

Acts 9:32-43, No. 21**“The Presence of the Lord”****February 7, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

As we noted last time, 9:31 ended the second chapter or section of the book of Acts. With v. 32 we begin the third of the six sections that make up the book. This may partly explain why Luke begins with the account of two miracles. He is in this way indicating that in this next period of gospel advance miracles were continuing in association with the ministry of the apostles.

Text Comment

We now return to the ministry of Peter. While Luke will briefly mention him on two occasions in the next several chapters, Paul, whose conversion has just been narrated in chapter 9, will not again take center stage in Luke’s narrative until chapter 13.

v.32 Peter was, as we say nowadays, an itinerant preacher. In this case he was also visiting and teaching the Christians who lived north and west of Jerusalem. Lydda was located in the Plain of Sharon on the road from Jerusalem about 12 miles from the coastal town of Joppa. The congregation in Lydda may have been composed primarily of Christians who fled the persecution in Jerusalem or converts from the preaching of Philip mentioned in 8:40.

v.33 Aeneas is a Greek name, indeed the same name as that of the hero of the great epic of Roman Latin literature, *The Aeneid*. But he was a Jew. Many Jews had Greek names.

The wonder of the healing miracles reported in the Gospels and in Acts is often accentuated by the details of the person’s condition. This man had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years! This was not some temporary condition, not something psychosomatic; nor was it merely an inconvenience to him. It had ruined his life!

v.36 Tabitha is an Aramaic name that means “deer” or “gazelle.” So her Greek name, Dorcas, similarly means “Gazelle.” [Peterson, 321] It was a term often used for women in ancient near eastern poetry. [Page, 142] Her reputation was, as it ought to have been for a Christian woman, one of generosity and the love of others. In v. 39 we will be given more information about what she did for others and how many were indebted to her and loved her in return. She was probably a woman of means.

v.37 Why was Peter sent for? Did the disciples simply want Peter to pay his respects to this faithful Christian woman, to have the Lord’s own disciple and the leader of the apostles there would be a great honor, or perhaps they wished him to preach at her burial, or, given the prevalence of miracles in those days, did they actually entertain the hope that Peter might do something to bring her back to life? We are not told. I suppose it is possible that we are to understand that he had been called for while Tabitha was alive, but arrived only after she had died. [Wm. Ramsay, *Pictures of the Apostolic Church*, 74]

- v.40 As the Lord had done on one memorable occasion (Luke 8:51-56), an occasion when Peter himself was present, he sent the crowd out of the room. Again, why he did that is not said, nor is it said whether at least some of the woman's family or the church's leaders remained behind when everyone else was asked to leave. Peter, of course, had witnessed that earlier miracle of resuscitation and, in effect, did what he had seen the Lord do.
- v.43 It is not insignificant that Simon was a tanner or that his occupation was mentioned here. Jews widely thought of tanners as unclean because they were in constant contact with the hides of dead animals. Peter was no longer troubled by Simon's occupation, though, as we will see in the next chapter, he still had some scruples left over from his Jewish upbringing.

When persecution had broken out in Jerusalem, of which we read in 8:1, the apostles had remained in Jerusalem. They had felt it important that they not flee. But as we read in 9:31, the church was enjoying a period of peace and, accordingly we find Peter on a preaching tour. We would, of course, love to know what the other apostles were doing at this time, but Luke concentrates on the ministry of Peter and of Paul. He was not only evangelizing – preaching the gospel to those who did not yet believe – but encouraging the Christians whom he met as he traveled from town to town. On this preaching tour Peter encountered two believers, a paralyzed man named Aeneas and a saintly woman, Tabitha, who had just died. In each case he performed a miracle. I say “performed,” because he was the agent of the healing, his spoken words effected the deliverance.

