

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL TO EXTEND JESUS' KINGDOM OF PEACE

Acts 9:31-43

INTRODUCTION

I was in Beijing, China in 1989. While there was some modern construction going on, yet, at that time it mostly seemed locked into an ancient way of life. There were few cars and millions of people on bicycles. There were street vendors everywhere and open markets full of traditional Chinese food. However, there were two icons of modern American corporate muscle prominently located near Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City: Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonalds. McDonalds was incorporated on March 2, 1955 in San Bernardino, CA, the brainchild of a salesman named Ray Kroc. From that one restaurant McDonalds has grown until today there are more than 31,000 stores in over 119 countries worldwide. McDonalds serves over 47 million people every day. We Americans while impressed, are not surprised by this kind of corporate success story. The idea that one man with a good idea can start a company and in a relatively short period of time (only 54 years in the case of McDonalds) become a household name across the continents and in vastly different countries and cultures does not seem strange to us at all.

Due to our native optimism and expectation of worldwide success we are not surprised when we pick up our Bibles and read in Genesis 12 God telling an anonymous, pagan man named Abram that he has chosen him, will make him into a great nation and through him he is going to bless all the peoples of the world. I think it is easy for us to miss how amazing it is that this nomadic, then enslaved people who eventually take over a very small piece of real estate along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea maintain an expectation throughout thousands of years of troubled history that they will one day be the greatest of all nations and that God through them will rule the world. This is especially shocking in light of the fact that except for a brief 80 year period of their history they were a besieged, divided and oppressed people.

Listen to just a couple of the places this confident expectation is expressed. **Psalm 2:1-9**: "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.' The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, 'I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.' I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.'" **Micah 4:1-3**: "In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide." These are remarkable sentiments in light of the sad and pathetic history of Israel as a nation. To think that one of Israel's kings will become so powerful that he will rule over all nations or that Mt. Zion will become the center of hope for all the nations of the world is preposterous.

When we come to the NT and the arrival of Jesus on the scene the apparent naiveté and over-confidence does not diminish but is exponentially increased. This carpenter's son who never travels more than 70 miles from his hometown and suffers an ignominious death after a brief stint of popularity among this backward people in one of the backwaters of world civilization is said to be the creator and ruler of the world who will one day return and take over the world. It is claimed by the NT writers that he is the promised king of Israel whom God has set on the throne of David and before whom all the nations of the world will one day bow.

Luke, in the second volume of his two volume work, this book of Acts, is attempting to show how this crucified Jesus is the long promised king of Israel and how he is the one who is conquering the world and establishing his

kingdom right now. In describing these early years of the church's advance from that small collection of praying disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria and eventually into the rest of the Roman empire Luke is setting forth how Jesus is fulfilling that promise made originally to Abram to make his descendants into a great nation and to bless all the peoples of the earth through him. He is emphasizing the growing geographical spread of Jesus' rule and the growing numerical growth of those who submit to his kingship.

Verse 31 is written to accentuate the connection between the growth of the church and the OT prophecies concerning God's establishing Israel as the chief of nations. He shows that the OT promises regarding his rule over the world through Israel were not made to national, ethnic Israel but to believing Israel, that is, to all who were saved by grace through faith in the promises of God. Believing Israel in the OT is equivalent to all those who belong to the church of Jesus through faith in him now. Jesus and those who trust in him are the recipients of all the OT promises regarding Israel. I want you to look at and listen as I read a literal translation of v. 31. "Therefore the church throughout all of Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace. By being built up and by going in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it was being multiplied."

The three regions mentioned in this verse are the original land of Canaan which God promised to Abraham and his descendants and which national, ethnic Israel occupied under Joshua and ruled under David and Solomon. It is this land that God promises to bring his people back to out of the nations of the world. It is no accident that Luke says the church, not churches had peace in this land. He is showing that the church is Israel as it lives at peace in the land of Canaan. In addition, when Luke says the church had peace he is using one of the key words used in the OT prophets to describe the condition of God's people in God's land. As we heard read in Ezekiel he promises to make a covenant of peace with his people as he gives them the land. Luke wants us to see that God is fulfilling all of those promises to rule over the world through Israel by extending the church geographically and numerically. The fullness of that promise will not be realized until Jesus returns but Luke shows that it is currently in the process of fulfillment as seen here by the people of God having peace in the land of Israel. The question we are considering this morning is how is he extending Jesus' kingdom of peace?

