

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 17, 2010**

GLIMPSES OF GOD

Acts 9:32-43

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

Following their mission to Samaria in Acts 8, when the Holy Spirit came to the believers there, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem. On their way, they preached the gospel in every Samaritan town they passed through (Acts 8:25). Then, beginning in Acts 8:26, Luke describes the divinely-orchestrated encounter between Philip and a government official in the administration of Ethiopia's Queen Candace (8:26-40).

What happened next, in Acts 9, is one of the most remarkable and significant events not just in the New Testament but in all of history, the dramatic story of Saul's (Paul's) unexpected encounter with the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, which changed the whole direction and trajectory of Paul's life. The fiercest enemy of the Christian faith would become, in the sovereignty of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, the greatest and most influential Christian missionary in the history of the church.

After describing the conversion of Paul and his early Christian experience, Luke changes the subject again and goes back to Peter and his ministry as a messenger of the gospel. This brings us to Acts 9:32, where we resume our look at the life and times of Peter today.

Some Bible scholars, including William Barclay and John Stott, suggest that this particular passage could be called "The Acts of Peter." Peter himself would disagree, as I hope will become clear. Peter knew that he didn't have the power to heal anyone. He didn't have any miracle-working power. The power to heal the sick or restore a dead person to life wasn't his. He was just an instrument the Lord Jesus chose to use. He was just a channel through whom the power of the Holy Spirit flowed. Peter knew it was God's power and not his. These verses do describe the human agency of Peter, but it was really God in action, working through Peter to do truly amazing, miraculous things. And to give us glimpses of god.

Let's look together at Acts 9:32-43. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MIRACLES?

If you're old enough, even if you're not much of a hockey fan, you probably remember the "miracle on ice" at the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, NY, when an underdog USA hockey team faced off against the juggernaut Soviet team that was considered by far the best in the world. Nobody gave the USA much of a chance. But Team USA did the impossible. They pulled off the biggest upset in Olympic hockey history. With a bunch of amateurs and collegians, they beat the Soviets, 4-3, to earn the right to play in the gold medal game, which the USA won over Sweden. In the final seconds of their victory over the Soviet Union, with

the clock ticking down to zero, sportscaster Al Michaels exuberantly uttered these famous words: “Do you believe in miracles? Yes!” All of America celebrated it as the “miracle on ice.” And, of course, Disney made a movie about it a few years ago (2004), which is simply called *Miracle*.

Was what happened at Lake Placid a miracle? No doubt it was a huge surprise. No doubt it was contrary to what just about everybody in America – in the world, for that matter – expected. No doubt it was an extraordinary game with an extraordinary outcome. But, was it a miracle?

To get more personal: Do you believe in miracles? It is really a great question. And an important one. How you answer it, of course, will depend on how you define the word *miracle*.

According to one definition, a miracle is simply an amazing or wonderful event or accomplishment. In this sense, a miracle occurs every time a baby is born. Even though it happens every day, and it happens according to the laws of nature ordained and established by God, we see the miraculous in every birth. Or, someone may consider it a miracle, given our nation’s history of racial prejudice, that an African-American man was elected president of the United States in 2008 and now sits in the Oval Office. It *is* truly remarkable. It *is* an extraordinary occurrence of historic significance. Regardless of your political persuasion. No question about it.

But neither the birth of a baby nor the election of an African-American to the presidency nor the USA’s stunning upset of the Soviet Union in 1980, is a miracle according to the classical, biblical definition.

The primary dictionary definition of *miracle* is “an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary) or “an event that [cannot be explained] by the laws of nature, and so is held to be supernatural in origin as an act of God” (American Heritage Dictionary). We Christians believe miracles are supernatural acts that only God can perform, usually by superceding natural laws (Probe Ministries). C. S. Lewis explained miracle as an interference with nature by a supernatural power – i.e., God. Bible teacher John MacArthur says that a miracle is what occurs when God intervenes in the normal laws of nature to do a supernatural act. The Bible, of course, is filled with miraculous events – from God’s act of creating the universe itself (out of *nothing, ex nihilo*) to the parting of the Red Sea for the people of Israel, from the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, when both were in their old age and as good as dead in terms of having a child of their own (Romans 4:19), to the supernatural circumstances surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus, from the feeding of the five thousand and the raising of Jesus’ friend Lazarus from the dead to the death blow Jesus dealt death itself in His resurrection from the dead and ascension to heaven. And many, many more.