When reading Acts it is always valuable to ask ourselves “Why did Luke include these two accounts?” After all, he has already made clear that the apostles worked miracles. Peter and John had healed a lame man at the temple, an episode reported in detail in chapter 3, Philip had performed a number of miracles in Samaria. Why do we learn about Aeneas and Tabitha among all the people who were miraculously healed of serious illness by the apostles? Why did Luke sandwich these two brief accounts between the account of the conversion of Paul and that of Cornelius in our chapter 10? In one sense Aeneas was simply another paralyzed man who was healed. There had been many such miracles of healing. Why this one? Tabitha was brought back to life from the dead and even the Lord, who performed many miracles, did that on only three occasions that we know of. So that was an unusual case, for all we know the *only* case of Peter actually bringing someone back from the dead, and perhaps was included in Luke's narrative for that reason. But then why Aeneas?

What is clear is that the details of these two accounts, betray the testimony of an eyewitness, someone who was there and saw it all. If in the case of Tabitha there was no one actually in the room when Peter healed her – which I don't think is likely – Peter would be the eyewitness and Luke would have got his information from him. But in both cases it seems more likely that Luke had during his two-year stay in Palestine, while Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea, access to someone or several someones who had been present when the healings had occurred. So much of the New Testament narrative was verified by eyewitness testimony, a fact that has become still more certain as the result of recent scholarship.

William Ramsay, the great 19th and early 20th century classical scholar and archaeologist, trained in the skepticism of 19th century German scholarship regarding the historical veracity of the New Testament, began his archaeological researches in Turkey expecting to find that Luke's account of the travels of Paul was worthless as real history. But he discovered that in fact Luke was precisely accurate, even about first century place names and political boundaries and nomenclature, matters about which scholarship at that time supposed Luke to have been in error. Indeed, Ramsay concluded that Luke's data were too accurate to have been written in the second half of the second century, more than a century after the events it purported to describe, which is what the Germans were claiming at the time. Ramsay's researches led him not only to rehabilitate Luke's reputation as a serious and reliable historian, but to argue that Luke was more precisely accurate than any other ancient historian. His researches on the ground also led him to believe in the message that Luke was conveying with his history. [W. Ward Gasque, *Sir William Ramsay: Archaeologist and Biblical Scholar*, 60] Ramsay would write of Tabitha's resuscitation:

“The description of the scene when Peter arrived at the house strongly suggests the account of an eyewitness before whose memory the visible details stood out clearly.”
[*Pictures of the Apostolic Church*, 75]

Or as Ramsay put it in regard to another of Luke's firsthand reports:

The reader, if he reads the narrative rightly, can see with the eyes and hear with the ears of a man who was there and witnessed all that happened. [*Bearing of Recent Discoveries*, 79]

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great London preacher of the mid-20th century, had a sermon on Aeneas. He must have felt it was a valuable message, because he preached that sermon more than 40 times over the course of his ministry. Not 40 times to his own congregation, of course, but 40 times here and there. Indeed, on his first visit to the United States in 1937, it was his sermon on Aeneas he preached for Clarence McCartney at the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, one of the flagship conservative congregations of the old Northern Presbyterian Church. In 1938 he preached the same sermon to a large gathering of ministers in England. Lloyd-Jones was a great preacher and the newspaper accounts of his sermon on Aeneas confirm that the effect on the great congregation was electric. As one reporter put it, “The Vast Congregation was gripped and held from start to finish.” [I. Murray, *The First Forty Years*, 328, 334]

But actually Lloyd-Jones' sermon on this text is a curious piece of allegorizing, the sort of thing you wouldn't expect from Lloyd-Jones. He made the healing of Aeneas into a parable of what needs to happen in the church. Aeneas is thus made a picture of a sinner and Peter's command and promise: “Jesus Christ heals you,” is thus a picture of the way of salvation. As a matter of fact, virtually all commentators take Aeneas to have already been a Christian man, v. 33 following v. 32 as it does. [Peterson, 321] Tabitha, on the other hand, being explicitly identified as a Christian, is a picture of the recumbent or the sleeping church needing resuscitation and revitalizing.

I have immense respect for the preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, but I cannot preach this text in that way. I don't think Luke included these two brief accounts to teach us what needs to happen in the church and to the church.

