

Chapter 24: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Savior

Acts 9:32–43

When we read the Bible, we can be tempted to think that we are reading primarily about extraordinary people. Either we will be tempted to identify pridefully with such important people so that we dismiss the “ordinary” people from consideration, or we will be tempted to despair by thinking that what God does in the Bible would not include ordinary people like us. Yet, while we do read a number of stories about remarkable people—prophets, priests, kings, and apostles—the Scriptures never let us forget that these people are all ordinary, like us. They do not receive God’s favor because of their merit but because of God’s grace and mercy toward sinners. Further, amidst all of the stories of seemingly extraordinary people, the Bible never fails to give us portraits of the lives of ordinary people. Here at the end of Acts 9, we see God’s care for two ordinary people in order that we might be reminded that *Jesus is an extraordinary Savior for ordinary people*.

An Ordinary Man (Acts 9:32–35)

The two stories in this section are very similar, distinguished only in the level of detail and the specific subjects of the healing miracles received through Peter.¹ Within the Book of Acts, Peter had largely been the subject of action through the first five chapters. Then, after stories about Stephen and Philip, Peter and John had appeared again in Acts 8 as apostolic representatives by whom the Holy Spirit might fall upon the Samaritans (Acts 8:14–25).² While the history of Acts will focus almost exclusively on narratives about Saul/Paul from Acts 13 onward, Luke leaves Saul in Tarsus (Acts 9:30) to return the narrative to Peter for the most part through Acts 12. The two stories in this section deal with Peter’s ministry to ordinary people through extraordinary miracles.

To open the first story, we read about Peter’s “extensive” ministry of visitation: “Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda” (v. 32). Lenski observes from this verse that Peter apparently “intends to visit ‘all,’ to cover the entire church. It would seem as though other apostles had the same program. Since the churches as yet had little or no organization they could not be left to themselves, and therefore the apostles felt obliged to visit them from time to time.”³ Regarding the location of Lydda, Bock writes that the “city of Lydda (=OT Lod, 1 Chron. 8:12; 1 Macc. 11:34) is on the road from Jerusalem to Joppa, about a day’s journey by foot from Joppa and twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem....It was a predominantly Jewish town of mixed population.”⁴

¹ “These two narratives form a pair, with a number of common elements, but with the second account more detailed. The first focuses on a man and the second on a woman, highlighting her good works and the respect she commanded among the believers in Joppa.” (Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 320.)

² Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 210.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 381–82.

⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 376.

While in Lydda, “There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed” (v. 33). Regarding this man, Lenski writes, “This man is a parallel to the cripple at the Gate Beautiful in the Temple, 3:2, etc., parallel especially in helping to bring many to faith.”⁵ Yet, we should notice one clear difference: Luke gives us Aeneas’s name, whereas we do not know the name of the paralyzed man whom Peter and John had healed in Acts 3. This is a subtle, but important, point that we must develop in our study of this passage. While there is indeed much in the Book of Acts about the “important” people (the apostles, missionaries, kings, and governors), here Luke gives special attention to very ordinary people. We would know nothing about Aeneas or Lydda if not for these mentions here, and they play no stated role in the rest of the history of Acts. Their importance in the eyes of God is expressed through the pastoral care of Peter and reflected to us through their named inclusion in this history.

Luke relates only the basic detail of the length of Aeneas’s paralysis (eight years) so that we may understand the importance of what Peter does: “And Peter said to him, ‘Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.’ And immediately he rose” (v. 34). Importantly, Peter does not claim to heal Aeneas, but insists that “Jesus Christ” is the one who “heals” him. As Calvin observes, “in these words Peter showeth plainly that he is only the minister of the miracle, and that it proceedeth from the power of Christ; that he may by this means extol the name of Christ alone.”⁶ More, Peter’s words remind us that Luke’s Gospel narrated only what “Jesus *began* to do and teach” (Acts 1:1), so that we see Jesus’ ongoing ministry through his church. Jesus had healed many who could not walk (Matt. 8:5–13; 9:1–8; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 5:17–26). Even in the Gospels, Jesus had commissioned his apostles to heal on his behalf (Luke 9:1, 6; 10:9).⁷ Here in the Book of Acts, Jesus heals another paralyzed man through Peter.

The phrase, “make your bed” might be literally translated, “set the table,” which could either refer to his *bed* or to a *table* on which someone might eat, since the Jews reclined by lying down and eating on a mat (e.g., Luke 22:14; John 13:23).⁸ Jesus did instruct others to feed Jairus’s daughter after raising her to life (Mark 5:43, Luke 8:55); however, Jesus also instructed the paralyzed man in John 5:8–9 to “take up your bed and walk.” Bock, then, is likely correct that, “given the situation, a command to make the bed is more natural. The instruction means that he can now care for himself, since he is restored.”⁹

The result of this healing is that many turn to the Lord in faith: “And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord” (v. 35). Importantly, this area was “semi-Gentile in population,” so that Bruce observes that this language suggests “a further widening of the range of the saving message” into the Gentile population.¹⁰ Not only are these two stories tracing the spread of the gospel to ordinary people, but we are also seeing the movement of the gospel increasingly toward Gentiles in anticipation of the formal extension that we will find in the next chapter.

