

## King Jesus Comes to Town

A Sermon on Acts 9:32-43

Pastor Knox @ Faith Pres PCA Tacoma WA

May 19, 2024 PM

Our sermon text this evening illustrates several themes, each of which could justify its own sermon. My goal this evening is to explore one that we have not yet had much opportunity to consider so far in our sermon series on the book of Acts: **the kingdom of God**.

Although you could count on two hands the number of times the term “kingdom of God” is mentioned in the book of Acts, there can be **little** doubt that it is one of the **central** themes of Acts. From a **literary** perspective, we see this quite clearly in the fact that the book of Acts is structured by an **inclusio**. Acts **opens** in chapter 1, verse 3, with a description of the resurrected Lord Jesus “**speaking** about the **kingdom of God**,” and it **ends** with a description of the apostle **Paul** “**proclaiming** the **kingdom of God**.” **Another** piece of literary evidence pointing to the **centrality** of this theme is that Luke placed the **Ascension** of Jesus to His heavenly throne as the **first major event** of this book.

From a **theological** perspective, we can see the centrality of the Kingdom of God in Acts in several ways. For starters, it’s helpful to remember that the WCF teaches us in chapter 25 that the visible church **is** the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the story of the **church’s** growth is **also** the story of the **Kingdom’s** growth. Along similar lines, we should note that Luke summarizes the preaching of both Paul and Philip as “**proclaiming/preaching the kingdom of God**.” Likewise, we should remember Peter’s Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, which concludes with the declaration, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both **Lord** and **Christ** (*that is “the **anointed one**,” the **king***), this Jesus whom you crucified.” In that sense, **every** time Acts describes Jesus as **Lord** or **Christ**, the theme of **kingdom** is in the background.

Our passage this evening emphasizes **another** thread that ties into this theme of the kingdom of God in Acts: **miracles of healing**. The gospel accounts consistently emphasize the connection between **healing** and the **kingdom** of God. You could legitimately summarize Jesus' public ministry prior to the cross as **healing** and **proclaiming** the **kingdom**. Jesus makes that connection **explicit** in passages such as Matthew 10:5-15 and Luke 10:1-12, where he sends his disciples throughout Judea with a **two-part commission**: proclaim the kingdom of God and heal. Listen, for example, to Matthew 10:6-8, "but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And **proclaim** as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' **8 Heal** the sick, **raise** the dead, **cleanse** lepers, cast out demons."

As we read our text this evening, keep this theme of the kingdom of God in mind. What do these two stories of healing teach us about the kingdom of God post-Resurrection and post-Pentecost?

Our sermon will focus on Acts 9:32-43, but for the sake of context, I'm going to start reading at verse 31.

This is the word of the Lord...

Please keep your Bibles open, and may the Lord enable us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Our sermon text illustrates **three** aspects of the kingdom of God.

First, it illustrates the **character** of the kingdom. As we consider what we can learn from these miracle stories, it's important to remember that the Bible consistently describes the miracles it records as "**signs.**" While these extraordinary events are wonderful and helpful in and of themselves, their **significance primarily** lies in the **reality to which they point**. In other words, while extraordinary healings such as the ones recorded here, were, of course, helpful to Aeneas, Tabitha, and company, the Lord had a **bigger purpose in mind** than simply helping or impressing these folks. These miracles are meant to **signify** something to **them** and to **us** about the one who performed them (in this case Peter) and about his **message**.

In past sermons we've already touched on how miracles **authenticate** the **messenger**. Peter's ability to wield supernatural power confirms his **identity** as God's messenger.

But this evening I'd like to focus on how these miracles illustrate Peter's **message** of the **kingdom**. Look again at these two stories of healing and consider how they illustrate our **need** for the **salvation** associated with the kingdom of God. Ponder with me the pitiful condition of Aeneas, paralyzed and bedridden for 8 years. Clearly this was not a **recent** injury or a **passing** illness, but rather a life-altering condition. From what we can tell, it seems that this man was unable to **walk**, to **work**, or even **stand** on his own. Consider the **frustration**, the **discouragement**, the **embarrassment**, and the **sorrow** of not being able to do the following: help his family with the **harvest**, pick up his **children**, help his wife carry in the **groceries**, defend his family or his nation in warfare, perhaps even use the restroom independently.

He must have had many moments when he was tempted to **despair**: to think that his life was **useless**, to feel utterly **overwhelmed** by all the things he **wished** he could do, but **could not**. To remember the happy days **before** his paralysis and to

compare them with what his life had **now become** would have been a **burden** that I imagine most of us would find very hard to bear.