To be sure, all the miracles of the apostles served certain purposes and those purposes were certainly served by these two miracles as well. Such miracles accredited the apostles, here Peter in particular, as men sent from God with the authority of God to speak and act on his behalf. In that way miracles were powerful confirmation of the truth of the message they proclaimed. In a day before the New Testament was written, it was critical that the men who would write it were known to be men who had the authority to communicate the Word of God. Doing what no other human being could do was the evidence of that utterly unique authority. The fact that Peter could do such marvelous things, that he could wield supernatural power in the same way that Moses and Elijah and Elisha had and, supremely, in the same way that Jesus had, proved beyond doubt that God was working through Peter and speaking through Peter. It is no accident that the miracles of the apostles were in kind so similar to the miracles performed by Moses and Elijah and Elisha and by the Lord Jesus himself. The apostles are being identified in that way with both the great OT prophets and with the Lord Christ. They wield the same power; their words have the same authority.

But I don't think that fully explains why these two particular miracles are reported as they are here at the end of chapter 9. What Luke seems particularly interested in demonstrating in both cases, and what is key to his entire theology and message, is that it was *Jesus Christ himself* who was at work in the ministry of Peter and the other apostles, and, for that matter, in the ministry of Stephen and Philip. What these miracle accounts are intended to demonstrate – as so much of the history that Luke has already recorded – is that Jesus Christ is alive and at work in the world. Not only was he not dead, he was not some absent figure, but present with his people *as he had promised he would be*. Notice how this point is made an emphasis in the accounts we read.

First the miracles as Peter performed them closely mimicked the Lord's own miracles. The healing of Aeneas is reminiscent of the healing of another long paralyzed man, the account of which we find in Luke's Gospel (5:17-26). On that occasion also - remember when the man was dropped through the roof of the house - the paralyzed man was told to rise, take up his bed, and walk, just as Aeneas was here. And the parallel is even more precise in the case of Tabitha when compared with the miracle of the resuscitation of Jairus' daughter reported in Luke 8. As Jesus had done, Peter sent the mourners out of the room. The words he said to Tabitha, lying dead before him, are very like the words Jesus had spoken to the dead girl. Indeed, as more than one commentator has pointed out, if Peter spoke to Tabitha in Aramaic, as seems likely he would have done since she is identified by name first as Tabitha, an Aramaic name, only one letter would have been different in the words spoken by the Lord in the first instance and by Peter in the second. The Lord said, *Talitha kum*, that is, "Little girl, get up." Peter would have said, *Tabitha kum*, that is, "Tabitha, get up."

And, finally, as the Lord had taken Jairus' daughter by the hand, so Peter gave Tabitha his hand. The extent to which Peter was consciously imitating what he had seen the Lord do and say on that earlier occasion who can say, but that Luke has taken care to report the similarities between

the two occasions to draw our attention to them who can deny. So attention is drawn to the fact that Peter did what Jesus had done. Remarkable!

Second, Luke places special emphasis on the fact that it was by the power of Jesus that these healings were performed. In the case of Aeneas, Peter makes the point explicit, telling the man not simply that he was being healed by the power of Jesus, but more than that, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you!” Peter was reporting on what was happening, not doing it himself. That is, Jesus was doing the healing. It was not as if Jesus, upon leaving the world, had given the apostles a supply of his power that they could then use to heal the sick. No, it was Jesus himself in that room healing the sick man.

And if that were not enough, Peter makes the point even more powerfully in the case of Tabitha. He knelt and prayed by the body. He was asking the Lord for a result he knew perfectly well he was unable himself to bring to pass. The resulting miracle was the answer to that prayer. Power was being unleashed without question, extraordinary things were happening, but Peter was the last person to suppose that it was *his* power or that *he* had in some way effected these cures. Given that Peter had said to Aeneas “Jesus Christ heals you,” it seems right to me to suppose that when Peter prayed over Tabitha’s body, he prayed directly to Jesus, not to the Father. “Lord Jesus, please do for this dear servant of yours what you did for Jairus’ daughter!”