MAIN POINT

Jesus extends his kingdom of peace geographically and numerically through...

I. The encouragement of the Holy Spirit (v. 31)

The last word of v. 31 in the original is the verb: "it was being multiplied." In other words the church occupies the entire Promised Land in a condition of peace and at the same time the number of people who belong to the church is increasing. The passive verb indicates that it is God who is causing the multiplication of people in the church. How does God give peace to and multiply the church? We saw last week that it has something to do with the removal of Saul of Tarsus from the scene. The wolf has become a lamb and he is sent away so as not to provoke any more trouble. However, the main reasons for the peace and multiplication of the church are seen in those three clauses in the middle of the verse: by being built up, by going in the fear of the Lord and by going in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit.

These three clauses describe the spiritual condition of the church. They emphasize the God-centeredness of the church. They express the fact that the God who is the center of our lives is the Triune God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. First, we are being built up in our faith in Christ (Ephesians 4:12-13). We together are growing to depend upon Jesus not only as our Savior but as our sufficiency. We are people who are learning that we can lose everything and if we have Jesus we have lost nothing. Second, we live our lives in the fear of the Lord. That is, we are a people dominated by the knowledge of the greatness and glory of God. We are overcome by the knowledge that the perfectly holy, just and all powerful God of the universe who ought to be angry with us has loved and accepted us through Christ. We fear him, not in the sense we are terrified he will destroy us but in the sense that we are in awe of who he is and that he has loved us. I like John Piper's analogy that the fear we have is like that of mountain climbers who see an approaching storm while they are climbing a

sheer rock face. They know that if they are on the face of the cliff when it arrives they will be swept away. Suddenly they discover a cleft or cave in the rock face just above them. They quickly climb to it and scramble over the ledge and crawl to the back of the cave just as the storm strikes. They are safe and thus relieved and not afraid in the cleft of the rock as the storm rages outside it. At the same time they are in awe of the fury of the storm and of what would have happened to them if not for the cave. So it is with the church. We know we are safe in Christ and cannot be harmed but we also feel how awesome is the God who is now our refuge. Finally, the encouragement of the Holy Spirit is his assurance that we are indeed the sons of God. We know by his testimony to our spirits that we are the brothers of Jesus and co-heirs with him of all the riches of God. The Holy Spirit is continually revealing to us the greatness and sufficiency of Jesus and assuring us of God's love for us. He encourages us by reminding us of our security in Christ and of the glory that awaits us in Christ.

A church comprised of people being built up in their faith in Jesus, living in the fear of the Lord and enjoying the encouragement of the Holy Spirit is a church that has peace and a church to which the Lord adds more people. Churches and people who are preoccupied with God and with his great saving work in Christ are free to give themselves away to others and free from the fears that beset the world. There is a disparaging cliché that goes like this: "He is so heavenly minded he is of no earthly good." The Bible says exactly the opposite is true. It is only people who are heavenly minded, that is who are taken up with God and his salvation, who can be of any earthly good for we are the only ones who don't need the world to be happy and therefore we are the only ones who can risk the loss of all things in order to care for others. Here are the questions we must consider: Are we being built up in our faith? Are we living in the fear of the Lord? Are we living in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit?

