

Alive and Well

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on December 27, 1998. The preacher is Gordon Cheng.

His sermon is entitled Alive and Well and is from Acts chapter 9 verses 32 to 43. Loving Father, we pray that your words may enlighten us today and that we may again put our trust in your Son, Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Well, it's good to be able to preach to you today and thank you, Paul, for inviting me.

He said actually that the Sunday after Christmas is a very difficult Sunday on which to preach. But in my view, if you're at church today, it's because you really want to be twice in two weeks.

That's pretty good. In one week. In one week. Today, we're resuming a series that we left off halfway through the year.

[1 : 0 7] It's in the book of Acts. And we come in Acts chapter 9 and verse 32 to an extraordinary account of two miracles that are performed by the apostle Peter as he travels, as the passage says, here and there among the believers.

He's traveling around, presumably encouraging the people in their belief and their faith. My purpose in looking at these miracles today is to ask the question of what we're to make of them and how we apply these things to ourselves and what do they teach us about how to live as Christians.

Miracles trail along in the wake of the apostles. They began, of course, with Jesus Christ. They were performed by Jesus himself on numerous occasions.

And so John comments about the miracles of Jesus at the end of his gospel. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

Then in the book of Acts, there begins another great flurry of miraculous activity. This time it's centering around the apostles themselves. In Acts 2, they miraculously speak in languages which are understood by many foreign Jews.

[2 : 3 8] In Acts 2, verse 43, we read that many miraculous signs and wonders were done by all the apostles. In Acts chapter 3, a crippled beggar at the temple is healed.

And we have that famous traditional hymn, which I was kind of hoping that we'd sing today, but obviously not. The hymn, silver and gold, have I none. In Acts 5, verse 5, we read what I suppose might be called the slaying in the spirit.

Ananias and Sapphira tell a lie about how generous they've been. And at Peter's rebuke, they fall down dead. The first slaying in the spirit. In Acts chapter 5 and verse 15, we read this extraordinary statement that people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on them as he passed by.

And the crowds, we read about them coming where they're sick and demon-possessed. And verse 16 of chapter 5 says that all of these people were healed. But of all the great miracles that are recorded in the book of Acts as being done by the apostles, in my opinion, the two miracles that are in these 12 verses for today's passage, they are the greatest of them all, apart from the miracle of becoming a Christian.

Certainly the second miracle that we read of, the resurrection of Tabitha, who has already been prepared for burial. It is pretty hard to see how you could beat that one.

[4 : 14] The passage talks about Peter travelling here and there. He is visiting the saints in Lydda, which is not too far from Jerusalem, so no doubt your vicar has visited the place on numerous occasions.

Peter appears to be travelling around encouraging the saints in Judea and Galilee and Samaria, possibly even spreading the news that Saul, the persecutor of the church, has become Paul the believer.

That also happens in chapter 9. And that will be, of course, a huge encouragement to the people that Peter was visiting. There in Lydda, he comes into contact with Aeneas, about whom everything we know is contained in two verses.

His name is Aeneas. He comes from Lydda and he has been paralysed for eight years. Eight years is more than enough time for muscle to waste away.

In fact, muscle that isn't used, it's not as if the person just goes slack or floppy. The muscles and the tendons freeze up and they tighten into all sorts of contortions. So if you've ever met or known anyone who has lost the use of their muscles in the long term, you find that unless they've had a bit of physio on a fairly regular basis, their body has been contorted and twisted into all sorts of unnatural positions.

[5 : 37] And that is how we should imagine Aeneas to be, not comfortably sitting, sipping his orange juice and watching television. He is on a mat. His body is distorted.

He must have had to rely on his relatives to clean himself up and to feed him. He hasn't got an electric wheelchair or a disabled ramp. He is simply there and helpless.

Peter arrives and confidently, without a shadow of hesitation, declares, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and make your bed.

Now how Peter knew enough to confidently declare, Jesus Christ heals you, I have no idea. I've no doubt that God could do this again if he chose.

And we're certainly right to keep asking God to heal our sick friends and relatives and to do that in services each Sunday and so on. But even so, I would not be game to do what Peter did and tell this person who'd been sick for eight years to get up and get on with life to make his bed.

[6 : 44] Would you do it? Well, what happens next is that, in fact, the man does just that. And the reaction, for my money, is not surprising. Verse 35 says that all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

You'd have to be pretty determined not to believe, wouldn't you, if you saw something like this with your own eyes and didn't at least check it out to see if it was true or not. Now the second miracle follows a similar pattern.

In fact, it occurs in direct response to the first miracle. People in nearby Joppa, which is on the coast of Israel, and you can ask Paul Barker for his holiday snaps, they hear the news that this man has been healed of his paralysis.

And they ask Peter to come and help. One of their own, a disciple named Tabitha, which translates as Dorcas, or in English gazelle, has died.

She is a lady of the sort we know and recognize. She is kind. She is generous. She spends her time making clothes for people. In fact, the passage talks about people showing their clothes to Peter, I guess to demonstrate what kind of lady she was.

