

The God of Lost Causes

Holy Confusion – Part IV

Acts 9:32-43

Introduction

We return to the “book of action” or Acts today, and find ourselves in chapter 9. However, I want you to first turn to the book of Matthew, chapter 10.

Before we begin in that text, notice in Acts that we see the name of Peter again. His name has been absent for three chapters. If anyone could be considered a “lost cause,” Peter could be. It is interesting that God, in His grace, will use Peter in ministry again to deal with two lost causes, regardless of his past foolishness and failure.

I would like to share with you a story that someone sent to me. It is a story about a fairly foolish fellow from Los Angeles named Larry Waters. I cannot help but believe that his family is still in shock and a little embarrassed.

Larry’s boyhood dream was to fly. So, when he graduated from high school, he joined the Air Force in hopes of becoming a pilot. Unfortunately, poor eyesight disqualified him. When he was finally discharged, he had to satisfy himself by watching jets fly over his back yard.

One day, Larry had a bright idea – he decided to fly. He went to the local Army/Navy Surplus Store and purchase forty-five weather balloons and several tanks of helium. The weather balloons, when fully inflated, each measured more than four feet across. At home, Larry securely strapped the weather balloons to his “sturdy” lawn chair. He anchored the chair to the bumper of his jeep and inflated the balloons with the helium. He climbed on for a test,

while it was still only a few feet above the ground. Satisfied it would work, Larry packed several sandwiches and a six-pack of Miller Lite, loaded his pellet gun, figuring he could pop a few balloons when it was time to descend, and went to his lawn chair. He tied himself in, along with his pellet gun and provisions.

Larry’s plan was to lazily float up to a height of about thirty feet above his back yard, after severing the anchor, and in a few hours, come back down. Things did not quite work out that way. When he cut the cord anchoring the lawn chair to his jeep, he did not float lazily up to thirty or so feet, but instead, he streaked into the LA skies as if shot from a canon. He did not level off at thirty feet, but instead, leveled off at 11,000 feet. At this height, he could not risk shooting any of the balloons, lest he unbalance the lawn chair. He stayed there drifting for more than fourteen hours.

Then, Larry really got into trouble. He found himself drifting into the primary approach quarter of the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). A United Airlines pilot first spotted Larry. He radioed the tower and described passing a guy in a lawn chair with a gun. Radar confirmed the existence of an object floating 11,000 feet above the airport.

LAX emergency procedures swung into full alert and a helicopter was dispatched to investigate. Night was falling and the off shore breeze was beginning to flow. It began to carry Larry out over the ocean with the helicopter in hot pursuit. Several miles out, the helicopter caught up with Larry. Once the crew

determined that Larry was not dangerous, they attempted to close in for a rescue. However, the draft from the blades would push Larry away whenever they neared. Finally, the helicopter ascended to a position several hundred feet above Larry and lowered a rescue line. Larry snagged the line and was hauled back to shore.

As soon as Larry was brought back to earth, he was arrested for violating air space. As he was led away in handcuffs, a reporter dispatched to cover the daring rescue, asked him why he had done it. Larry stopped, turned, and replied, “Well, a man just can’t sit around.”

There are certain things you never live down and Larry will never, ever live this down! In a similar way, Peter is a man that you would never expect to live down his foolishness and failure. Yet, as we will observe, he is going to be used in ministry by the God of lost causes.

Setting the historical context

Now, before we can appreciate Acts, chapter 9, and understand it correctly, and most importantly apply it – and there is a lot of misapplication today, as we have previously discussed – we need to deal specifically with the nature of healing today. I want to give you five principles or observations that continue to confirm the transitional nature of the book of Acts.

If you do not see Acts as a bridge from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, or if you see Acts as something the church should be applying in every instance today, then you are in for great confusion. If you, as well, do not see the nature of the apostolic gifts as temporary, you will be frustrated as you follow men who claim to have those gifts today. Let me give the principles and look at the passages.

Healing people and raising people from the dead were specific apostolic gifts

1. First, healing people and raising people from the dead were specific apostolic gifts.

Healing people and raising people from the dead will both happen in Acts, chapter 9. Those who claim to have the apostolic gift of healing ought to also claim the apostolic gift of raising people from the dead. Jesus Christ did it; Peter did it; Paul did it. These gifts were specific, delegated apostolic gifts.