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- *And through...*

II. The apostolic word (vv. 32 & 42-43)

After describing the condition of the church throughout the land of Israel Luke tells us that Peter is traveling around the country of Judea, Galilee and Samaria and he pays a visit to the saints in Lydda. Why is Peter traveling throughout this country and why does he visit the saints in Lydda, a city about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem? We are not specifically told why in the text but because we know the history of Peter and we see the result of his visit it is not too difficult to figure out what he is doing. First of all, in John 21 we have the record of an encounter between Jesus and his disciples on one of the forty days he appeared to them after his resurrection and prior to his ascension. On that occasion, Jesus had a private conversation with Peter in which he asked Peter three times if he loved him. Each time Peter declared his love for Jesus and Jesus commanded him, "Feed my sheep." Then Peter, in his first letter says this: 1 Peter 5:1-2, "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder...: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care..." Peter is traveling for the purpose of feeding the sheep, of shepherding the flock. This primarily refers to his task to preach the word of God to the people and to help them to apply that word to their lives. He does this both because he is an apostle and because he is an elder/pastor of the church.

We can see that this is the purpose of his visit because the result in both Lydda and then in Joppa is that more and more people placed their faith in Jesus as a result of the two miraculous healings he performed in the name of Jesus. People do not know who Jesus is, what he has done, nor why they need to trust in him unless someone explains those facts to them. Miracles do not explain these things; they merely bear witness to the truthfulness of the gospel. The fact that Peter remains in Joppa following many people believing in the Lord points to the fact that Peter remained in order to give further instruction and encouragement in the faith to these new believers.

The church will not live in peace and will not spread geographically and will not grow numerically unless the word about Jesus is faithfully and clearly taught in the church and through the church into the broader

community. From a human point of view the condition and growth of any local church is directly related to the number and quality of teachers of the gospel within that church. The vitality and growth of our church depends, not only on the faithfulness of me and the other elders to the gospel but also to the faithfulness of you parents to preach this gospel to your children and to the faithfulness of our small group leaders and personal discipleship leaders to this same gospel. We will enjoy the peace of God and will be multiplied in direct proportion to our faithfully declaring and teaching and applying the truth of God's word.

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III. The care of the poor (vv. 36-37 & 39 & 41b)

While Peter is in Lydda, teaching the gospel, a valued disciple, a woman named Tabitha (in Aramaic) or Dorcas (in Greek) dies. The reason she is such a valued member of the church in Joppa is because she was full of good works and was caring for the poor. When she dies the disciples there wash her body but do not bury her. They put her corpse in an upper room. The disciples in Joppa, which is about 9 miles northwest of Lydda, right on the Mediterranean coast, send word to Peter to come quickly to Joppa. Notice, upon Peter's arrival after they escort him to Tabitha's corpse the widows whom she has helped show up weeping and showing to Peter the garments that this industrious and kind woman had made for them.

Here is a key question: why do the Christians in Joppa and these widows want to have Tabitha back? Their not burying her but putting her in an upper room, show their hope that Peter will raise her up. It is obvious that the reason the disciples and the widows in Joppa want her to be healed is so that she can continue to care for the poor. These are Christians. They know that death is not the end but the beginning. They know that it is not bad for Dorcas to be dead. She is with the Lord. Also, they are not just being sentimental; like they miss her company and want her back with them. Rather, the motive is that she is needed for the ongoing work of the church. She is a valuable member of the body of Christ and her loss means that the glory of Jesus is diminished because the church will not be able to care for the poor in the same way. She most likely is a woman of wealth. She has a very rare combination of motives and resources. She is not proud because she is wealthy. She is full of compassion for the poor and she has the resources of time and money and apparently, the skill of making clothing in order to care for the poor and disadvantaged.

