

Acts

Acts 9:32-42 - Comforting, encouraging, life-giving power

In **Acts 9:31** “the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. **Strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit**, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.” “Fear,” in context, would likely mean “a much heightened respect,” especially after the amazing transformation of Saul. That respect had then extended to each other in the church too, because even Jews and Samaritans who’d traditionally hated each other were at peace and getting along together, providing further visible and wonderful witness to the huge difference the Spirit was making in the church.

And notice how **personal** the Holy Spirit is too in verse 31. The church had been through hell during Saul’s psychopathic rampage, families had been broken up, fellow Christians locked up or killed, and no one in the church had been safe, even hundreds of kilometres from Jerusalem. To be given a period of peace, therefore, during which the church was personally “strengthened and encouraged” by the Holy Spirit, must’ve felt great. **The Spirit knew the need and met it.**

And without Saul hounding them anymore, Peter could also travel freely round the country, so off he went “to visit the saints in Lydda,” among whom was **Aeneas**, who’d been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years (verses 32-33). On Peter saying to him, “Jesus Christ heals you, get up,” Aeneas was instantly cured (verse 34). Even more amazing, though, was the resurrection of **Tabitha** back to life again in nearby Joppa (verse 40).

But notice how Luke adds all sorts of details to the story of Tabitha, which again reveal how personal the Holy Spirit is. The Spirit was obviously well aware of how loved and respected Tabitha was in the church at Joppa. She “was always doing good and helping the poor,” **verse 36**, and when Peter was taken up to her room in **verse 39**, “All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing she’d made while she was still with them.”

So Luke isn’t letting us just flip through these stories. He wants to draw us in and imagine being there, because it helps us realize **what a Comforter we have in the Holy Spirit**, who knows exactly what we’re going through, knows all our personalities and needs, and how to keep us encouraged.

And it was encouragement the church in Joppa needed, because they were devastated when Tabitha died. We see that in their reaction to hearing that Peter was in nearby Lydda, because they immediately “dispatched two men to Peter and urged him, ‘Please come at once.’” It was a cry rooted in helpless desperation, because what, exactly, did they expect Peter to do? **Tabitha was dead**, and no one in the church up to this point in Acts had been raised from the dead back to life again either.

Tabitha was to be the first, therefore, but what better person than her to bring the comfort and encouragement a church so desperately needed? It’s as though Tabitha had never died, because after Peter had shoed all the ladies out of Tabitha’s room in **verse 40**, “he got down on his knees and prayed,” and then “turning toward the dead woman he said, ‘Tabitha, get up’” - and she did.

But what on earth made Peter say that to Tabitha in the first place, when he hadn’t witnessed anyone being raised from the dead on his watch so far? Clearly, then, it had to be the Holy Spirit’s doing, giving Peter the confidence that this was God’s will for this little group of people at this time, because of their love for this woman. Again, the Holy Spirit knew the need and met it, by actually putting the thought in Peter’s mind to do what was needed most to encourage this specific group of people in their grief.

Imagine their delight, then, when a few minutes later Peter “called the believers and the widows and presented Tabitha to them alive,” **verse 41**. Tabitha, I imagine, simply said, “Right, let’s get back to work again,” and off she went to find her sewing kit, but word soon rippled out “all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.”

But “believed in the Lord” **about what**, exactly? Well, what they needed to believe in most of all, that Jesus was alive and continuing his ministry exactly as he’d done before, when he too had raised a 12 year old dead girl back to life again. And he’d done it in much the same way as Peter too, because Jesus had also shoed all the wailing women out of the room and said to the dead girl, “I say to you, get up!” - and she too immediately got up (Mark 5:38-42).

So, again, Tabitha was visible witness to **the heart and mind of Jesus** at work, knowing what was needed most for those people at that moment in time, and meeting it. It was all so personal and encouraging, the result being “many people believing in the Lord,” **Acts 9:42**, because this is what’s supposed to happen when the church is filled with the Spirit. People willingly “turn to the Lord,” **verse 35**, because **the Holy Spirit is making willing disciples**, who love what is being revealed about Jesus.

The purpose of the book of Acts, then, is to provide a wonderfully visible witness to what happens to people who believe Jesus' ministry is continuing in the church. They are comforted and encouraged. But notice also, in the example of Tabitha, that raising people from the dead is included too.

