

Part 19: Walking with Jesus

Tyler Velin | Acts 9:31-43

January 5, 2025

If you're just joining us at Sovereign Hope, we have spent the last four weeks meditating on the birth of Jesus, but today we resume our study in the book of Acts which instructs us regarding the birth of the church. Before Jesus died he told his disciples that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

And Jesus died, but more than that, he rose again, and this produced much fruit. We have just witnessed the lead persecutor of the church, a man named Saul, be himself converted by Jesus' sovereign hand to Christianity. And the verse right before our passage today describes the culture of the church: **Acts 9:31**, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied."

You might see this and say, "Ah, the good ol' days of the church! If only we would see such fruit today!" And I would join you and say, "Yes, and amen." But do you remember all that's going on here? Immediately before that verse we see conspiracies to murder the disciples. In today's passage we read of disease and death plaguing even the Christian. Yet, in the face of such bleak circumstances we see two miraculous responses.

First, the church was at peace and being built up. Second, the church that was opposed and afflicted was attractive and compelling to the outsider! As the church walked in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Spirit, they were not seen as sufferers to be pitied, but as joyful saints to be joined! While it appeared to be an unattractive situation, what we instead see is that there was supernatural situation inside the church that was both satisfying to the believer and compelling to the unbeliever.

But what does that look like today? What would it look like in our own church if we walked in the fear of the Lord, the comfort of the Spirit, and because of that multiplied? Well it just so happens that immediately after that description we see the miracle of a lame man walking, and grieving group comforted, and many souls added to the church!

These superficial miracles of healing take center stage but they do so to point us to the greater miracle--the miracle of sinners coming to faith in Jesus Christ. This will be our main point this morning: **God uses ordinary acts of grace to bring the supernatural fruit of faith.**

What does it look like for a church to walk in such a supernatural way? We will see this in three ways today: **Walking in Discipleship, Walking in Compassion, and Walking for Conversion.**

Our passage begins this morning as Luke shifts the camera from Saul and back to Peter. **Acts 9:32**, "Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived in Lydda."

This might seem like an odd verse to pull an entire point out of--but this verse is hugely important in reaffirming the identity of the Christian church and the activity of the Christian church.

This is our first point this morning: **Walking in Discipleship.**

Let's begin by focusing on the names and identifiers. First, notice how the Christians in Lydda are called "saints."

This is only the second time Luke has used this word, the first time being when Ananias referred to the "saints" in Jerusalem (Acts 9:13). Kids who are in here, do you know what a "saint" is? Here's the answer--the word "saint" is just the word for "holy."

So a saint is a "holy" one. What does "holy" mean? It just means to be set apart, or to be distinct. But how does one become a "holy saint"?

We just came out of a season where you've heard of "Jolly Ol' Saint Nicholas." Maybe you've heard characters of the Bible spoken of as "Saint Peter," or "Saint Paul." Or maybe, you grew up in the Catholic Church and were familiar with saints who aren't even in the Bible like, "Saint Patrick" or "Saint Vincent."

Becoming a "saint" in the Roman Catholic Church is quite the process. You must first have, "lived a heroically virtuous life." Second, you must have died either as a martyr or in some sacrificial way.

Then, after your death, you have to be recognized by the church as "venerable." Once you've been recognized as "venerable" by the Pope, they would then examine your life to see if you did anything considered miraculous in your life. If you did perform a miracle, then you would be given the title, "Blessed." And if you happened to perform more than one miracle, then you may be presented to the Pope and officially canonized as a "saint."

To be a "saint" by Roman Catholic standards is to be really set apart—you had to be a super Christian of sorts. But here, Peter finds saints in a Lydda. There's nothing spectacular about Lydda. In fact if you look it up, it's essentially a truck stop town between the important political city of Jerusalem and the important trading cities on the coast. We don't have any record of Jesus visiting Lydda, Pentecost didn't happen in Lydda, in fact we don't even hear about anyone in Lydda until we find Peter visiting the saints who were there.

Somehow, someone made saints, holy people in Lydda. How can this be? Well, it's because the Bible's way to make saints is a lot simpler than the Roman Catholic Church's. Paul himself tells us this **1 Corinthians 1:2**, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified (the literal sense, "sainted"), called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours."

Writing to the church in Colossae, Paul tells us that it is the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light through your faith in Jesus Christ. When you realize your sinfulness, and you put your faith in Jesus, your whole identity changes. You become, "holy."

In fact, the same word for "saint" is the same root word for "holy," in the Holy Spirit. We are made saints because the Father has qualified us by our faith in Jesus, who has made us holy by his blood, and we are now filled with the Holy Spirit for his purposes.

You see, it's not that the Catholics were wrong about how set apart saints are. They are remarkably set apart—in fact remarkably so! But it's not by anything they have done. It's by the miraculous work of Jesus Christ and their faith in him. And the result is that this title now sets them up to live differently.

I wonder if you realize that? To be called a “saint” by faith in Jesus is to be given a new authorization in life. And what are we authorized to do? Well, here we see our second title which defines the life of the saint.

