

Tabitha Arise

Mark Heath, 8 Sept 2004

Acts 9:36-42

³⁶ Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. ³⁷ In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.

³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, "Please come to us without delay." ³⁹ So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them.

⁴⁰ But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. ⁴² And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Raising someone from the dead is, in many ways, the ultimate miracle. People who are very sick can, and often do, recover, but people who have died always stay dead. Where there is still life, there is still hope, but once someone has died, hope dies and grieving begins. Whether 21st century university educated intellectuals or 1st century Palestinian peasants, everyone knows that dead people simply do not come back to life. So when we tell a story of someone being raised from the dead, we quite naturally expect scepticism.

Those who have encountered the risen Christ will not feel the need to approach this story with the same level of disbelief. We have come to believe in a miracle-working God and have found the Bible to be trustworthy in every respect. In any case, Luke has not recorded this account as a "proof" that miracles happen today. There are some people so predisposed to doubt that they would not believe whatever miracle they witnessed (and others so credulous that they think they've witnessed a miracle after seeing the most elementary magician's trick). Simply recording an account of a miracle will not "prove" anything.

So if you are the type of person who views the Bible as a collection of fairy tales for gullible fools, it is not likely that this story will change your mind. But it would be worth your while actually finding out some facts for yourself. You may be surprised to discover that Luke was a first class historian, recording many details that have since been proved by archaeological discoveries or verified by other historical accounts.

Evangelicals, on the other hand, are convinced that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16,17). So this passage isn't merely a history lesson – there are principles for us to take on board to shape our thinking and actions.

Helping the Poor – An Indispensable Ministry

We don't know much about Tabitha. We are simply told she was a disciple; full of good works and acts of charity. It doesn't appear that she held a leadership role in the church, but the impact of her ministry was widely felt. She seems to have been gifted at making clothes, and distributed them to the widows of her town. This was clearly

something they greatly appreciated as can be seen from the way they mourned for her in verse 39.

Her death was a tremendous loss not just to her family and friends in the church, but especially to those she ministered to, and indirectly to the whole town of Joppa. We are not told if she had enlisted others to help in her work, but even if she had, the ministry had lost a key person.

Tabitha sets a great example to us of making the most of your gifts. She was skilled at making clothes, hardly the most glamorous spiritual gift, but she looked for an opportunity to use it for the service of others. The widows, who were probably already receiving food handouts from the church, had no money to buy themselves new clothes or replace worn out garments. Tabitha made a habit of “good works and acts of charity”, so when she saw that these people needed something she could offer she took the initiative.

When thinking about what our own “spiritual gifts” are, do we overlook some of the more mundane practical skills or resources that God has given us? Offering to give people a lift, to babysit for them, to help with a DIY task, to teach a skill, to donate second-hand goods are examples of the types of thing that we can all easily do, particularly in the context of small groups. We ought to spend more time thinking about how we can serve others in practical ways so that like Tabitha, we can be a blessing to many.

Often ministries in church life are energised by people with great vision and passion for the work, and when they are gone the work can be in danger of falling by the wayside. Obviously not every ministry can be kept going indefinitely, and some are more worthy of sustaining than others, but helping the poor is not a matter for indifference. Had the church in Joppa simply decided that they would drop the program of help for the widows now that Tabitha had died, it would have seriously undermined their witness and integrity in that town. Perhaps the reason that Tabitha, unlike most other Christians, was allowed to return from the dead, was to show us that the ministry to the poor is not one that the church should allow to die.

Healing the Sick – A Sovereignly Given Ministry

At the time of Tabitha’s death, Peter had embarked on an itinerant ministry, visiting the believers in various places. He had arrived in Lydda, and after healing Aeneas, a man who had been paralysed for eight years, had seen many turn to the Lord (Acts 9:32-35). Doubtless he wanted to stay a while helping the new believers get established in their faith, and the news of what had happened spread to neighbouring towns.

Now when it comes to miraculous healing, Christians tend to take polarised views. One extreme is to never expect God to work at all in this way, assuming that miracles simply served the purpose of underlining the authority of the original apostles, a purpose which is no longer relevant. The other extreme is to insist that all sickness or death should be immediately reversed and the only thing getting in the way of this happening is our lack of faith.

