

Acts 9:32-43

This summer at [Knaphill](#), we return to the Book of Acts two years after spending a previous summer in it. And we return with a bang, starting with this story about the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Dorcas. Just the sort of incidents we encounter every day? Maybe not ...

And perhaps that's both one of the reasons these stories are in Acts and also one of the reasons they can be a problem to us. These are not exactly everyday occurrences. I want to tackle the passage by looking both the specific issue of healing and the general issue of blessing.

Firstly, then, **the specifics of healing** – and by ‘healing’, I am including the raising of Dorcas alongside the healing of Aeneas.

Perhaps where the place many of us begin is with our experiences. This week we have witnessed someone having a heart attack combined with brain damage, then not coming out of the induced coma, and having the life support machines turned off. I bring the experience of my Mum’s death in February and my Dad’s on-going health troubles. Should I have prayed for Mum to be healed? When she died, should I have prayed that she be raised, like Dorcas?

One of my college friends was confronted with a question like that when he was on a summer placement. A much-loved member of the church died, and somebody told my friend that they should go to the hospital mortuary and pray for this person to come back to life. My friend didn’t know what to do. There are a few biblical stories of people being raised back to this life, but at the same time the final enemy of death has not yet been ultimately defeated, and in those circumstances it seems wise to pray for a ‘good death’.

Certainly that is what we did when we knew my Mum didn’t have long. We prayed that her passing would be quick, peaceful and painless. God answered all those prayers. She declined rapidly in a few days, a community nurse stepped in to manage her pain control when she could no longer swallow tablets, and she slipped away peacefully in the early hours of the morning with a Christian nurse by her side as she took leave of the church militant to join the church triumphant. It wasn’t a raising from the dead, but it was an answer to prayer.

Or what about other experiences that we bring to these miraculous stories of healing and restored life in the Scriptures? How many people have you seen healed in answer to your prayers? To my knowledge, I have only seen one person healed when I have prayed for them.

Perhaps you have seen more healings than me when you have prayed. Or maybe in your disappointment you have lapsed back into tacking the words ‘If it be your will’ onto the end

of your prayers as a catch-all clause that protects you from feeling let down when what you want to happen doesn't occur.

And it is true that not everyone is healed in answer to prayer. We are dealing with the fact that the kingdom of God has come, but it has not come fully yet. In God's kingdom there will be no more suffering or pain, and so we can expect healed bodies. Sometimes that does indeed happen in this life when we pray – as well as what the God-given skill of medical professionals achieves. But on other occasions, we see no healing. The kingdom of God has not yet come in completeness, and thus some suffer and struggle with chronic illness.

Against all that, let me set the testimony of one man whose approach to the healing ministry affected the Christian church for good in the late twentieth century. I refer to the American pastor [John Wimber](#). He became famous for healings and for other 'signs and wonders' when he preached, and amongst the Christian denomination he founded, the Vineyard Churches. Back in 1984 I was one of thousands who crammed into Westminster Central Hall to hear him preach and lead prayer ministry for those present.

But it wasn't always a smooth ride for John Wimber, either before his ministry became so popular or later, when he was diagnosed with cancer and died at the age of just 63 in 1997. Wimber's healing ministry started with frustration, discouragement, and – dare I say – a spoonful or two of unbelief.

What happened was this: Wimber was converted from a life of drinking, smoking and drug-taking as a rock musician. (He had been the pianist for the Righteous Brothers.) When he found Christ, he heard the Bible stories about Jesus performing great miracles, and innocently asked at church, "When do we get to do this?"

Upon being told that they didn't go in for such things at church and only held Sunday services, Wimber replied, "You mean I gave up drugs for that?"

Sometime later, he felt challenged by God to preach about healing from Luke's Gospel. So he did. And faithfully every week, not only did he preach on the subject, he offered prayer ministry to anyone who had a need, especially those who were sick.

And nothing happened. Nobody was healed. If anything, some people got worse.

Wimber argued with God in prayer about this. God challenged him: "Are you going to preach your experiences or my Word?" So he kept on preaching the stories of the healing miracles. He continued to offer prayer ministry for anyone in need after the services. And then it all changed. Healings began to happen. The trickle became a stream became a river.

Might it be, then, that for all our disappointments, it is the right and worthwhile thing to do to keep praying for people to be healed, even if we don't see those answers to prayer? When people told John Wimber that they were afraid to pray for people to be healed in

case it didn't happen, he had a wise response. "What's the worst thing that could happen to someone who is prayed for? The very worst," he said, "is that they will get blessed!"

