

Words and Deeds: Greater Things Than These
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Psalm 135:1-10,12-13; John 14:8-14; Acts 9:32-43

Today's final Scripture reading comes from Acts 9:32-43. May God bless the reading of His holy and perfect Word. "As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the saints in Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, a paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years. "Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. 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!" Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. 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. 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. 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. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon."

We live in a time of great advancement, of greater "stuff." Less than 70 years ago, almost no one had a television set; now we have 4K HD digital screens that take up half our wall. The computers that got men to the moon were less powerful than the computer we each carry around with us in our pocket every day. 100 years ago, Henry Ford famously said that you could buy a car any color you wanted as long as it was black. Now, we have cars down to a science, everything from the aerodynamics to the paint job, and we're entering a future where we may still own cars, but driving that car will be a thing of the past. In 1978, we had the first modern superhero movie with Superman. Now our superhero movies cost \$300 million to make and cram in 30 or more superheroes. We expect constant improvements to everything - faster, bigger, stronger.

And yet with all our advancement, whether we really live in a time of greater things is debatable. A 50" TV with a perfect picture is still junk if there's nothing worth watching. A computer in your pocket that causes you to be antisocial with the people who care about you the most isn't an improvement. 30 superheroes in a movie with a lousy plot is still lousy. And the pace of things in today's society is so fast that we can hardly keep up. We worry about losing our jobs, our homes, our minds because we fear that we can't keep up with the treadmill.

The good news is, when it comes to our faith, greater things lie ahead. Not bigger and better things so much as eternal things, things of permanent importance. We are destined for the Kingdom of God, as Romans 8:17 reminds us – we are the heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. Isn't that amazing? And Jesus promised in our passage from John 14 today that the apostles would do greater things than the miracles He performed. Whether or not He intended that to apply to us exactly is hard to know, but we do know that through His power and grace, we can be His witnesses to the world in ways that were never possible before. And as our passage shows us, Jesus' promise to the disciples absolutely came true.

After the story of Saul's conversion, the rest of chapter 9 gets back to Peter, and we hear about these miracles. And if you know your Bible, this passage feels a little funny. When you read it, you should have a sense of *deja vu*. That's intentional. It might be easy to skip over this passage and just say, “Oh yeah, more miracles, no surprise, they did some back in Acts 2 and 3 and 4 and 5 and 8.” There are so many miracles in Acts that by this point, we might skip over them because they seem commonplace. These two especially sound just like some other miracle stories we've heard. So why are they uniquely important?

So the first story is the healing of Aeneas. Peter's been traveling all over Judea, the region of Israel around Jerusalem, and he stops off in Lydda where he meets Aeneas. Unlike the man Peter healed back in Acts 3, he's not just lame; he's paralyzed, and has been for eight years. This is no minor feat and not something that could be explained away. It's a direct parallel to Luke 5:24, when Jesus both forgave the sins of a paralyzed man and gave him the power to stand. The wording is a little different, but in English translation it's almost identical. The only key difference, and the one we'll talk about in a minute, is that Peter says, “Jesus Christ heals you.”

Some translations say “rise and take up your mat;” others say, “Rise and make your bed.” (I'm glad that's not the right translation, because if it was, I would really be in trouble, because I can't think of the last time I made my bed!) It's actually a very ambiguous phrase in Greek that literally translates “spread your things yourself.” Where once this man was powerless, now he is healed – he can spread out his own bed, he can spread out his own table for a meal. God has restored him and now he is once again able to work, worship, and rejoin the community. Through Peter, Jesus has done the same thing for Aeneas as He did for the paralyzed man He healed during His earthly lifetime.

Then there's the second story – the raising of Tabitha. Joppa is about a three hour journey from Lydda, and word of Peter's coming had spread, especially since the whole area was coming to know Jesus through this healing. So when Tabitha was sick, the believers in Joppa naturally thought about calling him. At her death, the thinking of the Christians is really different from when Jesus traveled and many people doubted His ability. Jewish tradition in the area was to bury the body in the family tomb as soon as possible; just think of how Lazarus and Jesus were both in the tomb very quickly after their deaths. But they have her body washed and laid in the upper room of someone's house, where someone would normally sleep. They are praying for the impossible.