Third, it can hardly be accidental that the word that Peter used in commanding both Aeneas who was not dead and Tabitha who was to get up is the very word used of God raising Jesus from the dead. It is the word Luke uses three times in the last chapter of his Gospel to refer to the Lord’s resurrection. These miracles, in this way, became visible signs of the eternal life and the conquest of death that Jesus accomplished on behalf of those who trust in him. *The risen Christ had been in those rooms to share his life and his power over death with others!*

Fourth, and finally, a great point is made of the fact that it was to Jesus that the credit for the healings was given *by everyone*, and the result of the miracles was precisely that large numbers of people *believed in Jesus*. We see that in v. 35 where Luke emphasizes the impact of Aeneas’ healing by saying that “all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw Aeneas walking normally – no doubt they also heard his account of what had happened to him – and *they turned to the Lord, all turned to the Lord*. That is hyperbole to be sure, exaggeration for effect, for emphasis, but what is being emphasized is how many became Christians as a result of these miracles. A great many people turned to the Lord. But no one apparently made the mistake of supposing that they ought to believe in Peter.

And so in the case of Tabitha. The women who had washed her body and who had begun to prepare her for burial, together with the other believers who were there, saw her walking toward them, coming out of the room where her body had lain, heard her speak, and after they had shed their tears of joy and exchanged their hugs, they began spreading the word. And what was the result of that? Luke tells us: “Many believed *in the Lord*.”

This was everywhere the case in the New Testament. When the Lord’s disciples were sent by him on a preaching tour and given authority to perform miracles – raise the sick, cast out demons - we read that this resulted in great curiosity *about Jesus*, not about them. Nobody

assumed that this was a power possessed by these men themselves. They wanted to know about Jesus whom these men were serving. It was clear to everyone that the power did not rest with these men, but with Jesus whom they served. And so here.

Acts began, as you remember, with the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that Jesus had said he would send in his place. And in Peter's sermon he made clear – indeed, this was the central point of his sermon - that *it was Jesus* who had sent the Spirit, Jesus who was present by the Spirit, and Jesus who was calling the nations to himself. Throughout Acts this is going to be the fundamental conviction of Luke's history. Jesus is present in the world by his Spirit. We don't know exactly what that means - a Spirit, one self present by another; it's a mystery to be sure. From time to time, as it were, the veil is drawn back and we see him there. Paul saw the glory of Christ and he heard Jesus address him by name. None of those who had become Christians on Pentecost and afterward had seen Jesus or heard him speak. And now in Peter's two miracles we are reminded that whether or not one can see the risen Christ or his glory, whether or not one can hear his voice, it is still Jesus present and working by his Holy Spirit. He is here and he is there. He may be in heaven, but he is also on earth by his Spirit to speak and to act.

If you want to know what Pentecost means and what these two miracles meant, what the Book of Acts is all about, it is this: the Jesus who ascended to heaven and who sent the Holy Spirit in his place, is now at work in the world through that Holy Spirit. He said before he ascended to heaven that he would be with his disciples until the end of the age. He had taught his disciples in the Gospels that where two or three of his followers met together he would there in the midst of them. *He would be there!* Elsewhere in the New Testament a point is made of the fact that *the Lord is always with his people*. Indeed in Hebrews 13 the point is put in a way that is emphatic in Greek but bad grammar in English. "I will not, not leave you, I will not not forsake you." Not a double negative in Greek, just simply emphasis piled on emphasis.

We know this, of course, but then you and I *don't know it* far too much of time. We don't live in the consciousness that the Lord is present to help us, to provide for us, and, to be sure, sometimes to correct us. We do not live our lives – *even when we imagine that we are completely alone* – we do not live our lives alone. We are, you and I, *never alone!* Jesus is always with us by his Spirit. These great miracles are only dramatic, unusual, once-for-all demonstrations of that tremendous fact. We are always, you and I, in the company of the Son of God.