Often, God’s purpose in a miracle is not simply to *do* something amazing or extraordinary that brings a blessing we would never otherwise experience. Very often, when God does something miraculous, it is meant to be a sign that points us beyond the miracle to give us a

glimpse of God Himself, to enlarge our understanding and vision of His power, His grace, His love, His purposes, His character, and His absolute sufficiency. We may pray earnestly for God to do a miracle in our lives, or in the life of someone we love. We may long passionately for a miracle. We may feel a need in the depths of our heart for some kind of miracle that only God can make happen. But the truth is that, more than a miracle, what we really, desperately need at every moment, in every situation or circumstance in life, is God Himself. Not the miracle. But God, whose love for us, whose grace to us, whose presence with us, and whose power at work in us, are truly miraculous.

So, do you believe in miracles?

While we're on the subject, I can't let the opportunity pass without mentioning the amazing story of the rescue this past week of the 33 miners in Chile who had been trapped 2,000 feet underground for 69 days. It *is* a miracle, don't you think, that God kept all of them alive all that time and brought them safely out. It was a miracle of perseverance, as they endured such a prolonged period of severe testing and hardship. The rescue itself was a miracle of human ingenuity, as God gave the understanding and ability to devise, first, a way to deliver supplies to the miners, and, second, the technological means to bring the miners to the surface and safety. So it is right to praise God from whom all blessings flow!

Last Tuesday, just a day before their rescue, one of the 33 miners (Jimmy Sanchez) sent a message to the surface in which he said: "There are actually 34 of us, because God has never left us down here." From the depths of the earth, a testimony to the presence and grace of God! It is an echo of what David wrote 3,000 years ago in Psalm 139:

If I go up to the heavens, You are there;
 If I make my bed in the depths, You are there.
 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
 If I settle on the far side of the sea,
 (No matter where I go or what circumstances I experience)
 Even there Your hand will guide me,
 Your right hand will hold me fast.
 (Psalm 139:8-10)

On a *Christianity Today* blog, someone suggested this Bible verse – Psalm 71:20 – for the now-rescued miners. It says:

Though You have made me see troubles, many and bitter,
 You will restore my life again;
 From the depths of the earth
 You will again bring me up.

Which is what happened. It may not fit the classical, biblical definition of a miracle, but it was still an extraordinary, life-altering event. Even if it was not supernatural in the sense that natural laws were suspended or overruled by God, it was still pretty miraculous. And there is no question in my mind that God was in it.

Here is something else that is amazing: It is estimated that, through the miracle of modern technology, one billion people around the world were watching live on TV or the internet as the rescue took place. Maybe you were among them. If you were, you may have noticed that the miners were all wearing T-shirts which had the words “Thank You Lord” printed in Spanish on the front, and a Bible verse (Psalm 95:4) printed on the back. The shirts were a gift to the miners from Campus Crusade for Christ Chile. The miners themselves decided to wear the shirts. They didn’t have to. That they did bore witness to the watching world that God had been with them throughout their ordeal, and had brought them safely through it.

There is a spiritual application in all of this, too, as H. B. London points out. The Bible teaches (and experience confirms) that all of humankind – every one of us – is in bondage to sin. We are all trapped in our sin, with no way out. No way to rescue ourselves, as hard as we may try. But then, as Paul says in Romans 5, “at just the right time, when we were still powerless (trapped in our sinfulness and unable to save ourselves), Christ died for the ungodly. When we were still sinners (stuck in our sin with no way to rescue ourselves), Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6, 8). Talk about a miracle! Our salvation is truly a supernatural act that only God could do. He did it for us. He did it for you. And a miracle like this would be a terrible thing to waste. Why would anyone in their right mind refuse to be rescued by the Lord Jesus when there is no other way to be set free? It doesn’t make sense. If you are still trapped in your sin, come to Jesus today. Let Him rescue you. Let Him bring you out of the darkness, out of the hopelessness and futility of being stuck in your sin, into the light of His love and mercy and grace. Let Him do this miracle in your life. You will be amazed at what Jesus can do.