This isn't the first time caring for the poor has been highlighted in Acts. Back in Acts 4 we saw how the disciples were selling property and giving the proceeds to the apostles to be distributed to those in need. In Acts 6 we saw that the 10,000 member church in Jerusalem had a program set up to provide daily meals to the widows among them. Now here we see God resurrect this woman from the dead so that she can continue to minister to the poor in the name of Jesus. It is hard to escape the fact that one of the things that ought to characterize us as the church is caring for the poor and disadvantaged. We've joined up with a number of other churches in town to work with and support Love, Inc. Love, Inc. acts as a clearing house to connect those with need to churches that can supply that need. Our particular role at the moment is providing toilet paper, toilet bowl cleaner and feminine hygiene products to the non-food emergency pantry. There are baskets in the foyer of the church where these items can be placed each week. Also we organize the duffle bag project for the Rock County foster child program. Right now, in addition to each of us contributing to the non-food pantry we need an individual who would be our liaison with Love, Inc. and we need another person to take over the duffle bag project. The duffle bag project would be a perfect project for one of our mom's and her children to run. Do we have two Tabitha's among us who could take responsibility for these two vital ministries? I don't think this is all we should be doing but it certainly is the minimum we should be doing. Perhaps you have other ideas of how we could help the poor. If you do, please talk with one of the elders.

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IV. The manifestation of his presence in answer to prayer (vv. 33-38 & 40-41)

Obviously, the most striking thing about Peter's ministry in Lydda and Joppa is the miraculous healing of a man who suffered some type of spinal cord injury 8 years ago and the resuscitation of Tabitha. The effect of these two miracles is that the church was multiplied in these two places. Here we are again confronted with the question: is Jesus still giving this same ability to heal in his name today as he clearly gave to Peter on this occasion, to all the apostles on numerous other occasions and even to Philip when he was in Samaria? On June 28th I am going to address this question directly. The sermon on that day is entitled, "Are the miraculous gifts for today?" So I am not going to give a complete answer at this time. Rather I want to identify from the record of these two miracles several points that Luke wants us to see.

First, in reading these miracles we are immediately reminded of very similar miracles performed by Jesus during his earthly ministry. He healed several paralyzed individuals and when he did he told them to pick up their mat. So when Peter tells Aeneas that "Jesus heals you. Get up and take care of your mat," we can see that this is very much the kind of thing that Jesus did. He is obviously working through Peter. Thus the main point of Acts is seen: the resurrected and ascended Jesus continues to teach and to act through his people, in this case, Peter. The same thing is true of the resuscitation of Tabitha. There are many similarities between Peter's raising of Tabitha and Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter. Jesus does his work through his church and thus extends his kingdom.

Second, the raising of Tabitha also shares many features in common with two resuscitations in the OT. Both Elijah and Elisha each resuscitate a boy who dies and is laid in an upper room where he is raised from the dead by the prophet. The work of Peter in proclaiming the gospel and in raising the dead is thus seen to be a continuation of the work of the prophets in the OT. The prophets and the apostles are all proclaiming the same gospel and exercising the same power of God.

Third, in the case of Tabitha we can observe the hope of the disciples in Joppa when they do not bury Tabitha but put her in the upper room and send for Peter. Please note: they knew there was no one in their church who had the ability to raise her from the dead. However, they knew that if anyone could, it would be Peter, the apostle. There is some uncertainty about whether or not he will do it as can be seen in the fact that they did not just bring him to her corpse and tell him to raise her up. They felt they needed to show Peter why she needed to be given back to them by bringing the widows to show him the fruit of her ministry. In addition, Peter does not immediately command her to rise but first puts everyone out of the room and then gets down on his knees and prays. This is distinctly different from every other healing that we have observed thus far in Acts. He does not know if this is what God wants and so he first must go to the Lord to find out his will. Once he is certain that God wants to raise her, he then gives the command and Dorcas awakes and gets up and is presented to the disciples and to the widows.

It seems to me that the one thing we can definitely take from this is that it is right to ask the Lord Jesus to extend his hand in power to heal Christians so that we can continue to do the work he has called us to do. However, we must do this humbly, in submission to God's will. We do not ask for these kinds of things because we are in despair over the sickness or death of a Christian or because we miss them. We ask because we believe that the healing will increase the glory of Jesus and not just by the healing itself but through the ongoing ministry of the one whom he heals. Jesus delights to manifest his presence to his people by healing and caring for us and so we should not hesitate to ask him to do these things but we must always pray as Jesus

himself prayed, not my will but yours be done. Our motives must always be for the glory of Jesus and the good of his church, never for our own self interest.

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