If we are moved by the paralysis of this man's **body**, how **much more so** should we be moved by the thought that **sin** is a kind of **spiritual paralysis**. In Romans 8, Paul describes sin as a kind of **moral inability** when he says, Romans 8:7–8, “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it **cannot**. Those who are in the flesh **cannot** please God.” It is bad enough to be **physically** unable to do what we wish or feel we ought to be able to do; how much worse to be **morally** unable, to be incapacitated, not by disease or injury, but by a dark mind and a hard heart.

This is one of the Bible’s ways of picturing fallen man: **handicapped** by sin. He **cannot** do what is right and good; He **cannot** be acceptable to God, not because He is **physically** unable to do God’s will, but because He is **morally** unable. Fallen man does not **want** to do God’s will. Fallen man’s view of what is true, good, and right has been turned **inside-out** and **upside-down** by sin.

But this is not the Bible’s **only** way of picturing fallen man. The Bible **also** describes fallen man as **spiritually dead**, and this brings us to the **second** scene of this text: **Tabitha’s deathbed**. Let that scene sink into your imagination. Here lies a lovely Christian woman. She is a paragon of godly womanhood, well-known and beloved for her life of goodness, generosity, and love. The widows grieving her loss are adorned by the many beautiful garments she made during her fruitful life. Even her name, which means Gazelle, is a testament to the grace, beauty, and strength of her character.

And here she lies **cold, pale, stiff, and dead**.

If we find the scene poignant, how **much more so** should we find it poignant when the Bible describes **mankind** as **spiritually dead**. Created at the climax of Day 6, Adam and Eve were the very **pinnacle** of creation, the image of God, crowned with both the capacity and the calling to rule the earth as God’s vice-regents. But through Adam’s sin **death** spread to **all** men- not just **physical** death, the fitting punishment

for our guilt, but **spiritual** death: alienation from God; slavery to sin; the spell of the evil one, the corruption of the flesh, and the **defilement** of fallen world. And all of this overshadowed by the threat of what the Bible calls the **second** death: an eternity of judgment.

Although Aeneas and Tabitha were both faithful Christians, the paralysis and death of their bodies illustrate our **need** for the salvation that is found in the Kingdom of God. To be **outside** of the kingdom of God is to live under the **dark reign of sin and death**. It is to serve a **cruel and wicked master**, who will lead your soul into a desolate country of **curses** and **destruction**. But to be brought into the kingdom of **God** is to live under the life-giving reign of King **Jesus**. It is to become a citizen of a heavenly city, one which flows with the water of life and is lit by the glory of God.

But look again at these stories and notice how the healings not only illustrate our need for salvation, but salvation itself. Notice how both stories use the language of **resurrection** (verses 34, 40, and 41). Notice how both Aeneas and Tabitha are **immediately** restored to **health** and **peace**. Notice how Tabitha passes from death to **life**, and her eyes are opened (verse 40). So it is for every sinner who is brought into the kingdom of God: we made **alive** with Christ, we are **raised up** with him and seated in heavenly places, the eyes of our hearts are **enlightened**, and we are a **new creation**.

These stories remind us that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of **life, grace, joy, peace, and blessing**. Do you know and love this **beautiful** realm called the kingdom of God?

The character of the kingdom.

Secondly, our sermon text shows us the **heart** of the kingdom. Look again with me at this passage and notice the **presence** of **Jesus**. In a general sense, we can see His presence reflected in the **Christian fellowship** of these two towns. Jesus said, “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them,” and we see something of his spirit reflected in their **love** for one another. It seems likely that brothers and sisters alerted Peter to Aeneas’ need for healing. Certainly they did so in

the case of Tabitha who couldn't speak for herself (verse 38). Look at verse 37 and notice the detail that they laid her in an **upper room**. Many commentators have pointed out that this broke with the standard custom of bringing the body **downstairs**, some pointing out the symbolic significance in raising the body upward (towards heaven) instead of bringing it down (towards the earth and Sheol). Perhaps this is a hint that they were hoping for resurrection, knowing that Christ's apostle was nearby. More telling in my view is that this action of moving the dead body upstairs matches several other Biblical stories of resurrection: In 1 Kings 17:19, the son of **the widow at Zarephath** is laid in the upper room shortly before **Elijah** brings him back to life. Similarly, in 2 Kings 4, the son of the **Shunamite woman** is laid in the upper room shortly before **Elisha** raises him. It seems likely that the church of Joppa thus collectively expressed her faith in Christ by placing the body upstairs and calling for Peter.

But while we get hints of Christ's presence through his people in a **general** way, we see it in a **clearer** and more **specific** way in the ministry of the Apostle **Peter**. Remember that apostles were **uniquely** called to represent Christ; they were **commissioned** to be his witnesses, **anointed** with and **empowered** by His **Spirit**, and **confirmed** by signs and wonders.

