Tabitha there was no question she was a follower of Jesus.

Yes, before us is a woman who honored the Lord in her life. What do we learn from her?

1. *To do the same, we must follow the Lord.* If we are going to honor the Lord in our lives we must *follow* Him. That's what a "disciple" does, as Tabitha exemplified.

2. *In addition, we must love people in practical ways.* I'm struck by Luke's description that Tabitha "was always doing good and helping the poor." You can tell if our religion is true by how we treat the defenseless and needy.

Remember Jesus' words in **Matthew 25:35-36**? "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Here was Paul's charge in **Galatians 6:10**, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

James sums it up in **James 1:27**, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress..."

Tabitha loved people in practical ways. She was always doing good and helping the poor. And beloved, according to what we've just heard Jesus, Paul, and James say, this ought to be the norm, not the exception. Churches should be full of people who are doing good and helping the poor.

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<sup>3</sup> Wiersbe, p. 443.

We tend to think it's the government's job. Apparently, Tabitha saw it as part of her responsibility.

Jesus said, "The poor you will have with you always." And we do. Granted, poverty is relative. Many who classify as "poor" in our country are wealthy compared to the people I met in Papua New Guinea a few years ago, for instance, where the average income is \$150 per year. And from talking to others who have the knowledge to make the comparison, the poverty in countries like Haiti, Sudan, and Ethiopia is even worse than PNG.

So while poverty is sort of relative, the reality is that we are living in a world full of poor people. The poor you will have with you always.

-1 in 6 people in America face hunger. More than 1 in 5 children is at risk of hunger.<sup>4</sup>

Among African-Americans and Latinos, it's 1 in 3.

-In the US, hunger isn't caused by a lack of food, but rather the continued prevalence of poverty.

-40% of food is thrown out in the US every year, or about \$165 billion worth. All of this uneaten food could feed 25 million Americans.

- These 8 states have statistically higher food insecurity rates than the US national average (14.6%): Arkansas (21.2%), Mississippi (21.1%), Texas (18.0%), Tennessee (17.4%), North Carolina (17.3%), Missouri (16.9%), Georgia (16.6%), Ohio (16.0%).

We are living in an area where jobs are scarce and a lot of people are having trouble making it. This is a matter of concern. It's also an opportunity to be like our Savior, to show that we care.

I know there is abuse. I know that caring for physical needs is not our top concern, for Jesus said, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul." I also know that when we as a church meet the needs of the poor, particularly those in the household of faith, we're giving the lost world a picture of our Savior—who left the comforts of heaven, lowered His standard of living, and gave His life to bring sinners out of their spiritual bankruptcy (2 Cor 8:9).

Beloved, this is where God has placed us, where one out of five people struggles to have adequate food. If we're going to make Christ known to the lost in this area we need to be like Tabitha, people who love the Lord and love people in practical ways. She was a woman who honored God in her life.

**B. Tabitha honored God in her death (37-39).** Verse 37 states, "About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room."

Now there's a tragedy. It's hard to find selfless servants. This church had one—and she *died*. We're not told what her sickness was, nor how long she lingered, but that she died.

Again, this is God's way. He works through weakness and loss, even death itself. "He demonstrated His love for us in this, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

What the church members did next is quite significant. They prepared her body for burial *and called for Peter*. Verse 38—"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!"

Why did they call Peter? Did they want some pastoral care to assist them in their grieving? Perhaps. But perhaps they hoped for something more.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dosomething.org/facts/11-facts-about-hunger-us>

“What are we ever going to do without Tabitha?” many undoubtedly were saying. “We need her! Maybe Peter can do something. Let’s see if he will come.”

Verse 39 explains what happened, “Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room.” Our culture doesn’t handle death too well. We either try to dress it up and minimize its tragic reality, or we ignore it. These believers faced it.

Luke describes what they did, “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.” The believers faced the fact of Tabitha’s death. She’s gone. A great loss has occurred. They actually went to the room where the body was. And they *cried*. It is okay to cry, you know.

They also showed Peter the robes and clothing she had made. This wasn’t about fashion. This was a reflection on how God had used this woman to bless their lives. As I visualize this scene, I see the widows wearing the clothing Tabitha made for them, as they poured out their hearts to the apostle.

“She made this for me, Peter,” one widow said. “I was cold one winter night and had no money to buy clothing, when I heard a knock at my door. It was Tabitha. She handed me this robe. And then she sat and visited with me. She helped me get through the loss of my husband. Oh, Peter, what am I going to do without her?”

As she sobbed another widow spoke up, “Sir, I lost my husband five years ago. My only son died suddenly last year. It’s been tight, but God’s been good. One of the ways He’s sustained me is through the kindness of Tabitha. One time she gave me a dress and in the side pocket I found two silver coins. But what meant even more than the dress and the money was knowing that someone *cared* for a poor, helpless person like me. What will I do without her?” She, too, broke down in tears.

Do you think people will respond that way when you die? Why did Tabitha make such an impact on the disciples in Joppa? Simply put, *because she cared*. She really cared about people and showed it. She made clothing for the needy.

Our wise God has given each of us abilities and skills. Can you sew? Can you fix cars? Can you cook a meal? Can you clean a guest room for a visitor? Do you know how to raise a garden, balance a checkbook, and live by a budget?

The question is why. Why did God give us the health, ability, and the learned experience to be able to do these things?