Look down at what they are called in **Acts 9:38**: Disciples.

Saints are set apart to be disciples of Jesus and to be disciplers of Jesus. We live for Jesus and help others do the same. Sainthood is our identity and discipleship is our activity.

What is discipleship? Well, we often say discipleship is helping one another follow Jesus in all of life through the gospel. Maybe that’s a good phrase to pick apart at the lunch table and discuss more. What would that look like, and what does that not look like in our church?

The book of Acts doesn’t give us a definition of discipleship as much as it’s a documentary on discipleship. Peter in this passage is traveling here and there among believers to encourage and help them. That’s the pattern we see everywhere throughout the book of Acts.

It’s what Paul and Barnabas decided to do in, **Acts 15:36**, "And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.'"

Discipleship seeks to turn into the believers who are around you and to see “how they are.” But they do so Christianly. It’s a “saintified” community. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul speaks to the whole church and gives an outline of what this might look like: **1 Thessalonians 5:13-19**, “Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.”

Because we have been made holy by the Holy Spirit, we lean into the lives of others and help them and ourselves grow in holiness. I wonder if you might take that passage this week and examine how your current relationships in the church can be used to that end. The church multiplied as it walked in discipleship and I pray we might as well.

The church multiplies when it realizes that it is set apart to see the people in their church for what they are, Christians. But our second point shows how the church multiplies when it sees the Christians in their midst for what they also are, people.

This is our second point: **Walking in Compassion**.

See if you can pick up those themes as we read the following events: **Acts 9:33-39** "There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.' And immediately he rose. And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord. Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. 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.' 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."

What is compassion? Our world loves to talk about it. But Christian compassion should be distinct. We see a bit of this distinction in this passage as we see that Christian compassion does two things: 1. It sees people as Jesus sees people, and 2. It serves people like Jesus served people.

When it comes to **seeing** people as Jesus sees people, it's important to note that these two miracles mimic Jesus' own ministry. First, in Luke 5, Jesus heals a paralytic, then in Luke 7, Jesus raises a widow's son to life.

The obvious miracles in this passage are clear. But let's focus first of all on what changed. In Jesus' ministry, he was constantly rebuking the Jews and the Pharisees for being unconcerned the sick, the oppressed and the marginalized in their midst. Everyone went about their temple worship feeling good about themselves because they were doing right by God.

But since we began the book of Acts, we've seen that the true followers of Jesus don't miss the people that Jesus didn't miss. Conversion not only changes how we view Jesus, it changes how we view others.

Don't get me wrong...life is easier without people. And our society is trying to cater to that. You can go to a store and use self-check-out, you can have your goods dropped off at your door with contactless convenience. More tragically, you can access the internet and find pleasure through the flattening of image bearing people into pixels of empty gratification. But in a world of people-less encounters, the gospel gives us the eyes of compassion over and above the eyes of our own convenience.

There was nothing special about Aeneas, but Peter saw him and cared for him. When we have seen how Jesus alleviates our eternal suffering—we should be concerned about how we might show Jesus' love in our care for temporary suffering.

The church is filled with saints—but these saints are sick saints, suffering saints, stuck saints, and sniffing saints. As we get deacons up and running to serve the church we will all feel the pains of the inconvenience of compassion—but it's there we remember how Jesus served us. How he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself and took the form of a servant and humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.

This causes us to see, and to **serve** in distinctly Christian ways.

Notice Tabitha's compassionate service. Tabitha didn't create a healthcare system in Joppa. She didn't build an orphanage. She didn't wait tables for the church like the seven in Acts 6. She knitted beanies and sweaters for widows.

And yet, she served like Jesus. She was certainly one who helped these widows, who I assume were part of the church in Joppa, know and believe in Jesus. But she also helped them stay clothed in a harsh environment. They include her Greek name, Dorcas, which means "gazelle," probably to show us the way in which she effortlessly bounded from one service opportunity to another.

Service in the name of Jesus is service as Jesus. And notice how Tabitha's compassion went both ways. She obviously shared not only of her talents, but of herself. These grieving widows gathered not because their supply of beanies were gone—but because their sister Tabitha was.

Service and care is how we share Jesus' love with others, and it's also how we expand our own love for others.

May we be a church that is compassionate to others as Jesus was compassionate to us: meeting spiritual and physical needs to the degree we are able.

And what is our ability? That's the real question we are all asking here right? When am I going to stop ignoring the obvious! Our church would grow if I suddenly started healing paralytics and raising the dead right?

Perhaps. But let's not mistake what the true miracle is here. Look back at Acts 9:35, what happened after the temporary healing of that one man? All the residents of Lydda and Sharon turned to the Lord. Many people were saved from eternal and permanent damnation by turning to Jesus!

Prosthetics might make a man walk—but not even a miracle worker can make a man repent. You actually have a greater shot of raising someone from the dead than you do of causing them to repent. Repentance is a gift from God—a miracle that overcomes our dead and sinful hearts. But that's what happened.

And now look at what happens with our dear sister Tabitha: **Acts 9:40-43**, "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. And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner."

What happened when that one sister was raised to life? "Many believed in the Lord."