[8 : 06] Tabitha is more than just a kind lady, however. She is called a disciple. I think the only woman in the New Testament to be called actually a disciple. She's a follower of the Lord Jesus. Peter comes at the urging of the men from Joppa.

He is taken to an upstairs room. And as Luke writes this little sentence of description, you can almost see the picture. 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, it seems, is moved by compassion. Not so much for Tabitha, because for her, death actually means life with Jesus forever.

But compassion for those sad ones that she has left behind. And we can certainly sympathize and empathize with that, the sadness of those who are left behind. And he sends the people out.

He prays for Tabitha. And he turns to the body. I guess that little phrase, he turns to the body, emphasizes the deadness of it. There the body is.

[9 : 14] It's no longer a human being in a sense. It's just lying there. And it's been washed and prepared for burial. But he says to the body, Tabitha, get up.

Which she promptly does. And with the wonderful further result that we read, that many put their trust in Jesus.

Many believe in the Lord. Well, what do we make? What do we make of these two extraordinary miracles that Luke has recorded for us in the book of Acts?

I want to suggest three things that we should be calling to mind and remembering when we consider this passage and when we read what's being said here. Firstly, these miracles are recorded for us because they bring glory to Jesus.

They point not to the miracle worker or to the miracles themselves. They point to Jesus Christ. How does this happen? Well, the miracles bring glory because they are undeniably the work of God through Jesus Christ.

[10 : 25] There is no cards up the sleeve sort of trickery involved here. There are plenty of people who go around today claiming that miracles still happen. And of course, there is no doubt that God is perfectly able to do whatever he wants to do whenever he wants to do it.

Miracles included. But I will happily walk to Ballarat on my hands and back if anyone can do or show medical evidence of miracles like the ones that are here recorded.

Why don't you try it yourself sometime? Try raising someone from the dead. Sneak in at the back of the funeral and at the end sneak over to the coffin and try and make that body live again.

Only if you do it, can I recommend you do it very quietly when no one is looking because that way, if it doesn't come off, you won't have people calling the police on you. Or perhaps we could start, as Peter did, with the much easier miracle of helping someone who has been paralysed for eight years to get up and to make their bed.

And we're talking, of course, not just about a partial cure where the person is limping and sort of resting on a walking frame but manages a few steps and then after six months, they're a bit better.

[11 : 49] We're not talking about the cure has to be immediate, complete and permanent just as is recorded here. You see, the plain fact of the matter is that in comparison to so many of the claimed miracles of today, the miracles that are recorded here as well as in the rest of the Gospels, they are powerful, they are effective and they are immediate.

Powerful and effective and immediate in a way that can really only be explained by saying that God is at work because you see, no one apart from God has ever regenerated dead nerves.

No one apart from God has ever restored decayed spinal cords or brought back useless muscles and tendons to complete normal functioning. No one will ever, without the power of God, be able to raise someone from the dead, especially a dead body that has already been washed and laid out for burial, raise that body to full and healthy and strong life.

That is how we know that these miracles bring glory to Jesus because they are done in the name of Jesus and they are miracles that only God could have done, not through trickery or any sort of funny cover-up.

Now it hardly needs to be said that when God does bring someone back to life there is something very special going on and I suppose the other thing we see here is that this miracle is characteristic of a number of other occasions in the Bible where people have been raised from the dead.

[13 : 25] It only happens very rarely. It happens twice in the whole of the Old Testament. Abraham doesn't get to do it. Moses never sees a raising from the dead. Elijah and Elisha both managed to pull this one off, raise someone from the dead, not through their own power of course but through the power of God.

In fact it's very interesting if you go back and read in 1 and 2 Kings some of the echoes of the account that you see in Acts of the upper room, the fact that a woman is involved and is raised from the dead in this way.

Jesus of course brings three people back from the dead, not including himself and here in Acts 9 his disciple Peter does it too. So this is something special and a glorious work of God going on.

Just as an aside I think that the miracles are functioning as an authentication of Peter's apostolic ministry. That's why you don't see resurrections happening left, right and centre today because Peter it's really saying that Peter is the genuine product.

He and the other apostles who go around performing miracles are doing so because they're doing it with the power of Jesus Christ and it's really saying if you listen to Jesus then you need to listen also to the words of Peter and the other apostles as we don't have apostles today this sort of miracle isn't happening in the same sort of way.