When Peter arrives, he sends all the widows who've been grieving over her outside, and he prays. Once he's done praying, he says, "Tabitha, rise," and lo and behold, she does! He presents her to her friends and the other believers. Does it sound familiar? It might. Jesus once healed the daughter of a synagogue ruler named Jairus. Then, people laughed, but Jesus told Jairus, "She is only sleeping. Do not doubt but believing." And sending everyone out of the room, Jesus said, "Young girl, get up," and she did. In Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke most often, he said, "Talitha, koum." What did Peter say to the saintly woman who had just died? "Tabitha, koum." The rhyme is there in the original language. It's meant to remind us. It's meant to show us that Peter is doing the works of Jesus, now accomplishing the highest of Jesus' miracles – the raising of the dead back to life.

So let's start thinking about that for a few minutes, and it's something you can use as you speak to people about Jesus: *we believe not just on the basis of the miracles of Jesus, but the miracles of Jesus' followers who did (and do) greater things than He did.* Anybody can claim to do miracles. Magicians were around long before Jesus, and they're still with us today. But Jesus' followers don't do illusions and tricks, and they don't tell fortunes or give blessings and curses for profit. They genuinely helped people over and over again, even putting themselves in harm's way in order to do it.

Jesus said, "You will all do greater things than these." And so they did. Not just the apostles but many of the disciples did mighty works as they went. Many churches believe those spiritual gifts went away in the first century after Jesus was proclaimed throughout the Roman world. Yet wherever the gospel is spreading, reports of similar events still surface – stories of visions and dreams, stories of healings. But even if the signs the early church did were all there are, it is enough to say that something radical happened in the first century throughout the Roman empire, and thousands upon thousands of people witnessed it. When persecution came, they were willing to give their lives in droves to stand by what they had seen.

And while you can't do a miracle more amazing than raising the dead, there's something to be said that Jesus only did His miracles and spread the gospel in the Jewish lands, to His ancient people. Yet the apostles and disciples did it far and wide, healing and preaching, serving in pagan lands, faraway places, strongholds of darkness and evil. Jesus' words touched thousands during his lifetime, yet his disciples reached tens of thousands, eventually millions and even billions. The greater things have not ended; they may have taken a different form, yet even today lives across the globe are being changed as people hear the good news of the gospel and respond and are saved.

If you struggle sometimes with the distance between then and now, between Jesus and us, with Jesus being different from all the other religious figures that have popped up over time, remember that Jesus is the only one who did public works, ministered to the public, lived among the common people, whose gospel was for all people, who did not claim to have a revelation from God but who was the revelation from God, who willingly gave His life for His people, and whose immediate followers did not spread the message through violence but voluntarily laying down their lives, doing legitimate miracles as they went.

A second idea I want to tackle briefly is this: *miracles and healing aren't a result of our good deeds but God's good grace.* It can be easy to hear the story of Tabitha and think, “She deserved to be healed.” From the account, she's a great person – helping the poor, making clothing for the widows. And it's clear that her friends believe she would be healed, even resurrected, and they're willing to send for Peter to see it happen. Tabitha was a great friend, and in return her friends went to bat for her.

But notice Aeneas. There's really not much to notice. He's paralyzed. He's been unable to do any good deeds for eight years. But what's more, we don't know anything about Aeneas' spiritual state – not a thing. We don't know if he was a believer at all. What's more, he didn't even ask to be healed, as far as we know. To look at Scripture and Scripture alone, without conjecture, without any “what ifs” or “maybes,” he happens to be in the right place at the right time for Peter to come by, notice his state, and heal him in Jesus' name through Jesus' power. That's God's grace, plain and simple. The two accounts couldn't be more different in terms of the spiritual state of the people involved. But God gives life to both.

What do we have to remember? God is good all the time. Say it with me: God is good all the time. God answered your prayer just the way you wanted? God is good all the time. Still waiting for an answer on something you've been praying about for years? God is good all the time. God said no? God is good all the time. Does that no answer mean that you are a bad person or a bad Christian? No! Does a yes answer mean you are a good person or a good Christian? No! God is good all the time. God shows His grace in countless ways all the time; we just don't always understand it. Tabitha rose from the dead only to die again some other day. Is that wrong? No! It's the way of the world. We sin, so we die. But because Jesus died for us, one day, all those whose sins have been carried to the cross, we will live forever with him.

