

Apostolic Power

Acts 9:32-43

Christianity and Liberalism is a book by Gresham Machen that defined a generational struggle between the true definition and declaration of biblical Christianity and another religion altogether. If you have been in the adult Sunday School class, Mike has spent the last several weeks focused upon that book in particular, and the issue Machen raised a hundred years ago continue to define the struggle facing the church to this day. There are some things which we, as fellow Christians, might disagree upon that don't separate us into categories of Christian or non-Christian. There are some matters, of secondary importance, upon which true believers reach different conclusions.

But then there are matters which do distinguish Christianity from another religion altogether, a false religion. And the false religion which Machen identified has typically been labelled liberalism, and with respect to doctrine and theology, liberalism is a religion that denies many key, fundamental doctrines without which Christianity no longer exists. I won't take time in this introduction to identify them, except for this one. One fundamental doctrine essential to the true religion of Christianity is the belief in the supernatural power of God. Super-natural, above-nature—the belief that God has power above and beyond the normal, ordinary powers by which the natural processes of this world exists. For example, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead—the power of God to accomplish that resurrection. And, for that matter, Jesus' birth—his conception, by the power of the Holy Spirit enabling a godly woman named Mary to conceive a child before she was ever with a man. The supernatural power of God is a fundamental, essential, necessary part of true religion, and only Christianity proclaims such a God of power.

The Bible is filled with examples of such supernatural power, taking place especially during the years which Jesus' spent living on earth as a man, and then extending through this transitional age in the book of Acts when the apostles were establishing the New Covenant church by attesting to Jesus and confirming and validating his identity as the son of God and the savior of men. Thus I often refer to apostolic power as the supernatural power of God given to the apostles in order to establish the foundation upon which the church would be built. We read of that in,

Heb. 2:3 "...how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, 4 God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?"

As we read and study in the book of Acts, God is bearing witness to the salvation that is proclaimed to the world in Jesus' name. So we read of "signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will." The miraculous signs which Jesus performed serve the same purpose, as John records it.

John 20:30 "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

We come today to a narrative with regard to two of those signs, two of those miracles, and I want to state with emphasis right at the outset that these miracles actually happened. This miraculous, supernatural power was actually displayed, such that Aeneas was no longer paralyzed and Tabitha was no longer dead. I believe in the supernatural power of God to perform these miracles, and more importantly, I proclaim that power to you that

you might believe as well. And that by believing, that you might have life in Jesus' name. So let's begin with,

I. AENEAS

v.32 "Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda. 33 There he found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed."

Lydda is northwest of Jerusalem, 22 miles northwest, and had of old been part of Samaria but later became a city within Judea. Lydda is toward to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, bordering both Judea and Samaria. And above the region of Samaria is Galilee. Remember what we studied last week,

v.31 "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied."

In our text, Peter now assumes prominence in the historical narrative of the book of Acts as Luke records it for us. And as the story continues so does the proclamation of the gospel. And remember the theme verse for this whole book,

Acts 1:8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

So now Peter is traveling through all parts of the country. And in Lydda, he meets Aeneas. But don't miss the reference to the whole church in verse 32. This wasn't an isolated visit with Aeneas, but we read "that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda." To all the saints, the whole church. And among them was this man who was paralyzed, bedridden.

And Peter healed him.

v.34 And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed." Then he arose immediately."

There is the supernatural power of God displayed, and note the great contrast.

A. Supernatural power over human helplessness.

The mortality of man is emphasized, magnified, by this disease, this paralysis. And we can never forget that sense of our own helplessness. We are mortal, corruptible creatures. Since the fall, we are subject to death, all of our lives. And the great danger of the religion of liberalism is it promotes as the only hope of mankind our own strength and power! It's up to us to make this world a better place. It's up to us to do good, to do enough good to atone for our sins. It's up to us to succeed and prosper, and it's up to us to stay alive. As if any of us has any power at all to do any of those things ourselves. But that's all liberalism has to offer. Take out the supernatural power of God and all you are left with is this unrelenting awareness of helplessness. If natural power is all that there is, then there is no hope to overcome or conquer the helplessness of our human lives. As Paul puts it in,

1 Cor. 15:19 "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most [to be pitied]."

But, of course, there is supernatural power. And here it is, on full display. It was instantaneous. It was full and complete. Peter said, "Arise and make your bed" Then[Aeneas] arose immediately."

