

Small Town Saviour

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Date: 19 January 2020

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[0 : 00] Well, if I could, this morning, for a short while, and with the Lord's help, and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read in Acts chapter 9.

Acts chapter 9, and if we read again in verse 32. Acts 9 at verse 32. Now, as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda.

There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. Now, towards the end of last year, I read a very helpful and encouraging article by a young American pastor called Stephen Whitmer.

He's quoted in the intimations. And the article was entitled, Small Town Saviour for Discouraged Pastors in Forgotten Places.

And in the article, Stephen Whitmer, he talks about his father, who was a pastor, and how he faithfully ministered in small and rural charges for over 30 years.

[1 : 19] And now, as a small town pastor himself, Stephen Whitmer said that ministry in small places is demanding, sometimes thankless and usually unnoticed, unnoticed, which is why encouragement is precious, especially for those who are pouring out their lives for Jesus' sake in small towns and rural areas around the world.

And for their encouragement, Stephen Whitmer reminds pastors and their congregations that Jesus knows very intimately the struggles of every discouraged small town and rural area.

Because he says Jesus himself had a difficult small town ministry. Things didn't go well for him in Nazareth. And Nazareth, he says, was an insignificant little place with a population of perhaps two to four hundred people, which is not much bigger than the parish of Barbas.

And, you know, when he described the small community where he was a minister, he actually describes what it's like in many communities. Stephen Whitmer, he said, sometimes in these small places, Christianity is more of a veneer than a deep reality.

It's more about church attendance, traditional values, and cultural Christianity. But it misses the power and presence of Jesus in the gospel, which is what it really needs. And with that, Stephen Whitmer, he concluded his encouraging article about small town ministry by saying, he says, small town church.

[2 : 46] Jesus loves small places, even though he knows small place ministry can be demanding. Small town preacher, he says. Jesus loves your own little community, so much so that he sent you there.

And to the congregation, he says, the whole, as a whole, he says, your area has not escaped his notice. He loves it more than you do, and he invites you to love it more with his love.

Take heart, he says. He has people in your area whom he means to save. And he demonstrated that by personally going to small towns and by sending his disciples there too.

And, you know, that's what we're seeing here in this passage. Peter is a small town pastor, and he's pastoring in rural and coastal villages. But what Peter is dealing with is what every pastor and every congregation has to deal with, whether they're in a large urban church or a small rural church.

It makes no difference, because the reality is every pastor and every congregation has to deal with the heartache of disability and the heartbreak of death.

[3 : 58] The heartache of disability and the heartbreak of death. But what this passage in Acts chapter 9, what it teaches us is that when someone in our community is faced with the heartache of disability or the heartbreak of death, both pastor and congregation have to present Jesus.

Because Jesus, as we were, as Stephen Whitmer reminded us in that article, Jesus loves small communities. And Jesus is the only one who can deal with the heartache of disability and the heartbreak of death.

Jesus is the one we need to present to people in our community. And so as we consider Peter as a small town pastor, we see him dealing with these two things in these verses.

We see him dealing with the heartache of disability and the heartbreak of death. And in both cases, he presents Jesus. So first of all, the heartache of disability.

The heartache of disability. We see that in verse 32. Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed.

[5 : 16] And Peter said to him, Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Rise and make your bed. And immediately he rose. Now last week, we were considering the change in Saul's life when he became a Christian and the challenges that he faced as a Christian.

And we noted that all of this had an impact upon the church because we're told, as we read earlier in verse 31, the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

But I was talking about Saul. But you know, now we see here that it switches to Peter. And by switching the focus from Saul to Peter, I believe that the author of the book of Acts, Luke, he wants us to understand that Saul's dramatic and decisive conversion, it wasn't the only impact upon the church.

In fact, I think Luke wants us to see that the preaching of Saul and Peter wasn't the only way to have an impact upon the church. Because even though we saw Peter, he was preaching in the earlier chapters of the book of Acts, and we see him here providing pastoral care.

So he was preaching earlier in the book, but now here he's providing pastoral care. And as we read, and as we'll see in a moment, it wasn't only Peter's preaching, but also Peter's pastoral care as a small town pastor that had an impact upon the early church.

[6 : 50] And you know, it should remind us that as a congregation, when we're dealing with the heartache of disability or the heartbreak of death, preaching and pastoral care, they go hand in hand.

Preaching and pastoral care, they go hand in hand. And in this passage, as we read earlier, Luke records for us two occasions. Two occasions in which Peter didn't preach, but provided pastoral care.