But that shouldn't surprise us, because Jesus himself said that the goal of his ministry was to have all humans "cross over from death to life," **John 5:24**. And it's not just "life" in the future either, because in **verse 25** he says, "a time is coming and has **NOW** come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear **will live**."

But that raises the obvious question: "So where is the evidence in OUR day of dead people being raised to life, who are also tuned to the voice of the Son of God?" We know from the example of Tabitha that the Holy Spirit has the power to raise the dead, and in 2 Corinthians 3:6 the Holy Spirit is actually called "the giver of life," so in Jesus giving the church the Holy Spirit he's given us the **MEANS** by which humans "cross over from death to life." The Holy Spirit is the great Life-giver, and since we're already living in that era of the life-giving Holy Spirit, why aren't we seeing millions of Tabithas being raised from the dead now too?

But we are seeing them, and even better than the raising of Tabitha, because she was only raised back to physical life and she'd have to die physically a second time. But **Ephesians 2:5** tells us that "God made us **alive with Christ** even when we were dead in transgressions," meaning, **verse 6**, that we've been "raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus," meaning that **in the church right now** we experience life as it's being lived in the "heavenly" world of God.

But that's exactly what Peter said would happen in **Acts 3:26**, that "God raised up his servant (Jesus)...to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways," or, as Jesus might put it, to enable us to "cross over" from all the hope-destroying, life-sapping evil we cannot solve in ourselves or in the world, to experiencing the thriving life of his world.

And isn't that wonderful news, when you realize **how many types of death there are in this world**? And deaths far worse than physically dying too, because we're still alive **during** these deaths. It's like having a major surgical operation without anesthetic. And we know what these deaths are like, because we've lived them, so what an amazing relief to find out we can be raised from these deaths now, and that's what the life-giving Holy Spirit is for.

We see that in the simple statement Peter made to Aeneas in **Acts 9:34** - "Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." In Aeneas' case the type of "rising" or "raising from the dead" he experienced was being freed from his useless, paralyzed, "as good as dead" body. But it perfectly illustrated what Jesus' ministry has always been about: it's about **eradicating death in all its forms**, from healing dead paralyzed bodies to healing a heart paralyzed by grief, like the hearts of those who loved Tabitha.

And through the church the Holy Spirit is not only illustrating this as the reason for Jesus' ministry, but also proving it by creating living witnesses. And millions of witnesses too, like those being raised up and freed from the mental and emotional paralysis and inner death caused by hopelessness, fear, worry, bitterness, despair, boredom, jealousy, anger, and whatever else has **died inside us** from shattered relationships, like loss of trust, confidence and the desire to keep on living.

And suddenly one's whole life can take a turn for the worse too, that can even shatter the faith of a Christian, like those in Hebrews whose hearts were in danger of becoming cold and bitter, or simply no longer interested in God anymore (Hebrews 2:1, 3:12-13). Disillusionment is a real killer too, when, for instance, you find out after years of trying to be acceptable in God's sight by living an impressively upright, moral, devout religious life and giving tons of money to the church and keeping all its rules and rituals, you then find out all your efforts aren't what Christianity is all about.

Because it's not about our power, it's about the Holy Spirit's power, and being raised to a whole new life fuelled purely by the Spirit, two examples of which are given here in Acts 9. Aeneas, for instance, had been confined to his bed for eight years. He was utterly helpless, and no human power had been able to raise him up either. But along comes Peter and, whoosh, Aeneas is instantly and totally healed, not to prove that God is now into wholesale physical healing, but to demonstrate the purpose of God giving the life-giving Spirit to the church: it's to raise people from a life ruined by the world's ridiculous thinking to a new life of healed thinking about God and people, healed relationships, and the deep desire to forgive, comfort and encourage others, so their lives are opened up to God's world too.

And what better example of what the Holy Spirit has been given to us for than the literal crossing over from death to life by Tabitha? Tabitha was dead, just as every human is dead - "dead in transgressions," Ephesians 2:5 - but she was given life as a witness to what Jesus is up to through the life-giving Spirit, so that hopefully through the ages "many people believe in the Lord," just like they did in **Acts 9:42**.