But don't miss Peter's exact words,

v.34 "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you."

It wasn't actually Peter who healed him. It was Jesus himself.

Peter the apostle simply speaks for Jesus, bringing the miracle about. But make no mistake, it is Jesus himself who performs the miracle. This is nothing less than a display of...

B. Supernatural power in the name of Jesus.

We have certainly seen this before.

Acts 3:1 “Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. 2 And a certain man lame from his mother’s womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered the temple; 3 who, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked for alms. 4 And fixing his eyes on him, with John, Peter said, “Look at us.” 5 So he gave them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. 6 Then Peter said, “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.” 7 And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength.”

“In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.” It is Jesus’ power that is at work in these apostles. And in that previous case, Peter explicitly declared the gospel.

Acts 4:8 “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: 9 If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, 10 let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. 11 This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ 12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

So it is that this miracle demonstrates the reality of,

C. Supernatural power as a testimony of salvation.

“Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole...Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Or, as we read in our text today,

v.35 “So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.”

Sharon is the coastal plain just north of Lydda up into Samaria. And when they saw the miracle, when they saw this man healed, they “turned to the Lord.” What a great way to describe the effect of the work of salvation in the heart of man. They turned to the Lord!

Same phrase in,

Acts 11:21 “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.”

The Greek word, when in the passive voice, means to be converted. To be turned from one direction to another, and so it is a very helpful and descriptive reference to our salvation. To turn to the Lord, in terms of what we do in our conversion, would typically refer to our own faith and repentance. To turn to the Lord means to turn away from sin. It means to turn away from self-reliance or self-righteousness as the basis upon which you seek to be found acceptable in the sight of God. It means to turn away from your sense of goodness and accomplishment in your own merit or good works, and to turn to Jesus, trusting in him for salvation which is offered to you as a free gift.

So when this great miracle was performed, many turned to the Lord. Many were saved, because believed in the supernatural power of God not simply to enable a paralyzed man to walk, but to forgive sin. And remember Jesus performing a very similar miracle,

Mat. 9:1 “So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. 2 Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.” 3 And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, “This Man blasphemes!” 4 But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’? 6 But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins” —then He said to the paralytic, “Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.”

So those who deny the supernatural power of God to heal, reject that same supernatural power by which their sins would be forgiven. But as Luke records the event, the emphasis is upon those who believed in that power, unto eternal life. They turned to the Lord!

Then, a second display of apostolic power.

II. TABITHA.

Translated for us as Dorcas in the Greek, from the Aramaic form of Tabitha. Literally, the word translates into English as a Gazelle. And Dorcas, or Tabitha, is certainly remembered not only for this display of God’s supernatural power, but also for the display of her own godliness. And that is worth noting, that when Luke refers to Tabitha, he makes personal reference to her life and character. Thus we have,

A. The testimony of a godly woman.

She has died, we read in verse 37, so there is no current expression given to us. But note what Luke does record,

v.36 “This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did.”

That really is striking, for the praise and honor afforded to her is without any qualification. I resist the notion to identify and define sanctification differently for men and women, but here there seems to be a very special commendation to her for her good works, as if often the case for godly women! It’s not that men are exempt from the responsibility to show forth their good works, but it is the case that good works demonstrate well the beauty of a godly woman. Such that Paul would later write to Timothy,

1 Tim. 2:8 “I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; 9 in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, 10 but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works.”

So while men are called to assume responsibility for worship, in leading in prayer with the consistency of their own godliness, a woman is to express the beauty of her godliness not with mere external or outward adornment, but “with good works.” Practical, demonstrable evidence of the saving work of God in her heart.