And the first occasion for Peter's pastoral care was when he was confronted by the heartache of disability in this small and rural town called Lydda.

Now, Lydda was about 45 miles northwest of Jerusalem. And it was as you headed out towards the coast. And in comparison to the city of Jerusalem, which was this significant landmark, and it was the capital city of Israel, in comparison to Jerusalem, Lydda was this insignificant little town in what you could describe as an insignificant place.

But, you know, as Peter reminds us by going to pastor the people in Lydda, they weren't insignificant people. And they weren't insignificant to the Lord just because they lived in a rural community away from the hustle and bustle of a city.

[8 : 17] And, you know, the same is true with us just because we live in a rural community on the coast of the west, the west of Lewis. And, you know, we're away from the hustle and bustle of the city of Edinburgh, which is a significant landmark in our nation.

That doesn't, just because we're miles away from it, it doesn't mean that the people of this small community, it doesn't mean that they're insignificant to the Lord. Not at all.

Do you know, my friend, you need to be reminded this morning that you are precious to the Lord. You are precious to the Lord. And as that article was reminding us, Jesus loves small places.

And your area has not escaped his notice. He loves it more than you do. And he invites you to love it more with his love. You know, Jesus loves our community and the people of our community.

Therefore, we should do the same. We should love our community and the people of our community with the love of Jesus. We're to love one another, as Jesus says, as much as he loves us.

[9 : 27] And, you know, the fact that Peter was sent to preach and to pastor to the people of Lydda, it affirmed that Jesus loved the small and rural community of Lydda. And there were people there that Jesus wanted to save.

And, you know, in many ways, applying it, the reason I've been sent to preach and pastor to the people of this community wasn't just to fill a vacancy. That's not the purpose.

Jesus loves this community. We always have to remember that. Jesus loves this community and there are unconverted friends in this community that Jesus wants to save. Now, when we're told that Peter arrived in Lydda, the first place he went was where the saints gathered, which would have been the local church.

But they wouldn't have met in a building like this. They would have met in someone's home. And undoubtedly, Peter being there, it was an opportunity for Peter to preach to the saints in Lydda. But we're also told that he pastored the saints in Lydda. And it's interesting that the Christians in Lydda are described as saints. It's not a term that we would often use to describe a Christian.

[10:39] We'd probably say that they're the Lord's people or some people would say they're the ones with the Kurum. And that's probably because, we don't use the word saint because, probably because, it's often associated with the Roman Catholic Church.

But according to the Roman Catholic Church, to become a saint, you have to die. And then, if public opinion thinks that you lived a holy enough life, then they'd declare that you're a saint.

But you know, according to the Bible, a saint is a converted sinner. A saint is a Christian. A Christian who's alive. And they have the promise and the assurance of eternal life.

A saint is a Christian. And a sinner becomes a saint when they embrace Jesus Christ as their saviour. Of course, a Christian is still a fallen sinner.

They're not perfect. Don't ever think that they are. They make many mistakes and they make many blunders. But a Christian is referred to, as it says here, as a saint.

[11:41] Because, as you know, the word saint means holy. Someone who's set apart. Someone who's different, distinct. A Christian is referred to as a saint because their character, conduct, and conversation is to be holy, set apart, and distinct.

And you're my Christian friend. A Christian is to be a saint because they're to live a holy life with a distinct lifestyle and a distinct worldview from those around them.

They're to imitate and emulate the holiness of God. And, you know, in a small community like Lydda, where people knew one another well, the Christian witness of the saints at Lydda was very important.

And, you know, the same is true in our small and rural community on the west side and even in the island as a whole. People know one another well. People know who the Christians are.

They know who the churchgoers are. They know who the members in the congregations are. Therefore, the Christian saint must seek to possess a Christ-like character, conduct, and conversation.

[12:50] Because what happens far too often is that the witness of the Christian and the Christian church, it's damaged and it's undermined because the Christian is not living a holy life with a distinct lifestyle and worldview from the world around them.

And my Christian friend, these things ought not to be. They ought not to be. But, you know, as Peter, as he arrives in the small and rural community of Lydda, he's there to preach and to pastor the people.

And it seems that the saints, they inform him straight away of someone who had experienced the heartache of disability. They tell him straight away that there's someone in need.

And again, I want to highlight this point. We're not getting very far. But I want to highlight this point. Because Peter, he didn't know the community of Lydda as well as the locals did. Therefore, Peter didn't know the situations and the circumstances of all the locals unless the church informed him.