Look at Matthew, chapter 10, verses 5 through 7.

These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

Imagine how radical that message would be. This is new. This is a shift from Judaism, from the Old Covenant to messages about this new salvation, this new kingdom. They were to prove that there was a kingdom of heaven at hand. He gave them that ability. Look at verse 8.

Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give.

Now notice verse 9 and apply this verse today.

Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts,

I recently read of a crusade in this county. One of the individuals who ran the building and facilities said that the supposed faith healer told those in attendance that the first ten people who came to the front with a one thousand dollar check each, would be guaranteed a blessing from God. Phony!

Obviously, in these verses, the Lord would not have commanded them to do these miraculous things without giving them the power to do them. Why was it so important that their ministry be accompanied by the miraculous? Let me answer that with the second principle and passage.

Prior to the scriptures being written, these supernatural gifts were used to prove the apostles were indeed commissioned by God to reveal His new plan of salvation for the world

2. Secondly, prior to the scriptures being written, these supernatural gifts were used to prove the apostles were indeed commissioned by God to reveal His new plan of salvation for the world.

Look at Hebrews, chapter 2, verse 3.

how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard,

Notice that “was confirmed” is past tense. And, who are “those who heard”? The apostles – those

who heard the Lord teach personally. Continue to verse 4.

God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

We just read a list of these: healing the sick, exorcising demons, raising the dead, healing the lepers. All of these would be instances where no one could possibly intervene – except God. So, this past tense confirmation of this new gospel was through certain (implied) past tense miracles, signs, and wonders that were performed by those who heard; that is, the apostles.

After the church had the scriptures, the litmus test for authenticity was an adherence to biblical doctrine.

3. Thirdly, after the church had the scriptures, the litmus test for authenticity was an adherence to biblical doctrine.

After the church had the completed scriptures, the litmus test was no longer miraculous events. Look at Galatians, chapter 1, verses 6 through 9. This is an interesting passage because Paul explicitly relates these certain gifts with the office of apostle. We do not have any apostles today. As we have studied in the scriptures in the past, a true apostle had to see the resurrected Christ and had to have been personally taught by Him. Of course Paul has problems with this because people said to him, “Wait a second! You’re after the fact. You came to faith after Jesus was already ascended to heaven.”

So, Paul would remind them, “No, I saw Him on the road to Damascus. And, I was also personally taught by Him, in the ‘University’ of Arabia.” (We studied his time in Arabia in our last discussion of Acts.)

Now, notice Galatians, chapter 1, verses 6 through 9. Paul is again defending himself.

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said

before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

I think this is interesting because, in the culture we live in today, all someone has to do is somehow make a relationship between some message they have heard or some belief and the fact that they received it from some paranormal source, some mystical source. Whether it is a vision, or a trip to heaven and back, or a channeled message, or whatever, if somehow a relationship can be established, the message that is taught and the fact that it came from some paranormal source, then somehow it should be believed; it should be considered authentic – it has to be, it came from somewhere out there.

Well, Paul uses that same illustration and says, “Listen, if an angel came from heaven and you saw and heard him, and he preaches a body of truth different from what the apostles delivered to you, let him be accursed!”

Those are strong words. The litmus test is not miracles, it is the body of truth that you hold in your hands – the finished word of God.

Chuck Swindoll writes in his notes on the book of Acts,

Today, God does not work miracles through us like He did through Moses, the prophets, Jesus Christ, or the apostles. Instead, we have something previously unavailable to help us discern whether God’s presence validates a ministry – we have the finished word of God.

John Walvoord, the former chancellor of Dallas Theological seminary, adds,

With the completion of the New Testament, the need for further unusual display of miraculous works ceased. The preacher of today does not need the outward evidence of ability to heal to substantiate the validity of his gospel. Rather, the written Word speaks for itself, and is attended by the conviction power of the Spirit.

While the ability to heal the sick and raise the dead was God’s supernatural gifting, it was not God’s will for the apostles to heal nor raise everyone from the dead

4. The fourth principle is that while the ability to heal the sick and raise the dead was God's supernatural gifting, it was not God's will for the apostles to heal nor raise everyone from the dead.