God has so chosen that when the church walks in discipleship—it will multiply. God has so chosen that when the church walks in compassion—it will multiply. Neither of these are rules of math—they are rules of mercy. And we see this ultimately because the church will only ultimately grow when in all things we are **Walking for Conversion**.

That is our final point this morning. The greater miracle here is the salvation of souls—but before we get there I want to discuss the phenomenal miracle of a dead person rising.

This is the first resurrection we have in the Bible after the resurrection of Jesus. And how fitting to show God's mercy that in successive order we see the King of Kings who made atonement is only followed in resurrection by a single woman who made clothing. That's the beauty of grace!

But regarding miracles I want to speak to two kinds of people. First, for those who are prone to write away miracles as fairy tale additions to the Bible, or merely a mythological recapitulation of modern medicine—I want to say that if you are going to believe the Bible—you must believe in miracles.

There's no two ways about it. We follow a man who was dead, raised, and ascended. Moreover, we confess even more miraculously, that that one man, was also fully God. And because that God is the creator of the world, and the "laws" that govern it—we find no contradiction when creation obeys God's command even when it seems to step outside of the otherwise concrete patterns of science.

In this way C.S. Lewis once said, "In science we have been reading only the notes to a poem, in Christianity we find the poem itself."

Now, to the second group of people—you might look at this and say, "Yes, and how are we to practice these miracles today? Let's get back to the apostolic church!"

But I want to say that much of what we see in these early pages of Acts is absent in the latter pages and the pastoral letters. It seems that God choose to vindicate the church and show that it was the continued work of Jesus by allowing the apostles, by the power of Jesus, to do some of the same works Jesus did.

All that to say that we have no biblical command as a church to perform miracles. We also have no Biblical warrant to say that if we are a true church, God will do such miracles. However we are called to prayerfully ask, and openhandedly expect God to do these if he sees most fitting. James reminds us in James 5:14 that those who are sick should seek prayer, and that the elders specifically, and the broader church ought to pray for them.

So, we shouldn't be chasing miracles as a church—but I do want to point out the pattern we have seen in order to reframe our understanding of the miracles we most deeply want to see. Notice how it was only Peter's commitment to walking in discipleship that landed him on a journey of encouragement to Lydda. It was then only a church grieving the loss of their compassionate sister that they heard Peter was near and sent for him. And as the church pursued the ordinary means of discipleship and compassion—many were saved!

That's the very thing we've been tracking all along—that's what Luke wants to show us in Acts 9:31. Walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit the church multiplied.

Make no mistake, it is costly to walk in discipleship. It is costly to walk in compassion. And let me tell you, it is costly if you are really serious about prioritizing the conversion of the lost over everything else.

Take our sister, Tabitha, for example. We don't know much about her. The fact that we don't hear anything of her family probably means she was either a widow herself, or that she was a single young woman who had no existing family. Either way, I can imagine that when she breathed her final breath on earth and woke up in glory—it was the happiest and most blessed she's ever been. Face to face with the father. Free of the earthly pains of death. Free of the aching fingers of knitting.

But then one moment, she opened her eyes and she saw Peter. And then she saw those ladies who she made stuff for. And she thought to herself—I was in glory and you brought me back here? Brothers and sisters, if the Lord would so choose to bring me back from the grave I can tell you this—someone better be getting saved.

Tabitha got the short end of the stick. But from what I already know about Tabitha in this passage—she would have died and rose again a thousand times if it meant people would turn to Jesus.

We are not commanded to raise people from the dead as an evangelistic strategy. But we are commanded and committed to the ordinary works of life which God so frequently chooses to bring supernatural growth and salvation through.

If we really care about the lost, if we really care about our brothers and sisters in the faith, then we will happily lose the momentary joys of this world in order to help others embrace the eternal joy of Jesus. Tabitha gave up glory to return to knitting.

And yet, in God's providence, he has chosen to do more through faithful saints walking into the grave than he ever has by faithful saints rising out of the grave. Would you give your life to such a miraculous end as faithfully living and dying for the glory of God and the salvation of the lost?

Would you see that God has equipped you for such a life as that? I just heard a wonderful quote by the puritan Richard Sibbes who said, "I feel that my life is hanging by but a strand, but it is Christ who has spun it."

In other words, all he has is this one string, the trappings of worldly comforts and peace have been stripped away. Yet the string, slim as it is, was spun by the strong and unfailing Jesus Christ. Church if you want to be serious about your own joy and peace with God—get serious about walking with him in all of life.

And if you're not a believer, notice how it was people who were walking, and people who were living who believed in Jesus. Now, why would they do that? They don't need to walk. They don't need to be resuscitated. But that's the very point you can't miss, these miraculous proofs proved the greater truth—you must believe in Jesus to be saved from your sins. You don't need new legs, or even a second chance at life, you need a new heart. You need your sins forgiven and eternal damnation removed—and Jesus has made all of that possible for you on the cross. As Peter asked with confidence Jesus to do the miracles in this text, you can ask with greater confidence for Jesus do that greater miracle of forgiving you and making you a saint.