At this point, you may be wondering when (or if) I’m going to get back to our Scripture reading from Acts 9. The answer is: Right now. But everything I’ve talked about so far relates to it.

AENEAS AND TABITHA

In these verses (Acts 9:32-43), Luke recounts two events, two miraculous events, involving two different individuals, Aeneas and Tabitha, in two different towns, Lydda and Joppa, with a response from the people in both towns that was remarkable.

Now that the wave of persecution which had broken out in Acts 8 was over, Peter hit the road to visit the churches which had sprung up in Judea and Samaria. His travels took him to Lydda, a town about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Lydda was located at the intersection of “highways” between Egypt and Syria (going north and south) and between Jerusalem and Joppa on the Mediterranean coast (going east and west). If you have ever traveled to Israel, you have probably been to Lydda (or Lod, as it is sometimes known), because Israel’s main international airport, Ben-Gurion Airport, is located there, just outside Tel Aviv.

Luke’s description of what took place there is beautiful in its simplicity. Peter meets Aeneas, a man who has been paralyzed and bedridden for eight long years. And what does Peter do? He looks him in the eye and he calls him by his name. I love the fact that Peter does that,

don't you? When you call a person by name, it is a way of communicating respect. It is a way of bestowing dignity. It is a way of saying to someone: "You are important to me."

Peter says: "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you" (9:34). Notice that he doesn't say: "Aeneas, I heal you." He doesn't say: "Aeneas, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, I heal you." Nothing like that. Peter knows where the power to heal comes from. He knows whose power it is. It is Jesus who does the healing work. Not Peter. Peter is just the human instrument the Lord Jesus uses to perform the miracle. Peter gives the credit to Jesus, which is where the credit belongs.

When Peter says to Aeneas, "Jesus Christ heals you," he means, "This very moment, right now, Jesus heals you." That very moment Aeneas was healed completely and totally. Then, when Peter told Aeneas to get up and take care of his bed, Aeneas did it immediately. He didn't have to be told a second time! The result was that people all over Lydda and the surrounding area saw Aeneas, or they heard about what had happened to him, and, as it says in *The Message*, they "woke up to the fact that God was alive and active among them." For Aeneas, obviously, it was a life-changing event. For the people of Lydda and nearby Sharon, it gave them a glimpse of God. The healing of Aeneas was not an end in itself. God used it as a means of continuing the advance of the gospel. And the result was that many people embraced the gospel and turned to the Lord in faith (9:35).

From Lydda, Peter made the 12 mile trip to Joppa in response to an urgent call for help from the believers there. In the fellowship at Joppa was a beloved woman named Tabitha, who had become sick and died. Tabitha was her name in Aramaic. In Greek it was Dorcas. In both languages it means "gazelle." Here in America the name Tabitha enjoyed a brief period of popularity in the 1960s, due to the TV sitcom *Bewitched*, on which the daughter of the main characters, Samantha and Darrin Stephens, was named Tabitha. The name Dorcas is not used much today, for reasons that are probably obvious to you.

There is no doubt that this Tabitha (or Dorcas) was a remarkable woman. As Luke says, she was "always doing good and helping the poor" (9:36). She was the Mother Teresa of Joppa. She left a beautiful legacy, didn't she? Wouldn't you love to leave a legacy like that? Wouldn't you love for people to remember you as a person who was always doing good and helping the poor? Wow! She incarnated the kind of life the Scripture commends to us in James 1:27: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: To look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." Tabitha, who was probably a widow herself, looked after other widows in their distress by making clothes for them.