This is an interesting thought to consider because even at the inception of this miraculous era, in Acts, chapter 7, Stephen, the beloved, fearless leader of the church in Jerusalem, was stoned to death. If there was ever someone the church needed back, it was Stephen. If there was ever a worthy person of faith it was Stephen! Yet they did not raise him from the dead.

In fact, of the four illustrations beyond the book of Acts that refer to sick believers, only one was restored to health:

- Epaphroditus – was healed, although we do not know how (Philippians 2:25-27);
- Timothy – was referred to the medicinal use of wine by Paul (I Timothy 5:23);
- Trophimus – was not healed, but was left behind sick as Paul left for his journey (II Timothy 4:20);
- Paul – was not healed, even though he prayed fervently that God would heal him (II Corinthians 12:7-10).

The miracle healing ministry of Christ and His apostles was never an end in itself, but a validating sign of God's approval

5. Fifthly, the miracle healing ministry of Christ and His apostles was never an end in itself, but a validating sign of God's approval.

You might remind yourself of the fact that miraculous healings were never permanent. Sickness and death eventually returned and every healed person eventually died. So why bother to heal? It was just prolonging the inevitable.

Look at Acts, chapter 2, verse 22, which tells us explicitly why Jesus Christ healed.

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know

Not only was Jesus proven by God that He was the Messiah by His miracles, but we will look at

another passage and learn that the apostles were also proven by that.

Notice II Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 11b through 12. Paul is defending himself as a bona fide apostle and relating these proving, miraculous gifts with the office of apostle.

. . . Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.

If the healing was the end in itself or if Jesus Christ and the apostles healed simply because people were sick, as we hear people claiming to do today, then they were incredibly cruel. Why? Because they did not heal everyone.

Jesus and the apostles were surrounded by impoverished, sick people. Why did they not erect a tent and call all of them to come? Why did they not walk through the sick wards of their day and heal everyone? Why did they not cleanse entire leper colonies? Why did they not go to cemeteries and empty them? Because sickness and death are the result of the fall of mankind; it is the irrefutable reminder that our redemption will be beyond this earth that now groans for re-birth. To rid humankind of sickness and death would be to overturn the consequences of sin. It would be to render the need for spiritual health and redemption unnecessary.

So, Jesus only healed one man at the pool of Siloam. He healed only a handful of lepers. He raised only three people from the dead, instead of emptying entire cemeteries and returning the deceased to their grieving families.

There was a purpose in what He and the apostles did. Their miracles of healing were for a sign to the people that God was instituting a new era; a new age that we call the dispensation of grace.

Now, am I suggesting that God never miraculously heals? No. God certainly does miraculously heal. The medical community calls it "spontaneous remission," because they do not know how it happened. In fact, it is a miracle and may be the answer to someone's prayer. So, am I suggesting that we cannot pray for healing today? No. We certainly can pray, just as the apostle Paul prayed three different times for God to remove his physical infirmity. And yet, God chose not to heal him, so that,

as Paul himself wrote, paraphrased, “God’s grace and strength would be made evident in my weakness.”

The apostles were divine healers

What I am trying to help you to distinguish is the difference between divine healing and divine healers. The apostles were divine healers. Let me give four differences.

A divine healer did not require faith or prayers on the part of the sick

1. A divine healer did not require faith or prayers on the part of the sick.

That is a vast difference from what is going on among “faith healers” today. The apostles did not ask someone, “Do you have enough faith?” In fact, most of the healing illustrations in Acts and further involved people who were not even saved. It was not their faith that healed them, otherwise it would not have been a sign of the apostles’ power – it would have been a sign of their faith.

A divine healer may or may not have prayed himself before healing

2. A divine healer may or may not have prayed himself before healing.

They may not have even called on the name of Christ in prayer before the healing, they may have just said, “Get up and walk.” They had the inerrant, delegated ability to heal – that is divine healing. What is happening today is not divine healing. God may choose to heal, but healing through an individual claiming to be gifted as an apostle is not a divine healing today.