The connection between **Peter's calling** and **Christ's presence** is especially apparent in the **way** that Peter performs these healings. For example, notice in verse 40 how Peter expresses his **dependence** on the Lord through **prayer** before uttering the words, "Tabitha, arise." It was the **Lord's** power that healed and raised, not **Peter's**. Peter was here in this room **as an apostle of Christ, not as a magician or wizard in his own right**. Consider as well how closely Peter imitates Jesus in this scene which is almost a carbon copy of the healing of **Jairus' daughter** recorded Mark 5. In that story Jesus is called to heal a dying girl, who has already died by the time he arrives. Like Peter here in Acts 9, Jesus in Mark 5 goes upstairs to find a room crowded with mourners, and he sends them out. The words Jesus speaks to raise the girl in Mark 5 are **virtually identical** to the words Peter spoke here in Acts 9 (assuming Peter spoke in Aramaic as Jesus did). Jesus said "Talitha cumi" (which

means, “little girl, arise!”) What Peter says here is only **one letter** different, “Tabitha, cumi!” Along the same lines, there are also strong parallels between **Peter’s** healing of **Aeneas** and **Jesus’** healing of the **paralytic** who is let down through the roof in Mark 2.

A further evidence of the connection between Peter’s apostolic calling and the presence of the Lord Jesus is the **result** of these miracles: that attention is focused upon Jesus, not upon Peter (verse 35 and 42).

But, in my opinion, the most **obvious** and the most **powerful** evidence of Jesus’ presence in these scenes is Peter’s statement to Aeneas in verse 34, “And Peter said to him, ‘Aeneas, **Jesus Christ heals you**; rise and make your bed.’” Ponder these words with me. Peter did **not** say, “In the name of Jesus Christ, be healed.” Peter did **not** say, “I pray that you would be healed in the name of Jesus.” Peter did **not** look back **after** the fact and say, “Jesus Christ worked through me to heal you.” Peter simply said in the moment, “Jesus Christ heals you” as if he was acting in the place of Christ.

Perhaps **this** is the most **wonderful** aspect of this passage and of the kingdom of God: that Christ **himself** was **present** in this moment with His people. This wasn’t **just** a remarkable display of the supernatural and the extraordinary; this wasn’t just a turning point in the life of Aeneas. This was also a **divine visitation**, an **encounter** with the Lord Jesus, **mediated** through **prayer**, through **words**, and through the apostle Peter.

These twin stories illustrate what Pastor Steven pointed out at the very beginning of this series: that Acts is the chronicle of what the Risen and Ascended Jesus **continues** to do in and through His people. These twin stories illustrate what Jesus told his disciples in the Great Commission, “I am **with you** always.” And these stories illustrate what Jesus was getting at when he told the Pharisees in Luke 17, “the kingdom is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the **midst** of you.”

Unlike the kingdoms of this world, the kingdom of God can't be drawn on a geopolitical map. Unlike the kingdoms of this world, the borders of God's kingdom don't neatly correspond to rivers, oceans, seas, mountain ranges, treaties, or lines of latitude and longitude.

**Where** is the kingdom of God? It's wherever the authority of Christ's word and Spirit is gladly acknowledged and obeyed. It is wherever the members of Christ's body are gathered together. It is wherever His people are assembled as the temple which He inhabits by His Spirit. It is wherever Christ draws near to call, cleanse, consecrate, collect tribute from, commune with, commission, and bless His people.

The **heart** of the kingdom, and for that matter, the heart of our faith, is not a set of **doctrines**, a **ethical code**, a collection of rituals and traditions, or a social club. The heart of the kingdom is the **king: Jesus Christ**. What makes **doctrine essential** is that it shows us who Christ is and what He has done for us. What makes **spiritual disciplines important** is that they help us to put on the Lord Jesus. What makes **Biblical ethics necessary** is that it helps us to imitate Christ and express our gratitude to Him. What makes our **liturgy vital** is that it is a time when we encounter the Lord Jesus and receive His grace. And what makes Christian fellowship indispensable is that we are all members of Christ's body.

What makes the kingdom of God **wonderful** and life-giving, what makes it the best of all realms, is the favorable presence of the Lord Jesus.

He is the **heart** of the kingdom.

Thirdly, our passage illustrates the **growth** of the kingdom. It would have been natural for Jews of the early first century to assume that the Kingdom of God was equivalent to the kingdom of Judea. Although they were aware of uncircumcised, Gentile proselytes like the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8, they had a paradigm which equated the kingdom of God with the people, the place, and the power of the Promised Land.