Let us continue, then, to pray for people to be healed, and to believe that God will do what is blessed. At least we can ensure that people are blessed.

Secondly, having mentioned blessing, I want to talk about **the generalities of blessing**. As I said, the least that can happen when we pray in faith, even if we don't see our desired outcome, is that people will be blessed.

And this gives us a way of finding stories like this one relevant when we don't have the relevant spiritual gifts. Yes, we should pray and ask for people to be healed, but we also know that not everyone has the spiritual gift of healing. What about those of us who fall into that category?

Well, it seems to me that our lack of an appropriate spiritual gift should not stop us praying for people and blessing people. "I don't have the gift of healing" should never be a cop-out clause. Every single Christian has the ability to bless people. Why? Because we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we have the divine resources with which to affect people for the better.

If I am unable to bring about God's healing through my prayers, then although I do not have that specific gift to offer, I do have the general gift of blessing. People can experience love – God's love – through me. Do you believe that? What does it look like?

Well, it is unconditional. There is no hint in our story that Aeneas had to do anything in order to receive God's blessing (of healing) through Peter. The apostle turns up, finds the paralysed man, and speaks God's word to him. The miracle happens. There is no sense of Aeneas doing something to deserve this. He doesn't receive healing because he is a good man. He is blessed simply because God loves him, and God's servant shows that.

Can we look around and say, I may not have the gift of healing, but who needs a blessing? We are not to worry whether they deserve the favour of God – after all, none of us does! We look not at the earning of God's favour, but simply on the need. Sometimes those who need a blessing will be those who straightforwardly evoke our compassion because of their desperate situation – as doubtless Aeneas did with Peter. But on other occasions, they will be difficult people, prickly people, the awkward squad, the annoying types. But they have a need, and the answer is the blessing of God's love. We have a calling to offer unconditional blessing. It's the way of Jesus. He scandalised the religious leaders of his day by blessing the undeserving, and it is our call today also to risk upsetting the pious by pouring out God's love not on those who deserve it but on those who need it. A scandal! But it's what Jesus would have done. You don't need a WWJD bracelet to know that.

And not only do we ask, 'Who do we bless?', we also ask, 'Where do we bless?' Dorcas (or Tabitha) may be the greater miracle – a raising from the dead, not 'merely' the healing of

paralysis, but it happens within the family of the church. According to verse 36, she is a disciple. Her miraculous blessing comes rather in the way we pray for one another in the church. Aeneas? Well, he may be part of the church, too, given that Peter encounters him when he comes to Lydda ‘to visit the Lord’s people’ (verse 32). This healing stuff is challenging enough as it is, so let’s keep it within church structures! We’ll pray, we’ll have a prayer list for our intercessions, and we might put on the odd healing service (although we might feel rather awkward if someone from outside the church turns up – what will do or believe then?). But let’s keep it there.

The trouble is, the news gets out in both cases, which must mean that the disciples of Jesus at Lydda were well connected with their wider society. They cannot have been like many modern Christians whose only friends are other church members. They are plugged into the wider world, and when people get blessed – healed, or raised from the dead, even – their society gets to know that in both cases, Luke tells us that many people ‘turned to the Lord’ (verse 35) or ‘believed in the Lord’ (verse 42).

Isn’t it the case that too often we settle for some kind of soft life as Christians, a set of easy options where we enjoy one another’s company and do good things for each other, but make nothing like as much effort to bless the world as we do to bless one another? Yet if we were to give the sort of priority to blessing people in the world that we do to socialising with fellow Christians, or arguing about church politics, or rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic (which is what a lot of church structures and hierarchies want to do), then I do believe we would see a change in the public perception of the Christian faith. Ultimately we would see a softening of people’s hearts to Jesus Christ, and our willingness to let blessing leak out from the church to the world might just begin a spiritual transformation in our society.

You know, it’s quite common before a service in the vestry for a church steward to pray a prayer with the preacher that asks for the service to bring a word that will connect with what people will do in serving God on a Monday morning as well as on a Sunday. Well, the way in which the astonishing news of Aeneas’ healing and Dorcas’ raising break out beyond the community of Jesus’ disciples in this story gives us such a word with which to climax this sermon. Whether we have the gift of healing or not, will we go out into the world this week and ask this simple question: who is God calling me to bless, regardless of whether they deserve it, and only giving regard to whether they need it?

If the Christian church did that consistently, I truly believe things would begin to change in the long term.