But neither of these extremes finds support in the Scriptures. It was not just the apostles who performed miracles, and by no means all sicknesses and deaths met with supernatural healing. It does seem, however, that certain people were used mightily by God in the area of healing. Peter and Paul are classic examples in the

book of Acts. Throughout church history too, we we have seen occasional bursts of healing, usually in the context of evangelism.

Surely the church in Joppa had been praying for Tabitha during her illness. Yet no answer seemed forthcoming. Maybe they even prayed after her death – they certainly had not given up hope. But when they heard that Peter was in the area, a man of God who clearly had been used to perform miracles in the past, they called for him to come.

So can anyone pray for a miracle, or are some people especially gifted in that area? The answer is yes to both questions. 1 Cor 12:10 & 29 teaches that the ability to work miracles is a gift that not all are given, but there may be some in a church that have particular faith to pray for them. We should be willing to ask such people for their help when a need arises, but also realise that God wants to hear us ask for the things that matter most to us. In any case, we should realise that although Peter is credited with “performing the miracle”, the power was God’s and was an answer to not just Peter’s prayer, but also the prayers of the whole church at Joppa.

Following the Master – A Model for Ministry

It is interesting to note the similarities between the way that Peter approached the healing ministry and the way that Jesus performed healings. Peter was clearly trying to follow Jesus’ example, as every true disciple should. A very similar scenario had occurred in Mark 5:21-42. Jesus had been teaching, when a delegation arrived asking him to come quickly to the house of a little girl who was dying. By the time Jesus got there she was dead. The house was full of mourners who didn’t believe there was any hope and Jesus got rid of them before saying to the girl “Talitha qumi”, which means “Little girl, arise”.

The parallels are easy to spot and it is not hard to imagine that Peter had this very incident in his mind when he was called to the scene. Like Jesus, Peter got rid of the mourners and addressed Tabitha with almost the exact same phrase – “Tabitha qumi”. But there was one notable difference. Peter knelt and prayed first, whilst Jesus simply commanded the girl to arise. There was no doubt in Peter’s mind that the power was Jesus’, not his own. He could follow Jesus’ example, but he could never be Jesus.

In fact, the same pattern has already been seen a few verses earlier in the healing of Aeneas. Just like Jesus commanded a paralytic to “rise and take up your bed” (Mark 2:11), Peter tells this paralytic to “rise and make your bed”. But again there is a crucial difference. Peter states “Jesus Christ heals you”, whilst Jesus healed on his own authority.

Glorifying the Lord – The Point of Ministry

The results of the healing are seen in verse 42, and are the same as the results of the healing of Aeneas (v35). Many people believed in the Lord. This would appear to be one of the primary reasons for miracles – to cause people to come to faith. This is why Jesus could not heal many in his home town (Mark 6:5) – their unbelief meant that the primary purpose was defeated. God will not keep performing miracles to entertain a persistently unbelieving audience.

Now healing brings tremendous joy and blessing to the recipient and their friends, even if it does not inspire them to faith in Jesus. But in the end analysis, they have not gained much if they do not receive a remedy for their sins. Any healings in this

life are only temporary. Both Tabitha and Aeneas have since died. They were healed but they had not yet received their resurrection bodies (see 1 Cor 15). Jesus, on the other hand, was raised from the dead to an immortal life. He asked “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his life?” (Mark 8:36). Healing, just like riches or success, is of no profit if it is not accompanied by forgiveness.

All ministries, whether helping the poor or performing miracles, serve the primary purpose of bringing glory to God. They do this by inspiring believers to love God more, and drawing unbelievers to faith in the living God.

Conclusion

Tabitha and Peter shine out in this passage as people who used their gifts to glorify God and serve the people around them. There are some ministries that require us to use our own practical skills for the benefit of one another, and others that rely entirely on God’s sovereign decision to perform miracles. Whichever we are involved in, our model for ministry is the example of Jesus, who operated in the power of the Holy Spirit and went about doing good, teaching and healing. If we can follow as closely as his disciples Tabitha and Peter did, then it will result in many more coming to believe in Jesus.