She was greatly mourned when she died. She was surrounded by grieving widows. But when Peter arrived, he had them all leave the room. Then what did he do? He got down on his knees and prayed (9:40).

Do you know why he did that? It was because Peter knew that Peter did not have the power to bring this dear saint back to life. Peter knew that only God could do it. So, Peter went to prayer and asked God to do what only God could do. I'll bet Peter also remembered being

with Jesus when Jesus healed the daughter of a man named Jairus after she had been pronounced dead (Mark 5:21-43; also Matthew 9:18-26 and Luke 8:40-56). On that occasion Jesus didn't let anyone go into the room with Him except the girl's parents, along with Peter, James and John. Jesus took the girl's hand and said: "Little girl, get up!" And she did. Miraculously.

In Joppa, Peter prayed. The Bible doesn't give us the transcript of Peter's prayer, but I'm sure he asked the Lord in His power and grace, for His glory and for the spread of the gospel, to bring this beloved woman back to life. I'm sure he prayed for divine intervention. For a supernatural act. For a miracle. After he prayed, he turned to her dead body and said: "Tabitha, get up." And the rest is history. She opened her eyes and sat up. Peter took her hand and helped her up. Then he presented her alive to the widows and all the believers there.

That evening you can bet it was the lead story on the news at 6 and 11 there in Joppa. People who heard about it were amazed, and – just like in Lydda – many people put their trust in the Lord Jesus and His power, not just to bring a dead person back to life, but to give real, grace-filled, eternal life. People in Joppa got a glimpse of God, and a whole lot of them woke up to God and His power to save as a result. The miracle of Tabitha's restoration to life led to the miracle of many people receiving the gift of eternal life through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

MIRACLES TODAY

Do you believe in miracles? I do.

Do you believe God still does miracles today? I do. Although, in our philosophically-sophisticated and technologically-oriented world, we don't recognize what God is doing sometimes.

I know this: God's power hasn't changed. Or waned. As A. W. Tozer said, "Anything God has ever done anywhere He can do here. Anything God has ever done for anyone, He can do for you."

We know that God doesn't heal everyone who is sick. Even in the Bible, not everyone who was sick was healed by God. Jesus didn't heal everybody. But God does still heal people from sickness or injury or suffering miraculously today. And He performs miracles in other ways, too. He heals marriages and other relationships that are at the breaking point. He changes hearts. He gives grace to bear up in the midst of all kinds of pain and hurt and loss and disappointment and suffering. He takes people who are spiritually dead in their sins, and He makes them – us – spiritually alive to Him, alive *in* Him, by His amazing grace as an expression of His deep, deep love for us. If that is not a miracle.....

I could go on and on. (You may think I already *have* gone one and on!) Let me close with a Tony Campolo story. While visiting a church somewhere in Oregon, Tony prayed for a man who had cancer. A few days later, he got a call from the man's wife. She said: "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer."

Tony said: “Had?”

She said: “He died.” Tony felt terrible.

She continued: “Don’t feel bad. When he came into church on Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up. He was angry that this all-powerful God didn’t take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew toward God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence. After you prayed for him, a peace came over him and a joy came into him. Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We’ve sung. We’ve laughed. We’ve read Scripture. We prayed. O, they have been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing.”

Then, Tony says, she said something incredibly profound. She said: “He wasn’t cured, but he was healed.”

Dear friends, that is a miracle. It is every bit as much a miracle as if God had healed him of his cancer. The healing that took place is something only God could do. And God did it. He did a miracle of healing in that man’s heart. Tony Campolo didn’t heal him. It was the power of God that set him free from the bonds of his anger. Just as it was the power of God, not Peter, that healed Aeneas and restored Tabitha to life.

May God give us the wisdom to see glimpses of Him, glimpses of His grace and power, in both the ordinary and extraordinary events of life. May we invite and allow God to use us as channels of His grace and power. And may we always remember with grateful hearts that the power belongs to God, not to us in any way, and that the glory belongs to Him, too. Lord, let it be so. Amen.