And the same is through with us. My friend, I don't know everyone on the west side as well as many of you do. You've lived here for, I don't know, 40, 50 years, some of you.

[14:04] I've been here five. I don't know the situations and circumstances of people as well as you do. Therefore, you have to tell me. If someone's unwell or in hospital or in a care home or they need a pastoral visit or there's a situation in a family, let me or one of the elders know.

The opportunity for communication and sharing information, it's never been better. We have the phone, we have email, we have WhatsApp, we have Facebook, we have all these things.

And yet, you know, the reality is that we are poorer at communicating than ever. We don't talk to each other. And it seems to be getting worse.

My friend, as a congregation, we can't be like that. We have to be sharing information about those in our community, not to gossip about them. That's not our role. We're to first and foremost pray for them and then do as Peter does, pastor them.

Pastor them by presenting to them Jesus. That's our role because we're to follow the example of the early church. And that's the example we have here with Peter. He was informed by the congregation in Lydda.

[15:17] Straight away, he was told of a man who had been housebound and bedridden for eight years and he went to provide pastoral care. And we're told that this man's name was Aeneas.

And the name Aeneas was the name of a Greek mythical god. Which highlights that Aeneas himself was a Greek. He was a Gentile living in Israel.

He was an outsider. He wasn't a Jew. And so you can assume that Aeneas was this unconverted man who had been housebound and bedridden for eight years.

And of course his paralysis had not only affirmed that he couldn't walk but also that he couldn't work. So Aeneas was a poor paralysed man.

But he was a poor paralysed man that the church cared for. And the church loved. And the church sought to provide pastoral care too. He was a poor paralysed man that the church cared for.

[16:18] And you know Peter's pastoral care here and bedside manner you know it's the best anyone could receive. Peter goes to this man's house and when he comes and stands at the bedside of Aeneas he doesn't stay long.

He doesn't spend time talking about himself. He doesn't talk about the weather. He doesn't talk about other people. Instead Peter's pastoral care was with one intention to present Jesus.

That's the only reason he came. He wanted to see this man and present to him Jesus. Because that's who this housebound and bedridden man needed more than anything else.

He needed Jesus. And Peter says to him all we're told of what Peter says to this man Aeneas. Aeneas Jesus Christ heals you.

Rise and make your bed. You know what I think to say to a man who had been bedridden for eight years. Get up make your bed. You know Peter of course he had apostolic authority given to him by Jesus to heal Aeneas from his paralysis.

[17:27] We don't have that apostolic authority to heal anyone from the heartache of disability. But you know the wonderful thing is what we're learning from this passage is that we are still able to provide the best pastoral care and bedside manner that anyone could receive by just presenting to them Jesus.

And you know that's what pastoral care is. It's going to those in our community who have experienced the heartache of disability and presenting to them Jesus.

And whether that heartache of disability is physical or mental and it's left them housebound or bedridden or in hospital or a care home and whether they've been there for weeks or months or even years we're to go to them and we're to keep going to them and keep presenting to them one person Jesus.

Because who else can we present to them but Jesus? Who else will help them and get alongside them and care for them and assure them of his great and precious promises than Jesus?

Who else will remind them that he's their refuge and their strength? in their times of trouble? Who else will say to them that he's in the midst of them when their world is turned upside down?

[18:49] Who else promises never to leave them and never to forsake them when they're feeling alone and a prisoner even in their own home? Who else do we present to them but Jesus?

My friend those who have experienced and are experiencing the heartache of disability in our community they need pastoral care by presenting to them Jesus?

But you know what I find fascinating about the pastoral care of Peter is that it not only had an impact upon the individual Aeneas it also had an impact upon those outside his home we're told down in verse 35 and all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and they turned to the Lord everyone in the small and rural community of Lydda and even in the neighbouring community which was only a few miles away the neighbouring community of Sharon they heard about Peter's pastoral visit to the house of Aeneas and when they heard about how Peter dealt with Aeneas how he dealt with his heartache of disability by presenting to him Jesus they saw their need of Jesus for themselves once they saw it in the life of Aeneas they thought I need Jesus too and you know my friend that's my longing for our community that those who see in the lives of others

Jesus that they would see their need of Jesus for themselves that you would see your need of Jesus because what this passage is telling us is that we all need Jesus but you know sometimes I worry I do worry a lot I know I shouldn't but sometimes I worry about what heartache of disability the