You probably have a sponge on your kitchen sink. What does a sponge do? It soaks up things. It absorbs. It takes in...until you apply some pressure to it.

1. *God doesn’t bless us so we can live like a sponge.* This is our propensity. By nature, we are takers. We take from God day after day. We soak up the goods this life has to offer and fail to acknowledge that these goods are on loan from the Almighty.

It’s why we need a Savior. God sent Jesus to provide forgiveness for our selfishness, and to give us a new heart which recognizes...

2. *God blesses us so we can serve others and advance His kingdom.* Everything we have has come from Him. Your house, education, job experience, tools, guest room. You have it because God entrusted it to you. The ability to sew and the fact that you had a mother who taught you how to use that ability. Skillful hands that can fix things when they break, and a dad that showed you how use them. God didn’t give us abilities and possessions so we could live a comfortable life. He gave them to us—more accurately,

he *loaned* them to us—so we could serve Him by serving others, thus advancing His kingdom.

You say, “Do you mean I can use my skill as a mechanic for kingdom purposes?” That’s exactly what I mean. “Do widows’ cars ever break down? We have widows and single moms in our church. Not all of them have cars, but some do. Do they need help with car repairs, or at least help in finding an honest mechanic who won’t take advantage of them? My friend, when you use your skill as a mechanic to serve a widow, you are doing kingdom business.

The same is true when you cook a meal for someone who’s sick, or mow their grass, or fix their computer. This can be kingdom work—if we do it for the King.

I’m convinced that right here is one of the main reasons why so many Christians are living unfulfilled lives. They are hoarding what God entrusted to them. Why does God bless us with abilities, businesses, houses, cars, and the rest? So we can be comfortable and self-sufficient? No. If you want to experience fulfillment beyond imagination, roll up your sleeves and serve those in need.

Several years ago God brought an unmarried couple to us who were living together. As we ministered God’s Word to them, they believed in Christ. They also saw their need to stop living together. But that meant one of them needed a place to go. God provided by burdening one of our retired couples to open up their home and allow the woman to live in their extra bedroom. That’s kingdom business.

On another occasion we were working with a single mom who began to learn that her parenting was unbiblical. She needed help. She needed a woman who would spend time with her to model how to be a godly mom. And God provided one of you.

We have increasing opportunities like this. A couple that needs marriage counseling doesn’t have a car. Another couple that lives month to month needs someone to show them how to use a budget and then meet regularly with them for accountability. A woman who lost her mate needs someone to sit with in church.

Tabitha never preached a sermon from a pulpit, yet she preached hundreds of them, most of them more memorable than the sermons Peter and John delivered. We need more Tabithas at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. Tabitha honored God a third way...

**C. Tabitha honored God in her return to this life (40-43).** Verses 40-41 tell us how, “Peter sent them all out of the room; 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. <sup>41</sup> He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive.”

The scene reminds me of what Jesus did with the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:34-43). The words are almost identical (in fact, only one letter difference). Jesus said (in Aramaic), “*Talitha cumi*, little girl, arise.” Peter said, “*Tabitha cumi*, Tabitha, arise.”

As a result of this miracle three things happened.

1. *The church was encouraged.* Can’t you just see the widows’ faces light up as they see Tabitha standing there smiling?

2. *Many lost people believed in the Lord.* That’s what Luke says in verses 42-43, “This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup> Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.” *Many people believed.*

3. *Tabitha received more opportunity for service.* I see the mystery of God in this. Why did God bring Tabitha back to life? He certainly doesn’t always. He didn’t

bring Stephen back in chapter seven. Nor would He when the apostle James lost his life which we'll see in chapter 12. So why then did God grant Tabitha more life and not Stephen and James?

William LaSor shares the following story, "When a runaway truck crushed a boy and his bicycle under its wheels, leaving his deaf-mute brother as the parents' only surviving child, the mother told me, in her grief, 'Everyone in the city is asking, "Why wasn't this one taken and the other spared?"' But I don't feel that way. I loved them both alike.' She bowed before the strange will of God in lovely humility that was an example to all who tried to sympathize with her."<sup>5</sup>

I don't know why God returned Tabitha. He doesn't tell us. Maybe He gave her an extension on life just to show us how much He thinks of those who serve behind the scenes. This I know. By returning to this life, Tabitha got to do more of what she loved to do. *Serve*.

How does the Lord get the world's attention? We've seen two ways today. Through weakness and loss.

Make It Personal: We need to learn three lessons...

1. *Needs are merely opportunities for God to work.* The paralysis of Aeneas, the sickness and death of Tabitha. On the one hand, those were needs, even tragedies. On the other hand they became opportunities for God to get the world's attention. We must see needs in our lives that way, not just problems but as opportunities for God to work.

2. *Needs are also opportunities for me to work.* LaSor suggests that one of the reasons for the continued growth of the early church was the good works which it did. I think he's right.

Do we need good preaching? Absolutely. But we also need mechanics and cooks and carpenters and nurses and computer techs who will see themselves as stewards for the kingdom. Will you avail yourself and your abilities to the Lord today for His work?

3. *In all cases, the purpose is the glory of God.* Ultimately, that's what human needs are, opportunities to see God receive glory. May He use us to that end.

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<sup>5</sup> William LaSor, *Church Alive*, p. 149.