[14 : 52] Peter takes no credit whatsoever for the miracles in fact Peter points his witnesses towards the power of Jesus Christ he doesn't claim any glory for himself Aeneas is simply told Jesus Christ heals you and again with Tabitha the result is that people believe not in Peter they don't say you are a spectacular person we'll worship you they believe in Jesus Christ they believe in the Lord so firstly then the miracles bring glory to Jesus Christ and to him alone the second thing that we make of these miracles the second thing that we can draw is that do you notice who the beneficiaries of the miracles are it's not those who are wealthy enough to pay for it to happen it's not those with private health cover whose health cover actually happens to extend to miracles as well the miracles happen to those who are weak and humble the miracles illustrate

God's concern for those who humbly trust in him and him alone it is perfectly in line with everything else that we read of what Luke has said the whole point of Jesus coming in fact we're reminded of it at Christmas time because that's where we read the story of the angel coming to Mary and telling him a son is to be born Jesus comes to the world but it's not for the benefit of the high and the mighty and the rich and the powerful and the wealthy and those with the insurance in fact the exact opposite and Mary when she finds out that she's going to give birth to Jesus this is what she says my soul praises the Lord my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant later in that same song of praise she says God has brought down rulers from their thrones but he has lifted up the humble and that is exactly what we see happening in Jesus' ministry isn't it the ones who are benefiting are not the proud religious people in fact they are the ones who turn on Jesus and persecute him the ones that Jesus seeks out and heals are the outcasts the lepers the foreigners the women the ones that no one cares for and so it is in the book of Acts that these miracles that Luke records

Peter heals the cripple he raises the kind woman who knits and sews and puts a trust in God this is God taking care of the little people the ones who as far as the world is concerned don't count very much at all you see the miracles remind us that God is not interested in enhancing the careers of supermodels or sports people or making rich people much richer that is not what God is about God is concerned for those who are weak like Aeneas or for those who are kind and merciful and generous and good disciples of Jesus like Tabitha I don't know about you but the people that I am tempted to see as important or strategic for advancing the church or the work of the gospel in the world are those with money or leadership skills those who can either pay for gospel ministry to happen or those who actually get out and do it and of course money and leadership are important they are things that God uses to advance his kingdom but what these miracles remind me of is that

I am not to consider those rich powerful people as more important than others in God's church in fact what the two miracle stories tell me are that the ones that God chooses to bless are just as likely to be the seemingly weak people the useless people the people who lie around not because they have nothing better to do but because they cannot do anything else the people who knit the jumpers the people who sew things the people the ones that I am tempted to overlook are exactly the ones that God seeks out and in his kindness he raises them up God has torn down the rulers from their thrones and he has lifted up the poor the weak the humble God is concerned for us when we humbly trust him not when we stand on our power and our wealth and our authority third point about these miracles just to remind you of the first two the first point the miracles bring glory to

Jesus Christ and to him alone secondly the miracles are targeted at those who are weak and poor and humble who put their trust in God thirdly they happen specifically in order that people might believe in and trust Jesus you see it there in the passage verse 35 says all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him saw Aeneas that is and they turned to the Lord and again in verse 42 this became known what happened to Tabitha throughout Joppa and many believed in the Lord you see the miracles are not just written down for us as exciting stories someone said once in a talk I heard that Luke Luke is like a tabloid newspaper reporter for the Herald Sun he just tells you the exciting stuff and that's the way Acts reads and so here we have this terrific story it's a human interest thing it features

[20 : 41] Aeneas it features Tabitha we've got interviews with people concerned it's like a tabloid reporter but that is not I think what's going on because you see the miracles didn't just happen for the benefit of the people concerned much as I'm sure that Tabitha and Aeneas were happy campers when they realised what God had done for them the result of those miracles is that people saw God at work and they put their trust in him notice it is not a case of taking the miracle worker and putting him on a pedestal Peter neither receives nor expects any glory for what he has done see the one who receives glory is Jesus Christ he is the one that we are to trust and obey that's why Peter says not I heal you but Jesus Christ heals you get up and make your bed Jesus Christ is the one that we are to honour when we read these stories the invitation is there for everyone to trust and obey and isn't it exciting by the way to see how

Peter realises the grace of God flowing out to everybody so that everybody might trust and believe he works out himself you see the very last verse of our passage has him staying in the house of a certain Simon a tanner a tanner is unclean by Jewish law because of all the dead unclean animals that are hanging around the place and it's got to be said they are unclean not just by Jewish law but by any standard because of the general stink of carcasses and dead meat and skins being treated it's not like the healthy clean abattoirs we have today which generate enough stink on their own this man is genuinely unclean and however what Peter has realised is that there are no barriers God isn't just interested in rich powerful people he's interested even in Simon the tanner and he goes and stays at his place God's grace and power is for everybody who puts their trust in him not the rich or the proud not those who feel they don't need God's help the gospel is for those who are helpless and weak who realise that we need

God who act with kindness and compassion and who ask God for new life through Jesus Christ and I pray that as we're reminded of these things it will result in the strengthening of our own faith let's pray dear Lord Jesus we thank you for the stories we read today of Aeneas and Tabitha we thank you that these stories bring glory to you we thank you that you are indeed a Lord who raises up the weak and the humble who put their trust in you and you are a God who tears down the self-sufficient and proud and wealthy and arrogant we pray loving Father that we ourselves will be people who trust in you not in ourselves we pray in Jesus' name Amen