Tabitha was just such a woman, worthy of personal praise ascribed to her until the end of the age by this reference is the word of God. We get a hint of some of those good works in verse 39, with reference to “the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them.” And, with Tabitha, notice how Luke includes such honor given to other women as well, seeing...

B. The faithfulness of godly women.

v.37 “But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. 38 And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them. 39 Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them.”

First, note the care that was given to Tabitha upon her death. They had washed her, no doubt a reference to the “widows” in verse 39. They were Tabitha’s friends, her sisters in Christ. And they took care of her, just as a number of the women sought to do when Jesus himself died. They attended to the necessary labor of preparing the body for burial, doing so with honor and dignity afforded to Tabitha even as they attended to her corpse. They washed her. They prepared her for burial, and “laid her in upper room.”

But these faithful, godly women did more than that. They were grieving for her, appropriately so, weeping when Peter had come to them, but the fact that Peter had come was because these women had summoned him. They believed in the apostolic power of God which was evident with the disciples. They believed in the supernatural power of God to heal, even to raise their friend from the dead. So we read,

v.38 “And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them.”

Strong words. They were strongly urging Peter to come to them, imploring him, we read in the NKJV. And urged him not to delay, for the need was immediate. All of that testifies to the real

and lively faith of these women. They believed in God’s power. They believed and trusted in the apostles whom God had set apart. They believed in the resurrection, even here and now, following Tabitha’s death. And they were still being responsible faithfully to prepare her body for burial.

In that context of such faithful devotion to God, the apostle Peter responds with a miraculous declaration of...

C. The power of life itself.

v.40 “But Peter put them all out, 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.”

Such a descriptive account. He knelt down and prayed...Not that praying requires kneeling, but the outward posture clearly represents both a dependence upon God and the offering of a willing deference to him in honor. Peter is addressing God himself, for certainly he understands that the power is not in himself. He himself has nothing to offer, but God offers life. So he kneels down and prays.

He doesn’t make a show of it. In fact, we’re told that the put the other people out of the room, he asked them to leave. Luke records the exact miracle,

v.40 “And turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. 41 Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive.”

He escorted her out, offering her his hand, honoring her by doing so. He presented her to her friends, alive. He took care of her, honoring both her faith and godliness and that of her friends and fellow women. Peter ministered the gospel to these women.

It is very sad to me today when I hear pastors talking like they are absolutely hindered from ministering to women. Some pastor's won't even talk to women as a part of their ministry, let alone minister the gospel to them, somehow thinking any direct pastoral interaction will immediately become suspicious or suggestive of impropriety. In doing so, they deprive half of their congregation from their immediate pastoral care and appropriate affection. I am rather baffled by that, for Peter has no such qualms. There is, of course, absolutely no hint of anything inappropriate here, but clearly, Peter the apostle is offering his apostolic ministry to the faithful, godly women of Joppa. The words are even quite tender,

v.41 "Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive."

All of which advanced the gospel, as we again see...

D. Supernatural power as a testimony of salvation.

v.42 "And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord. 43 So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner."

"Many believed on the Lord." That's what it was all about. That's the effect of this faithful ministry of the apostle to these faithful women in Joppa. As R.C. Sproul puts it, "This was only a foretaste of heaven, for Dorcas would die again. It was a downpayment of the apostolic truth that everyone who is in Christ will be presented to the Bridegroom alive to live forever with no more tears and no more sin and no more death. This taste of heaven that Peter manifested to the people in this town spread abroad throughout the whole region, and multitudes were converted."

God builds his church upon the faithfulness of his people. It is his power at work, to be sure and certain. But he uses means,

and those means are us!

So I believe in the supernatural power of God. I proclaim that power to you as I preach upon this very text. Everything here is historically truthful and accurate. It is not a simple story or myth serving merely as some sort of symbolic gesture of the mystical power of faith. Rather is the very real demonstration of the very real power of God to save those who are lost and dead in their sins. Many turned to the Lord, we read, after the miracle with Aeneas. Many believed on the Lord, we read with regard to Tabitha. May the Lord demonstrate that same saving power among us here today. Please pray to that end, even as you seek to be found faithful, your own life full of good works.