

#### D. Peter's Itinerant Ministry (9:32-10:48)

Leaving Paul at Tarsus, Luke turned his attention back to Peter and a season in which Peter was engaged in itinerant ministry outside of Jerusalem. Luke described in great detail two healing episodes during that time of ministry, yet he provided no clear explanation for Peter's journey outside Jerusalem. He simply observed that, while travelling about (Greek, "passing through all") Peter determined to visit the saints at Lydda (9:32). Peter and John had journeyed north to Samaria to verify for the Jerusalem Church the work of the Spirit in that region, and it's possible that Peter was doing the same sort of investigation in the area toward the coast. On the other hand, some commentators believe Peter's intention was simply to visit and encourage the communities of believers scattered throughout Israel. In the end there's no way to be sure, but one thing is certain, and that is that Luke intended his account of Peter's ministry at Lydda and Joppa to provide the transition to the all-important matter of his encounter with Cornelius.

- This transitional function is evident first in the fact that the Lydda and Joppa accounts provide the context for the Cornelius episode: Peter received his vision and call to go to Cornelius' house while he was staying at Joppa, and Luke needed to provide some explanation for how Peter found himself in that particular city.
- But it's also evident in the contribution of this context to the narrative flow of Acts. Luke's treatment of Peter's ministry in Lydda and Joppa isn't sparse, but it is very brief compared to the narrative space he afforded the Cornelius episode. The narrative moves quickly toward that episode, thereby highlighting the transitional function of 9:32-43.

It's been noted that Luke's account of the Ethiopian's conversion marks the beginning of his treatment of the Gentile mission. That fact is suggested by the man's ethnicity, but it's made explicit by the way Luke connected him with Isaiah's prophecy (ref. again Isaiah 56:1-8). Paul's conversion was the next critical development in the advancement of the Gentile mission, but even that was eclipsed by what transpired in Cornelius' house. For that event provided the Spirit's irrefutable testimony to the *Jewish* Church that the community of God's people includes the Gentiles as full and equal participants with them. Thus Luke immediately followed his account of the Cornelius episode with Peter's explanation to the Jerusalem Church (11:1ff).

1. In moving toward Caesarea and Cornelius' conversion Luke recorded two miraculous events in two different cities (9:32-43). Again, this passage provides the narrative transition to Peter's encounter with Cornelius. But Luke could have made that transition in any number of ways; the fact that he recounted these particular miracles indicates that he saw them as making their own contribution to his larger narrative.

Luke gives no explanation for his inclusion of these episodes, so that the text itself must provide whatever insight can be gleaned. In that regard, two things are worth noting:

- a. The first is the obvious *parallelism* between them. Juxtaposed to one another, both accounts involve healing miracles performed by Peter in Jesus' name and power (9:34, 40). As well, both miracles became widely known and resulted in multitudes within the respective communities coming to faith in Christ (9:35, 42).

Luke also provided specific background information on the two healed individuals. One notable piece of information is their *Greek* names, which Luke possibly intended to serve as a pointer to the imminent “healing” and “raising” of Cornelius and his Gentile household (9:36-39).

These commonalities suggest that the two accounts are to be viewed as a complementary pair, though differences necessarily exist between them. The first individual was only paralyzed, while the second was deceased. As well, Peter happened upon the paralyzed man in Lydda, while Tabitha’s raising resulted from the urgent plea of disciples who’d come to him from Joppa. (The text seems to suggest that they sought Peter in the hope that he would be able to raise her from the dead rather than simply keep her from dying.) Luke also directly identified Tabitha as a disciple of Jesus, whereas Aeneas’ status as a believer is only suggested by the context (9:32) and the close correspondence of the two episodes.

- b. Another important observation is the fact that these miracles *closely paralleled Jesus’ own miraculous works*. Jesus had healed several paralytics (Matthew 4:24, 8:5-6), and one such incident was remarkably similar to this one involving Peter (Matthew 9:1-8). The same similarity exists between Jesus’ raising of Jairus’ daughter and Peter’s miracle in Joppa (Matthew 9:18-26).

Most importantly, Luke was personally familiar with these two works of Jesus (Luke 5:17-25, 8:41-56), and the way he constructed his accounts of Peter’s miracles indicates that he intended his reader to connect them with their counterparts performed by Jesus (cf. esp. Luke 5:24-25 with 9:34-35 and Luke 8:51-54 with 9:39-40). This intentionality is all the more evident from Luke’s introduction to Acts. There he expressed that the events he was about to recount represented the continuation of Jesus’ own words and works, now being carried on through those sharing in His life and power by His Spirit (1:1).

By recounting these two episodes, Luke was reinforcing the truth that the Church – as Christ’s body – represents His continuing presence in the world. He is “seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high,” but He has not left His own as orphans; He has come to them in His Spirit. The Spirit is Jesus’ presence in that He ministers Jesus’ life, truth, and power to His people, taking what is His and giving it to them (John 14:1-28, 16:12-16). In that way, the Church continues what “*Jesus began to do and teach.*”

- In Jesus’ case, his miraculous works helped affirm His messianic credentials. For the prophets had depicted Messiah as Yahweh’s agent of restoration and wholeness. Descent from Abraham and David weren’t sufficient to substantiate a person’s messianic claim; he must also restore sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, wholeness to the lame, and life to the dead (cf. Isaiah 35:1-10, 42:1-7; Ezekiel 37:1-14; etc.). The gospel writers understood these things, and so endeavored to show that the Scripture’s promise of healing and wholeness in the messianic age was being fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew 8:1-17, 12:9-28; cf. also Luke 4:16-21 with John 9:1-39).