Why is this important? You all know why. In the back of our pagan brains, we still think karma is a thing. Christians believe that God is just and will repay. Yet there's no balancing the scales in Christianity, at least not for believers – Jesus has permanently tipped the scales in favor of everyone who truly believes and lives out that belief. But we still think that grace is sometimes deserved – but then it wouldn't be grace, would it? Grace is undeserved favor. We think bad people should have bad things happen to them. And yet God redeems and restores and fixes bad people like you and me. It's a good thing to remember from this passage.

Last thing I want to talk about this morning is this: *every good, great, and miraculous thing Christians do comes from Jesus – and it's a relief.* What sticks out strongly from these stories are not the similarities to Jesus' healings but the differences. There are only a couple. And the biggest one is this: Jesus says the word and people are healed and raised from the dead. When Peter speaks to Aeneas, he says, “Jesus Christ heals you.” When he goes to Tabitha, once he has the room to himself, he kneels and prays. (Keep in mind that the standard Jewish practice at the time was to lift your gaze during prayer, so kneeling means he is deep in prayer and showing his humility.) It's only once he's prayed asking God to work that he tells Tabitha to rise.

That should be a relief to us. Why? Because God is not expecting Peter to do anything on his own authority or power. Peter, the leader of the early church, accomplished these wonders by calling upon the name of Jesus. This is a responsible example for us.

If you're like me, you get nervous about hearing that we might do greater things than Jesus, because you and I know, we're not Jesus. We don't know even where to start. We know what it might be to do good deeds – to help out at a food pantry or a homeless shelter, to volunteer as a mentor or tutor, to raise funds for the poor – but more than that gets difficult. To share our faith, to step out in faith, that's tough. And even with those good deeds that we might do because of our faith, who knows how they will turn out? Every good deed we attempt on our own can get twisted around.

We are not told to do anything for God in our own strength. The Bible is full of stories where the spiritual giants of the faith fail miserably when they try. Abraham tries to fulfill God's promise of an heir on his own and winds up creating a mess in his family. Jacob tries to get the blessing of his father by his wits and winds up in exile for twenty some-odd years. Moses tries to stand up for the Israelites by killing a brutal taskmaster and winds up in the desert for forty years. Saul tries to make the sacrifice to God that Samuel was supposed to offer and loses the royal line from his house. Peter takes his eyes off Jesus for a moment and instead of walking on the water sinks like a stone. The disciples twice try to come up with food for the massive crowds only to come up with hardly enough bread and fish to feed a young boy.

Whatever works we are meant to do for God's Kingdom are meant to be done through the power of the Holy Spirit with our eyes fixed on Jesus. That's not easy – some of us talked last week after church about the book *Forgotten God* and how hard it is to give control over to the Holy Spirit. But can I tell you something? It's a relief when you realize that it's not all on you. Your salvation is not on you. Your being transformed into a holy and righteous person? It's not on you. Your becoming who God wants you to be? Not on you.

That doesn't mean that those things won't take a lot of personal effort. When God is working through us, it's often exhausting physically to do what He desires. Anybody who's been on a short-term mission trip or spent a long time in a hard location working for God's Kingdom knows that. And yes, you are personally engaged every step of the way. It will be your mouth that changes, blessing rather than cursing. It will be your mind being renewed from constant thoughts about your pleasures and desires to thoughts of what is good and perfect and beautiful in God's sight. It will be your heart that delights in God rather than sin. And you are responsible for your actions; you will be engaged; it will be the hardest work you every do.

But it's not on you. For all that you are engaged and working and doing to pursue God, it is God who does the heavy lifting. It is God who provides your strength, who provides you with grace, who provides you with love. It is God who provides you with a new spirit and a new heart and a new mind. When God calls upon you to do things you believe are impossible, when He tells you to do greater things than these, it is Him through you that will accomplish them.

God has promised every faithful person that He will complete the work He has to do in us and that He will work through us for His purposes. The biggest thing for us is this: will we surrender our wills to His, or will we get in His way? I'm going to say this: just surrender, and it will be a relief. Surrender, and you will be free. Because God is moving in a mighty way here; I know it. And the more we surrender to His will, the more we will see Him moving in the hearts and minds near and dear to us.