Lord is going to bring into your life and maybe into the life of your family in order for you to see your need of Jesus you know as hard as it is to understand and I do find it hard to understand how the Lord graciously allows the heartache of disability to enter into our lives but you know it's never to drive us away from Jesus and I say that as best as I can it's never to drive us away from Jesus it's always to drive us to him because he's the one we need he's the one we need that's why these things are in our lives he's the one we need the heartache of disability is graciously given to us to drive us to

Jesus you know sometimes the heartache of disability is graciously given before the heartbreak of death takes place that's what we see in the second occasion for Peter's pastoral care the heartbreak of death we've considered the heartache of disability but secondly the heartbreak of death the heartbreak of death we see that in verse 36 now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha which translated means Dorcas she was full of good works and acts of charity in those days she became ill and died and when they had washed her they laid her in an upper room since Lydda was near Joppa the disciples hearing that Peter was there sent two men urging him please come to us without delay so while the church in the small and rural community of Lydda while they were rejoicing that Aeneas had embraced Jesus as a saviour the church 12 miles away in the small and seaside town of

[22 : 40] Joppa they were mourning they were mourning because one of their godly Christian members had just died now Joppa as you know it's well known to us because that was the place that Jonah tried to run to or he did run to he ran to this seaside town called Joppa when he was trying to escape the call of God upon his life but as we see here in this passage God was issuing a different type of call he was calling a saint home to glory he was calling Tabitha or Dorcas which was the Greek translation of the Hebrew name Tabitha and the name Tabitha or Dorcas they both mean the same thing they mean gazelle so God was calling Tabitha out of the scene of time into eternity and what we're told about Tabitha it should make us think that she would have been a great loss to the local church in Joppa and even to the wider community of Joppa because it seems that

Tabitha was this active member in her church we're told that she was full of good works and charity she was a godly woman who loved Jesus and loved her church and loved her community but God's will was that Tabitha would become ill we're told and die now Tabitha's family the church family and even the community in Joppa they're facing the heartbreak of death here and as we're told Tabitha's remains they were dutifully and respectfully washed and prepared for burial and placed in an upper room but it was on hearing that Peter was only 12 miles away he was there in Lydda preaching and pastoring to the people there we're told that two elders or two people in the church they go from Joppa to Lydda to call for the pastor they travelled inland to Lydda 12 miles away and they called for Peter to come and provide pastoral care for those experiencing the heartbreak of death and we read in verse 39 so Peter arose and went with them and when he arrived they took him to the upper room all the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them when the elders called for the pastor Peter came to Tabitha's home where the members of Tabitha's family the church and the community they'd all gathered and they're there weeping and mourning over the death of this godly woman and when Peter arrived he was taken up to where Tabitha's remains had been washed and prepared for burial he's taken up to the upper room and you know sometimes that's the hardest thing about being a pastor it's watching someone become ill and then die someone you haven't known all your life but someone you've gotten to know over the past while and then to see their remains when they've passed away it's one of the hardest things about being a pastor but at the same time it's the greatest privilege of being a pastor because you know in those moments when families experience the heartbreak of death as they witness someone they love and cherish taken from them you know I counted the greatest privilege to be with them at that time in their grief but more so to be allowed to pray with them and to pray for them and to bring the bible to them and to present to them who else but Jesus because when we encounter the heartbreak of death and when our world is turned upside down who else can we go to who else is there that will speak into that situation who else knows how to deal with what is to us an alien concept who else knows how to deal with death but Jesus because he alone has the words of eternal life but you know as we see on this occasion of Peter's pastoral care

Jesus not only has the words of eternal life we see that Jesus has the power of eternal life he has the power of the resurrection because as everyone is in Tabitha's home they're all there weeping

and mourning and rightly so but we're told in verse 40 but Peter he puts them all outside he kneels down and he prays and turning to the body he says Tabitha arise and she opened her eyes and when he saw Peter she sat up and he gave her his hand and raised her up then calling the saints and widows he presented her alive and it became known throughout all Joppa and many believed in the Lord my friend when Peter provided pastoral care to those who were mourning he presented to them Jesus he presented to them Jesus the one who has the power over death and the power of the resurrection and you know it's that same

Jesus who's being presented to us today in the gospel because the hope of every Tabitha the hope of every Christian who dies knowing Jesus Christ as their saviour their hope their hope in the face of the heartbreak of death is that Jesus has the power of the resurrection and you know every time I hear that someone dies in our community I don't know about you but my first thought is was he a Christian was she converted did they know the Lord did they trust in Jesus because my friend even though there is the heartbreak of death when a Christian dies when the Christian dies there is hope in death when a Christian dies Paul says we do not mourn as those without hope because when the Christian dies there is hope in death and our catechism reminds us and you know