An Ordinary Woman (Acts 9:36–43)

The next section extends this theme of care for ordinary people in the church. An important aspect of

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 382.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:396.

⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 376–77.

⁸ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 211. Bruce provides this footnote (n59): “Gk. στρῶσον σεαυτῷ. The object στρῶσον has to be supplied; στρώννυμι κλίνην means either ‘make the bed’ or ‘set the couch’ (for reclining at table).”

⁹ Bock, *Acts*, 377.

¹⁰ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 211.

what Luke is doing is to spotlight a story that echoes previous miracles of raising the dead. Polhill summarizes this well:

The story of Dorcas is reminiscent of earlier raisings of the dead, such as Elijah’s raising the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:17–24) and the raising of the Shunammite woman’s son by Elisha (2 Kgs 4:32–37), both of which are in turn echoed in the story of the widow’s son, who was raised by Jesus (Luke 7:11–17). The closest correspondence of all, however, is to be found in Jesus’ raising of Jairus’s daughter (Luke 8:49–56; Mark 5:35–43).¹¹

Specifically, these miracles from Elijah and Elisha take place in what Nathan Lovell calls “inner Kings”—i.e., the material at the center of the two-volume Book of Kings. Whereas “outer Kings” gives a historical account of major figures (the succession of David to Solomon and Solomon’s kingdom at the beginning of 1 Kings, and then the descent of the kings of Israel and Judah at the end of 2 Kings), “inner Kings” focuses on ordinary people and ordinary situations—especially instances involving non-Israelites and in areas outside the land of Canaan (see Luke 4:26).¹² For Lovell, the specific stories that the author of Kings chooses were written to strengthen the faith of God’s people while in exile to show them what ordinary life would look like *apart* from an active, reigning Davidic king and apart from the regular ministry of the temple. Here in the Book of Acts, these stories that echo the miracles of Elijah/Elisha accomplish the same purpose, with a small variation: they show how the gospel of Christianity spreads away from the holy city of Jerusalem to reach into every ordinary place to the ends of the earth. This is one of the key ways that Luke prepares us for the formal expansion of the gospel into the Gentile world in the next chapter.

In this case, Luke gives us the story of a very ordinary woman named Tabitha: “Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas” (v. 36a). While she is an *ordinary* woman in the sense that we do not read of any extraordinary gifts she exercised (e.g., prophecy), nevertheless she was an *extraordinary* woman in terms of her devotion to the Lord: “She was full of good works and acts of charity” (v. 36b). This is the only place where we read a woman called a “disciple.”¹³ Since *disciple* means “learner,” Calvin notes how the doctrine she learned as a “disciple” set down roots in her life that produced great fruit of her good works and acts of charity.¹⁴ The name *Tabitha* is Aramaic, while *Dorcas* is Greek. Both, in English, mean the same thing: *gazelle*.¹⁵ The meaning of her name does not seem to be important, but the two languages reflected in the translation of her name will become very important, as we will see.

Although we are given very little information about the surrounding circumstances, Luke informs us that “In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room” (v. 37). There is such little information here that we must beware trying to find answers to “questions that are not answered by the text.”¹⁶ All we know is that, “Since Lydda was

¹¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 247.

¹² Nathan Lovell, *The Book of Kings and Exilic Identity: 1 and 2 Kings as a Work of Political Historiography*, ed. Claudia V. Camp and Andrew Mein, LHBOTS 708 (London: T & T Clark, 2021), 250–56.

¹³ Bock, *Acts*, 377.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:397–98.

¹⁵ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 212.

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 385.

near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, ‘Please come to us without delay’ (v. 38). Here again, we do not know exactly what they hoped would happen when they called Peter, but we do know the result: “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” (v. 39). The form of the verb for describing how the widows were “showing” Peter their tunics “perhaps indicates that what is shown is what they are wearing.”¹⁷ Indeed, if these tunics were what Dorcas produced as her acts of charity for these widows, then it is unlikely that they would possess many (any?) other clothes. Lenski meditates on this heartwarming scene:

So Dorcas was a dressmaker, but instead of enriching herself by sewing only for money she enriched her soul by sewing for love. The garments she made for the poor she really made for the Lord, and she has had many successors, both with the needle itself and in other ways. She had only one talent, but see how much she made of that! Many who found themselves in her circumstances would have felt that they could do nothing; she saw the one opportunity and avenue open for her and made the most of that.¹⁸

Dorcas was an extraordinary woman not because she accomplished extraordinary things, but because she met *ordinary* needs by clothing these widows. What a commendation of the value of ordinary mercy ministry!

