

Explore the Bible: Bold

April 27, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for May 15 focuses on Acts 9:36-43.*

The Fallen Servant

The lives of several people are summarized in Scripture by one or two sentences. Many kings of Israel and Judah receive the terrible summary: “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as his fathers had done” (2 Kings 15:9, etc.) These were rulers of the people of God, many with reigns lasting a generation, and their lives are abridged by the chronicler into the dates of their reign and a failing grade. Consider in contrast Tabitha, whom Acts 9:36 summarizes as a disciple “who was always doing good and helping the poor.” She, like many Jews of the day, went by both a Hebrew and Greek name. Her location in a port city would have brought her into contact with many cultures that shared Greek as a language of commerce and civic life. Upon her death, her fellow disciples in the coastal city of Joppa dispensed with normal burial practice of Jewish people of that day and laid her in state, as though she were a queen. Fellow believers and the widows who were the beneficiaries of her generosity and labor were not ready to part with her without spending time in her presence.

This circumstance of keeping her body close at hand and not-yet-entombed coincided with the apostle Peter’s visit to the region. Although Peter and the rest of the apostles still used Jerusalem as a home base, he—and likely the others—went further afield when new groups of disciples formed in new regions (Acts 8:14). The early church depended on the eyewitness testimony of the apostles and others who had been with Jesus to teach and explain the events of Jesus’ life and the truth of his teachings. We see a repeated pattern in Acts—when the gospel came into new areas, miraculous signs testified to its truthfulness. This, too, followed Jesus’

pattern of announcing God's kingdom and implementing it through healing, exorcisms and, occasionally, by raising the dead.

The disciples of Joppa heard there was an apostle in the area, and they treated Tabitha's death like a medical emergency and Peter like first responder. Tabitha already was dead, but Peter needed to hurry! Her fellow believers didn't want that state of affairs to go on any longer than it already had. Peter hustles to Joppa and is greeted by tangible reminders of Tabitha's work—the robes and clothing she had made. In the ancient world, clothing was not the sort of consumable good it is in our mostly affluent society. A well-made piece of clothing was an investment and was made to last. Having a wide variety of clothes to wear was a sign of significant wealth. (Think of Jacob's gift of a coat to Joseph). The clothing made and apparently given away by Tabitha to these widows was another example of the early church's commitment to provide for one another.

The Risen Servant

Peter sent the rest of the disciples out of the room. It is entirely possible he reflected on how similar these circumstances were to the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-43). Peter stood in the place of his Lord, facing down the same ultimate enemy of death. Perhaps he heard the echo of his Lord's command "*Talitha koum*—Little girl, get up," in his own command to the woman, "Tabitha, get up." The difference is that the power over death was not in Peter but in his Lord. Peter began this encounter with prayer (Acts 9:40).

It is striking how many descriptions of a physical nature are included in the story of Tabitha's healing. Peter got on his knees, she opened her eyes, sat up, he took her hand, and she stood. This miracle was not, technically speaking, resurrection. Unlike the resurrected and transformed body of Jesus, but like Lazarus, Jairus' daughter and others, Tabitha would die again. More precisely, she was revived, or re-vivified. This miracle served

as a sign, however, God's salvation offered in Christ is not merely for the 'soul' or 'spirit' but for the whole person. God intended his creation to be physical and spiritual, not in opposition but in harmony. Jesus' resurrection represents that ultimate victory over death and the promise that those who follow him will share in the life of the new creation. Tabitha's return to life is a preview of even greater things to come. For that moment, her eyes that had looked on the poor with compassion, her hands that served, and her feet that brought the good news to the poor each get a moment in the spotlight, restored and ready to get back to work. This sign exactly met its purpose. Peter and Tabitha did not become spectacles in and of themselves. Instead, "many people believed in the Lord" (Acts 9:42). A new and growing congregation was born out of this outworking of the creative power of God, and Peter stayed around to guide and teach them.

The miraculous draws our attention, and we long for that kind of outworking of God's power in our midst. It is important to remember, however, the miracles recorded in the Gospels and Acts are not guaranteed to the believers. Stephen was not raised after his martyrdom, nor will the apostle James after his death in Acts 12. When God works in miraculous ways, it is always in service of his larger purposes, often the spread of the gospel to places it had not been known previously. If we highlight the miraculous over the everyday, we risk missing the power that comes from having lived a life like Tabitha's, always doing good and helping the poor. No Christian can claim to have raised the dead or healed the sick. Every instance of such power comes from God alone and serves God alone. All Christians can strive to have the summary of Tabitha's life apply to them, as well.