A divine healer was one hundred percent successful

3. A divine healer was one hundred percent successful.

There were no incidences of, “Oops,” or “Well, I guess you didn’t have enough faith,” or “Maybe you should try another healer or go to a doctor.” These apostles were like the prophets of old who claimed to be God’s messengers by prophesying something that would come about. The Israelites tested a man who said he was a prophet by asking him to prophesy something near. Once that was prophesied and came true, they placed their trust in him for something far

away. If that near thing did not come to pass, they took him outside the city and stoned him to death as a false teacher.

A divine healer healed external, observable physical maladies

4. A divine healer healed external, observable physical maladies; such as, leprosy, blindness, lameness, and what could be more observable than raising someone from the dead?

Why did the healing need to be observable? Because it was a sign to the people that those healing were the messengers from God.

The critical point in this for those who believe divine healers should exist today, simply because the apostles healed in the book of Acts, is that the apostles not only healed, but raised people from the dead. For someone to say, “Look, Peter healed a paralyzed man, so we should be able to do that too,” is to overlook the last part of chapter 9 of Acts where we are told that Peter raised a woman from the dead.

I will raise that standard today. Let all who claim to be divine healers meet me at the funeral home. Stop claiming the apostolic gift by healing someone’s high blood pressure, or bursitis; stop casting out the demon of cigarettes and the demon of chocolate. Let us get down to apostolic business and empty a coffin or two.

Why is it important to understand the temporary gift that these apostles had? Because it addresses the nature and purpose of the church today. Our mission today is miraculous, but it revolves around the miracle of changed lives; the miracle of redemption; the healing of the soul. And, if the only thing we are preoccupied with is the healing of our physical bodies, and the elimination of pain and discomfort, then the gospel is no better than surgery or extra-strength Tylenol. We would forget the spiritual nature of our mission, which is to follow our commission to go and make disciples in all the world.

Two Lost Causes

The apostles had the miraculous signs to prove their message. We have the Holy Spirit to validate the word of God. The results should be the same; that is, people coming to faith in Jesus Christ as their Messiah.

That is exactly the result of Acts, chapter 9. It reveals the case of two lost causes. Human

intervention was hopeless. Only a miracle from God could change the course of these two individuals lives.

Cause #1 – A disabled man!

1. The first lost cause in our paragraph of scripture is perhaps the most tragic of all human disabilities. We are not told how it happened; we are simply told how long it has lasted. A man has been paralyzed for eight years.

Look at Acts, chapter 9, verses 32 and 33.

Now as Peter was traveling through all those regions, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas [Eyenaus], who had been bedridden eight years, for he was paralyzed.

The man had been paralyzed for eight years. Evidently there had been an accident, because this man was not paralyzed from birth. We do not know exactly what happened, but he had been paralyzed long enough for his entire village to know that he was beyond help medically – he was a lost cause.

Eight years is a long time to be sick in bed – day in and day out, week after week, month after month, year after year – with no cure in sight. No doubt this man had tried every physician he could afford. They apparently, had all reached the same conclusion – there was no hope. Add to that the feelings of uselessness; the nagging sense of being a burden to others; the question of, “Why me?”

My wife and I had the privilege of meeting and talking with Joni Erickson Tada. Joni is a woman who is paralyzed from the neck down. She writes of her struggles and triumphs in best selling books. She is a believer who has had to come to terms with the fact that God’s plan for her life is to remain paralyzed. She wrote in her book, *A Step Further*, about her hope and prayer for healing,

On a rainy afternoon in the early summer of 1972, about fifteen people gathered together in a tiny oak church not far from my home. The group consisted of close friends, family, and church leaders whom I had called together to pray for my healing. By the time our brief service was over, the rain had stopped. Exiting through the front doors of the church, we were greeted by a beautiful rainbow in the misty distance. It gave me just one more reassurance that God had heard

our prayers. God had indeed heard . . . but He did not heal.

If you have ever met her or heard her speak, you have been struck by the peace of Christ that emanates from her face and testimony. However, for this man named Aeneas, the story would be radically different. Look at verse 34.

Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; . . .”

(He did not ask him how big his faith was. He did not say, “Lord, would You please, if it be Your will?” He simply said, “Jesus Christ heals you . . .” He then said . . .),

“. . . get up and make your bed.” Immediately he got up.