Here, Luke tells us that “Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, ‘Tabitha, arise’” (v. 40a). Elisha had done the same thing when he raised the widow’s son from the dead, stretching himself over the dead body three times.¹⁹ Here, however, Peter took no such action; instead, we read only that Peter sent out these widows in order to pray.²⁰ Indeed, the comparison is only indirectly to what Elijah did with the Shunammite’s son, and more properly toward Jesus’ raising of Jairus’s daughter. There, Jesus had said, “*Talitha qumi*,” which means, ‘Little girl...arise’ (Mark 5:41) in Aramaic. Here, although Luke had spoken of Dorcas up to this point by that Greek name, Luke now records Peter using the Aramaic name, Tabitha, which suggests he may have told Tabitha to arise in Aramaic.²¹ If so, what Peter said would differ by only one consonant from what Jesus had said: “*Tabitha qumi*.²²

After this, Luke tells us, “And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive” (v. 40b–41). In 1 Kings 17:23 Elijah “gave” a widow back her son, and again in Luke 7:15, Jesus “gave” a widow back her son. As Polhill notes, the word “presented” suggests that here again widows receive back someone whom they love: “Peter’s presentation of Dorcas alive was no less a gift to the widows of Joppa.”²³ Importantly, raising Dorcas from the dead was not only a gift to Dorcas, but a gift to these widows—these ordinary, poor widows who

¹⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 378.

¹⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 388.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:402.

²⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 389.

²¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 248.

²² Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 212.

²³ Polhill, *Acts*, 248.

loved this woman who had done so much for them.

As with the healing of Aeneas, the result of this miracle is an extensive growth of believers: “And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord” (v. 42). Lenski makes an important point that this miracle has ongoing validity, even though we do not see extraordinary raising of dead people today: “The idea is not that miracles as such work faith, but miracles are seals of the Word and attestations of its power and thus aid in producing faith. They are such seals to this day, for, once affixed to the Word, they remain there and need no repetition, and there is no need of new seals as though those affixed by the Lord had lost their validity.”²⁴ These miracles not only authenticate the *message* of the gospel, but also this particular *messenger*, who will carry the gospel to Gentiles in the next chapter: “God uses an authenticated, trustworthy minister to take the gospel to the Gentiles, an action that will prove to be controversial.”²⁵

Regarding the extent of the gospel’s spread, we notably find another instance of the phrase “throughout” (καθ’ ὅλης; *kath holēs*), from which we get our word “catholic.” Not only does the gospel spread extensively here in Joppa, but the final verse of this passage prepares us for an even greater expansion of the gospel in the next chapter: “And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner” (v. 43). As Polhill notes, the geographic movement from Lydda to Joppa is significant: “In a real sense, Peter had been moved by God even closer to Caesarea, where the greatest demonstration of God’s leading would take place when Peter was urged to witness there to the Gentile Cornelius.”²⁶ These ordinary stories show God’s extraordinary movement to continue to bring his gospel to the ends of the earth, one step at a time.

Discussion Questions

1. What is Peter doing by going “here and there among them all” (v. 32)? How does this pastoral work of visitation exemplify God’s care for the whole flock of Christ’s church? Who is Aeneas (v. 33)? How much do we know about him? How does Aeneas compare to the paralyzed man whom Peter and John met in the temple in Acts 3? Who heals Aeneas (v. 34)? What is the effect in the wider region? How did God use this ordinary man?
2. What do the names “Tabitha” and “Dorcas” mean (v. 36)? From what languages do those names derive? What do we know about Dorcas? How extraordinary would her life have seemed up to the point of her death? Why do you think that Dorcas’s friends call Peter and ask him to come to them (v. 39a)? When Peter arrives, what do the widows do (v. 39b)? What does that suggest about the impact of Dorcas’s mercy ministry?
3. How does the miracle of raising Dorcas from the dead echo miracles from Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs. 17:17–24; 2 Kgs. 4:32–37)? How does this miracle echo miracles of Jesus (Luke 7:11–17; 8:49–56)? How do the miracles from Elijah and Elisha emphasize God’s power to work beyond the bounds of Israel (see Luke 4:26)? How do the miracles of Jesus show the beginning of Jesus’ care for ordinary people in distress and even death?

²⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 392.

²⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 379.

²⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 249.

4. How are you tempted to despise or dismiss ordinary people in your life? How are you tempted to despise or dismiss ordinary work and service for others? How does the Bible give us lenses to see God's great care and compassion for ordinary people in our midst? How does this passage challenge the way that you think about yourself and your work? How does this passage challenge the way that you think about specific other people?