Acts is the same story of the kingdom of God, the rule of Jesus Christ, his ministry in the world as were the Gospels. It is the same Lord Jesus, but not physically, not immediately, not visibly present; instead present by the Spirit. And all the words in all the world cannot describe what a universe of difference that presence must make. Luke's whole interest in these miracles is to accent his main point: that Jesus was there in Lydda and Jesus was there in Joppa, that Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead, even if he did it by the power of the Holy Spirit and even if he used the words of his disciple. So obvious was the fact of this divine presence that *no one* failed to grasp it. They turned in great number *to Jesus*, to the one who had healed Aeneas and had raised up Tabitha. Jesus had been there; he had shown his power and his love to them, and they had no choice but to believe *in him*.

Now Luke leaves us in no doubt that it isn't always and won't be usually so obvious. Miracles were exceedingly rare, else they wouldn't have been miracles. Appearances of the Lord, such as to Stephen and to Paul, were rarer still. But the raising of the spiritually dead is happening all the time, as it happened here. Tabitha's was the only dead body brought back to life, but the miracle of her resuscitation was the cause of a great many who were spiritually dead being raised to life, and Jesus had done it.

Do not miss the point. Jesus is here to see you, to know you, to help you, to respond to your prayers, to love you and to save you. He is, by his Spirit, as really next to you and near to you as he was to those people who saw him and heard him during the days of his ministry. *That* is the extraordinary lesson of Luke's history and the extraordinary fact of our existence in this world. We are not alone. We are not by ourselves. Every moment of every day *he is here* with his power, his love, his truth, his care, even sometimes with his frown and his rod of judgment. He is no less *with you* than he was with his disciples along the lake in Galilee or in a home in Capernaum or at Bethany with Mary and Martha or in the upper room in Jerusalem.

That fact absolutely changes the meaning of human life and, more important still, changes the opportunity that lies before every human being in this world. The Lord Christ is here; is present. What will you do about him? Will you ignore him or will you turn to him for help and salvation?

If you had been in one of those homes at the moment of Christ's fabulous gift of health and life, you would live the rest of your life alert to the fact that Christ was with you, always with you. You would be conscious of his presence and live your life practicing his presence, turning away from temptation because he was there to see you, but turning to him repeatedly for his grace to help in time of need. This is the great ministry of the Holy Spirit, to mediate the presence of Jesus of Nazareth to the world and by doing so, to bring the world to him and him to his people.

You know very well, you cannot possibly deny how it would change your life if you could see the Lord Christ himself walking beside you every moment of every day; if at any moment you could take his hand; if at any moment you could glance to one side or another and see him there. How careful it would make you of your words and your actions. How often you would turn to him for advice, for comfort, and for strength to do his will. How much encouragement you would take from the sight of him there beside you, the glory of God upon him, the nail prints in his hands and feet.

Well *he is here* with you. He *is* by your side. That is what it means to believe in him: to know he is here with you now, here with us at this moment, as surely as he was by the sea in Galilee, as surely as he was on the cross, as surely as he was with his disciples in the Upper Room that first Easter Sunday, as surely as he was with his disciples on the Mount of Olives when he ascended out of their sight, as surely as he was with Peter, Aeneas, and Tabitha.

True enough, belief, faith, however strong is not and cannot be the same as sight. Paul will remind us that we live by faith and not by sight. We must wait for sight. There is a difference to be sure. To trust in the presence of a Jesus Christ whom we cannot see to put us in the situation of a blind man who is cut off from the world because he cannot see it. But no one doubts that the blind man knows that the world is really there. He has the evidence of that in a hundred ways.

And so it is with Christ. That we cannot see him hardly means that he isn't here. Those long ago miracles remind us of that fact and assure us that the Jesus who was in Lydda and Joppa *must be* equally in Tacoma! And if so, then it is ours to live accordingly! He is here! He is always here! The Lord Christ in his glory and power and love is always with you! Every moment of every day!

“And so we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’”