- The prophets described the messianic age and work largely in terms of physical phenomena, and so it was necessary that Jesus establish His identity by doing such miracles. At the same time, those works of physical healing and restoration only symbolized the true messianic work: Yahweh was sending His Servant, not to heal bodies and restore physical life, but to purge, enliven, renew and recover the estranged creation back to its Creator. The messianic task was to be spiritual and cosmic – the ushering in of a new creation. Thus Jesus’ physical miracles pointed to His *saving* power. As Yahweh’s Servant, He had come to wield the divine power for the sake of judgment, redemption and restoration. Jesus’ works in the power of the Spirit indicated that the day of Yahweh’s power – the day of salvation and the renewal and reconciliation of all things – had come at last.
- The same pattern was followed in Peter’s miracles. His works were Jesus’ works, being accomplished in His name and power. And perpetuating Jesus’ work, they, too, were physical miracles, but ones that spoke of a greater and more profound spiritual reality. Peter healed the paralytic and raised the dead woman, but he used those physical demonstrations of Jesus’ power as the springboard for testifying to His power and provision for restoring lifeless and disfigured souls.

Peter’s true concern was the recovery of people’s spiritual lives, not their physical ones. As he had with the lame man at the Jerusalem temple, Peter used his acts of physical healing to proclaim the Lord who heals the whole man, body and soul. Luke makes no mention of Peter preaching in Lydda and Joppa, but he implies it by his summary observation that the two miracles resulted in many coming to faith in Christ. The only way for that to happen was for Peter to have explained his actions and the power behind them in terms of Jesus and His gospel.

2. Some have pointed to this passage to prove the contention that signs and wonders are able in themselves to bring people to saving faith. It is true that Luke’s account, taken at face value, seems to indicate that Peter’s miracles alone were provoking faith in perhaps the majority of the citizens of Lydda and Joppa. Luke summarized both miracles by emphasizing the repentance and faith that resulted from them, but is conspicuously silent regarding any gospel proclamation on Peter’s part.

- But, as noted above, it’s impossible for signs and wonders to produce faith: *Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ* (ref. Romans 10:11-17).
- And although Luke doesn’t record any gospel preaching by Peter, he implies it by Peter’s ascribing his miracles to the name and power of Jesus (9:34). What good is that ascription without an explanation of who Christ is and how it is that His power has come to manifest itself through an ordinary man?

Despite what some contend, the book of Acts cannot be used to support the notion of “power evangelism” – that is, the capacity (if not necessity) of supernatural works of the Spirit to bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. This argument was addressed previously (ref. page 93ff), but it is worth summarizing here.

- a. First, signs and wonders must be considered carefully and understood broadly within the overall scriptural context. And what that consideration reveals is that signs and wonders are miraculous events intended and orchestrated by God to authenticate someone or something. They capture the observers' attention so that it can be directed toward some truth that needs to be grasped. That was as true in the Old Testament time of preparation as in the New Testament era of fulfillment.

Signs and wonders serve to authenticate persons and their message, and the reason the apostles needed such authentication is that they were proclaiming the fulfillment of the Scriptures in Jesus of Nazareth. The apostles were the designated interpreters of the Christ event, first to Israel, and then to the world, and their witness demanded divine attestation. Later on, the New Testament writings would provide that interpretation, but for now it was being proclaimed orally by the apostles and their associates.

*Jesus' apostolic appointees were, in effect, the living, breathing New Testament during the period before their oral witness was committed to a written account, and God used supernatural signs to attest their authority and credibility.*

Signs and wonders supplied that attestation in two related ways, both of which linked these ordinary men with the One they proclaimed. First of all, they linked the apostles' *persons* with Jesus, for they were doing the works He had done in the power of His Spirit. In that sense, to see the apostles was to see Jesus Himself. But supernatural works also linked the apostles' *proclamation* with Jesus in that they brought compelling credibility to their testimony concerning Him. These men were claiming that Jesus was resurrected, ascended and enthroned at the right hand of the living God, and the presence of His power confirmed their claims.

- b. Finally, the salvation-historical purpose for signs and wonders provides the answer to their continued presence in the Church today. Such signs served to authenticate God's spokesmen and thereby certify their words as being His word. Those human mouthpieces have now become *inscripturated*; the New Testament writings have taken over the work first assigned to Christ's witnesses. As the Spirit authenticated them and their words by "signs and wonders," so He now authenticates the same words by means of His inspired text and His internal witness of illumination, conviction and faith.

Peter's reason for his travels toward the coast isn't entirely clear, but one thing is certain: He had no idea he'd be healing a paralyzed man and raising a dead woman. But more than that, he could never have imagined what those healings portended. There, on the shore of the Mediterranean, the Spirit had breathed life into a lifeless corpse. For many days afterward, Peter surely would have contemplated that profound work of God, even while gazing off to the west across the vast watery expanse that bound together the Gentile world of that day (9:43). The Spirit had used Peter mightily, but that was only a prelude to the climactic and signal event to come. Resting by the sea, Peter had no sense that the Spirit was about to begin reaching across that expanse; Peter would again minister life to the dead, but this time to Gentiles, and unto life everlasting.