Can you imagine, “immediately he got up”?! He had not walked in eight years, but now circulation is restored immediately, coordination is returned immediately, atrophied muscles are restored immediately, muscle memory is erased and re-written immediately. This is an incredible miracle! Continue to verse 35.

And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, . . .

(. . . and marveled at Peter’s gift! Had healing gifts been an end of themselves, Peter would have simply revealed his power to heal. But healing was a means to another end; that is, the salvation of many. So, the text reads . . .),

. . . and they turned to the Lord.

Cause #2 – A deceased woman!

2. The second lost cause is revealed in verses 36 through 39 of Acts, chapter 9.

Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated in Greek is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did.

And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room.

Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, “Do not delay to come to us.”

So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them.

Can you imagine this scene? The room is filled with widows weeping and showing Peter their garments, “She sewed this for me.” Through tears they are telling him of Dorcas’ ministry and love for them. The church in Joppa had an incredible loss. Why? Did an elder die? No. A deacon . . . a gifted teacher? No. A woman who owned a needle and made clothes for widows.

Lessons learned at a funeral

Let me give several lessons learned at a funeral.

If you want your influence to last, put Jesus Christ first, other people second, and yourself last

1. First, if you want your influence to last, put Jesus Christ first, other people second, and yourself last.

Dorcas could have sewn garments and sold them for money that she herself could have used. The text implies by its silence, that she was a widow too. There was no mention of a family or a husband. Evidently she was wealthy enough to buy fabric, and her life was a constant source of giving.

People will not remember you in the future for something you are not now

2. Secondly, people will not remember you in the future for something you are not now.

If you:

- want to be remembered as gracious, then ask yourself if you are gracious now;
- want people to remember you as loving and forgiving, then be loving and forgiving now;
- want the pastoral staff to remember you as committed and involved, then ask how you can be involved now;
- want your family to remember you as faithful and enjoyable, then be so now.

How would you be remembered?

Live so that when death comes, the mourners outnumber those who cheer

3. The third lesson we can learn from a funeral is to live so that when death comes, the mourners outnumber those who cheer.

Look at verses 40 through 42 of Acts, chapter 9.

But Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body, he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up.

And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive.

It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Notice that verse 42 does not say that the people of Joppa built a shrine to Peter, or that Peter began a healing crusade ministry, but that “many believed in the Lord.”

Application

Let me give several applications.

You can trust God, the great Physician, with your health

1. You can trust God with your health. He, the great Physician, has had thousands of years of experience.

He may choose for you sickness or health. I have a friend who, while in college, walked off the edge of a cliff. He was hiking with some friends in the dark and did not know he was in danger. He walked right off the edge and broke his back. He is paralyzed from the waist down now. He is the pastor of a church in Atlanta, Georgia. He trusted the Lord with his health – in whatever way that meant.

You can trust God, the great Comforter, with your trials

2. You can trust God with your trials. He, the great Comforter, often reveals His greatest treasures only after darkness comes.

Have you discovered this truth?

You can trust God, the great Shepherd, with your life

3. You can trust God with your life. He, the great Shepherd, never loses His footing as He leads you over mountain tops and through deep valleys.

Isn't it wonderful that God delights to work in and through people that would be considered lost causes? Is He still working miraculously today? Absolutely, ladies and gentlemen. The God of lost causes still operates with omnipotence today. He works in hearts performing invisible miracles daily. Miracles such as:

- regeneration as people come alive in Him;
- restoring emotional health to people paralyzed with fear or hopelessness;

- mending the broken hearts of those who have experienced the death of dreams and plans.

With God there are no lost causes. Whether lying on a sick bed or in a coffin, what we would consider lost causes are really lessons created for us to learn more of His nature, His grace, His will, His perspective, and His power. So, the question is not, "Lord, how can you get me out of this?" but, "Lord, what do you want to teach me through this?"

He is the God of lost causes – like Simon Peter; like John Mark; like Rahab; like King David; like you and me as we yield to Him our lives and allow Him to make the decisions and submit to Him. So that ultimately, my life is such a reflection of His life and power that all those in my town, my corporation, my family know that He is the great Redeemer and Savior of mankind.

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