[29 : 03] I love that catechism the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and they do immediately pass into glory but their bodies their bodies still being united to Christ do rest in their graves until the resurrection because at the resurrection says the catechism believers will be raised up in glory they'll be openly acknowledged and acquitted on the day of judgment made perfectly blessed and go into the full enjoying of God to all eternity that's the hope of the Christian that's the hope of the Christian who faces the heartbreak of death there is hope that Jesus has the power over death and the power of the resurrection but my friend is that your hope is that your hope is your hope in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone because as we read there when Peter provided pastoral care to a grieving family a grieving community he presents

Jesus and what happens many believed in the Lord we're told many believed in the Lord many trusted Jesus Christ with their life but more importantly many trusted Jesus Christ with their death they trusted Jesus Christ because they came to discover that this Jesus has power over death power over the grave and he also has the power of the resurrection they came to trust Jesus with their life and with their death but you know what I want to know about you we're considering here a funeral scene what I want to know about you is what kind of funeral will you have what kind of funeral will you have because as your pastor it is likely that I will have to conduct it what kind of funeral will you have will your funeral be the funeral of a Christian friend or will your funeral be the funeral of an unconverted friend what kind of funeral will you have and as you know me by now well you should know me by now the only reason

I ask the question is out of a pastoral care and concern for your soul what kind of funeral will you have do you know if we've been taught anything by all the tragic deaths that have taken place in our small and rural community over the past few weeks and even over the past number of months and years there have been many of them and they're all reminding us life is uncertain death is sure sin is the cause Christ is the cure what kind of funeral will you have will it be the funeral of a Christian friend I hope it is I hope it is I would hate to bury any of you thinking that you were an unconverted friend what kind of funeral will you have because whether you encounter the heartache of disability or the heartbreak of death there's one thing or one person you need and that is

Jesus you need Jesus and that's the pastoral care which has been presented to you this morning from the word of God you need Jesus you need Jesus Jesus whatever else is going on in your life whether you're facing the heartache of disability or you have encountered the heartbreak of death you need Jesus you need Jesus because you know there is no one in this world who can speak into death and it was the power of the resurrection apart from Jesus and he says to us in the gospel come to me come to me if you have experienced the heartache of disability come to me if you know what it is to experience the heartbreak of death come to me come to me and I will give you rest rest for your soul you come to this Jesus because we all need him we all need him may the Lord bless these thoughts to us let us pray oh Lord our God we give thanks to thee for thy son we give thanks for the Lord Jesus that he speaks into every and any circumstance in our lives we thank the Lord that he's able to speak to us when we're faced with a heartache of disability and that he's able to remind us that he is still there that even though there is worries and anxieties that he is the one who promises never to leave us and never to forsake us and we give thanks Lord that even when we're faced with the awfulness of death and the heartbreak it brings that this Jesus is one

who reminds us that that's why he came to bear our griefs to carry our sorrows to defeat death to conquer the grave to bring life and immortality to light through the gospel help us then this morning to see that thy word is pointing us to Jesus all because we need him we need him in life we need him in death we need him for time and we need him for eternity help us

[35 : 27] Lord each and every one of us all to trust him to listen to his voice but because he's saying to us so clearly come to me and I will give you rest Lord bless thy truth to us we pray bless us as a community bless us Lord as a congregation help us to know that this Jesus he loves us with an everlasting love and he is pointing us to himself because to whom else can we go he alone has the words of eternal life go before us then we pray and do us good for Jesus sake amen we're going to bring our service to a conclusion by singing the words of psalm 147 psalm 147 so in the Scottish Psalter page 446 psalm 147 we're singing from the beginning down to the verse mark 7 a psalm that reminds us that we're to praise the

Lord we're to praise the Lord because of who he is and he's won us the psalmist reminds us he binds up our broken hearts and he heals our wounds he knows everything about us that's why we need to come to him praise the Lord for it is good praise to our God to sing for it is pleasant and to praise it is a comely thing from the beginning down to the verse marked seven of psalm 147 to God's praise praise the Lord for it is good praise to our God to sing for it is blessed done to praise it is our comely thing

God doth build up Jerusalem also happen those that are broken in their mind, unclean in their minds, healeth and their painful wounds, he tenderly abides.

He counts the number of the stars, he names them every one.

Great is our Lord, and of great power his wisdom surge and none.

[39 : 36] The Lord lifts up the meek and casts the wicked to the ground.

Sing to the Lord and give him thanks, on heart his praises sound.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.