One of the great burdens of Acts, and of the entire New Testament, is to expand this paradigm, to prove that Gentiles who believe in Christ are now included in the

kingdom and people of God. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 3, “the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit....is that the **Gentiles** are **fellow** heirs, members of the **same** body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

We should notice that same agenda on display here in these twin stories of Acts 9. First, consider the placement of these stories between the conversion of Paul and the revelations given to Peter and Cornelius. This is a transitional section in the book of Acts. For the last few chapters, the book of Acts has been showing us the second phase of the mission: witness in Judea and Samaria. But the conversion of Paul (the apostle to the Gentiles) is the beginning of a transition into the third section: witness to the ends of the earth. Equally significant, the revelations given to Peter and Cornelius also transition into that third section as they demonstrate the full inclusion of the Gentiles in the Kingdom of God.

But it’s not just the placement of these twin stories that points to the growth of the kingdom, but also the details of geography and names that are included here. Look again at these verses and think about the geography of these two towns. Lydda was located northwest of Jerusalem on a highway that went to the Mediterranean. It stood at the crossroads of that highway to the sea and a travel route that went north towards Syria and south towards Egypt. Because of this strategic location, Lydda was more metropolitan and more Hellenized than other cities in Judea, which helps us understand why a Jewish Christian would have a Roman name like Aeneas. Although it was technically a Jewish city, many commentators have described it as being akin to Gentile territory.

If Lydda was a bridge into Gentile territory, then Joppa was even more so. In order to get to Joppa, Peter would have continued heading west until he reached the great Mediterranean, symbolic of the many nations of the ancient world and of the conquest of the Roman empire. As is typical of port cities, Joppa would have been even more cosmopolitan and diverse than Lydda, filled with traders from all over the Roman empire. But the most significant detail we should note concerning Joppa is

that it is associated with the prophet Jonah. Remember that Jonah fled to Joppa in disobedience of the Lord's command to preach repentance to Nineveh. Remember that it was in Joppa that Jonah found a ship to take him away from the Lord's presence, and away from the Lord's purpose of bringing Assyrians to faith. Remember that the story of Jonah is perhaps the clearest Old Testament picture in of God's mercy and favor for the Gentiles.

Surely it's not mere coincidence that at this transitional moment in the book of Acts, the apostle Peter goes to Joppa and raises a woman in a way that closely parallels the resurrection miracles of Old Testament prophets like Elijah and Elisha, not to mention that reminds us of Jonah's own resurrection. But this time, instead of going to Joppa to flee from the Lord and to flee from nations like Jonah, Peter gladly brings the favorable presence of the Lord with him "Jesus Christ heals you," and he stays many days.

But this picture becomes even more clear when we consider the names of these characters. Consider the significance of the name Aeneas, the hero of the Roman epic *The Aeneid*, which tells the origin story of Rome. According to the myth, Aeneas was the mighty warrior whom the Roman gods appointed to be the founder of Rome. It's hard to imagine a more deeply pagan name. Although the Aeneas of Acts 9 was a Jewish Christian, we shouldn't miss the symbolic significance of this moment. Remember that Peter must have healed dozens, maybe hundreds or even thousands of people over the course of his ministry, but Luke only records a few of them. Surely the recording of this particular healing was meant to make us think about how the kingdom of God would bring healing and spiritual life across the entire Roman empire.

Equally significant are the names Tabitha and Dorcas. Earlier I mentioned how both mean Gazelle and how that is a fitting illustration of the grace and strength of this woman's character. But what I didn't mention is that Gazelles also have an important place in the ceremonial law of Israel. In fact, Pastor Steven recently preached on one of the passages in Deuteronomy that lays down food laws concerning Gazelles, which were classified as clean for eating, but not fit for

sacrifice. As Pastor Steven taught us, in the Mosaic schema, each major classification of animal symbolized a category of people, and this classification (clean for eating, but unfit for sacrifice) symbolized Gentile proselytes.

Like Aeneas, Tabitha herself was probably a fully Jewish Christian, but once again, we can safely assume that Luke recognized the symbolic significance of such a name, especially as the very next chapter of Acts focuses on themes related to the food laws of the Mosaic covenant.

But there's one more name that we should note: Simon the tanner in verse 43. Many commentators have pointed out that scrupulous Jews considered tanning to be an unclean profession- something only fit for Gentiles- since it brought one into constant contact with dead animals outside of the context of worship. And yet Peter stays with this man who, ironically, shares the same name as him. (Reminder that Peter's original name was Simon).

Put all of these details together and we get a picture of the growth of God's kingdom. It is for both Jews and Gentiles, men and women. It cannot be confined by any one culture, language, nation, or geographical border. Jesus is on the march, bringing healing and resurrection to all nations. And we are especially reminded on this Pentecost Sunday, that he has chosen and empowered us as His witnesses.

To be a Christian is to be a citizen of the greatest kingdom this world has ever seen: A kingdom characterized by healing and resurrection, ruled by a King of love and righteousness, and one that gradually conquers the world by grace and truth.

May the Lord give us a greater vision for this kingdom, and a greater love for its King. Amen!