

Bible Stories

PETER'S MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Act 11:15-18

October 21, 2023

Peter dominates the 1st 12 chapters of Acts. He is mentioned 53 times in Acts with 52 of those times occurring in chapters 1-12.

Peter traveled the country ministering to the believers as he went. One of the places he visited was the town of Lydda.

Lydda – Now the town of Lod, Israel

Lydda is 30 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

Lydda occupied a picturesque hollow in the plain of Sharon - surrounded by gardens and orchards. The town stood on the great caravan road between Babylon and Egypt, which meant trade for the inhabitants. The area was once known as "the valley of craftsmen."

While at Lydda, Peter came across a man named Aeneas, who had been paralyzed for 8 years. There isn't a recorded conversation between the two, Peter simply looked at Aeneas and said, "Jesus Christ has healed you. Get up and take care of your mat." – short and sweet.

Immediately, Aeneas stood up. Those who witnessed this encounter turned to the Lord. Peter remained at Lydda until he was called to Joppa.

Joppa – Now the town of Jaffa, a suburb of Tel-Aviv, Israel

Joppa is 11 miles west of Lydda.

Joppa is a port city built on a 116 ft. rocky mound at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea. In ancient times the port was utilized for trade between with Egypt, Syria and Asia.

In Joppa there lived a godly woman named Tabitha – better known to us as Dorcas. {Both Tabitha (Aramaic) and Dorcas (Greek) mean gazelle}. We don't know much about Tabitha. We don't know her age, if she was married or if she had children. What we do know is that she was a disciple of Jesus and was "full of good works and acts of charity."

She displayed her love for Christ in practical ways - continually working to meet the pressing needs of those around her. Her life was filled with acts of kindness and she was deeply loved for her charitable work amongst the poor and widows of the town.

She became sick and died. Her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Since Lydda and Joppa were not far apart, men were sent to bring Peter to Joppa. When he arrived at Joppa, he was taken to the room where Tabitha lay. All the widows stood around him weeping. The very clothes they wore bore witness to her love, but it wasn't just the clothes -- it was her friendship and her willingness to get involved in their life struggles that brought them to tears.

Peter sent the women out of the room, got on his knees and prayed. He rose and faced the dead women,

"Tabitha, get up!" he said.

She opened her eyes and sat up. Peter took her hand, helped her up and presented her to the believers.

- Acts 9:42-43 - This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

Caesarea – Israel

Caesarea is 40 miles north of Joppa on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

Caesarea was an ancient port city and the capital of Roman Judea. It was once a Phoenician trading village, but became a Jewish village in the 1st century BC under the Hasmonean kings. In 63 BC, the village was annexed by Rome. In 22 BC, significant building projects were commissioned by Herod the Great and the town was renamed Caesarea in honor of Cesar Augustus. Construction included: a deep-water harbor, storerooms, markets, wide roads, baths, temples, imposing public buildings and a palace for Herod.

When Judea became a Roman province in 6 AD, Caesarea replaced Jerusalem as its civilian and military capital and became the official residence of its governors. It became known as the administrative, economic, and cultural capital Judea.

Every five years, the city hosted major sports competitions, gladiator games, and theatrical productions in its theatre overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

Cornelius lived in Caesarea. He was a Centurion in the Italian Cohort. He was a believer in God who was known for his generosity.

One day, God appeared to him in vision instructing him to send some men to Joppa to locate Peter and bring him back to Caesarea.

The next day, as Cornelius' men were approaching Joppa, a hungry Peter went up to the roof of the house. While waiting for lunch to be served, he had a vision.

The sky opened and something resembling a sheet came down. In it were all kinds of unclean animals. Peter was instructed to get up, kill and eat.

"I have never eaten anything unholy or unclean!" He protested.

"What God has made clean is no longer unholy or unclean." Came the response.

This conversation was repeated 2 more times than the sheet was taken back to heaven.

CONTEXT: Gentiles were generally scorned and viewed with suspicion. Peter was not above this prejudice. In this context, the vision had nothing to do with food. It had to do with Peter's personal prejudices and the fact that Cornelius' men would soon be knocking on the door. God desired to save Cornelius and his family – Gentiles – and needed Peter – a Jew – to get on board with that plan.

The men found Peter and he returned with them to Cornelius' home. In anticipation of Peter's arrival, Cornelius had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "I am only a man like you," he said. Following Cornelius into the house, Peter found a large gathering of people.

He told them about his vision, then said, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right."

Peter spoke for quite some time about Jesus. While he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on all those listening – before they had been baptized.

Peter stayed with Cornelius for a few days and then made his way back to Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, the news spread that Gentiles had received the Word of God. When Peter arrived at Jerusalem, the Jewish believers criticized him, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them!"

Peter shared his experience including his vision and the fact that the Holy Spirit had fallen on Cornelius and his family BEFORE they were baptized.

When the group heard this, they stopped complaining and began to praise and glorified God.

Jerusalem

During the Feast of Unleavened Bread, James, the brother of John, was killed by Herod Agrippa (Herod II). When he saw that this pleased the Jewish leaders, he had Peter arrested too. Herod intended to have Peter publicly tried after Passover was over, so kept him under lock and key. Not wanting a repeat of the Sanhedrin's experience with Peter and prisons, Herod enlisted 4 squads of soldiers to guard him (2 soldiers were chained to him at all times) around the clock.

Meanwhile, many believers had gathered over at Mary's home to pray for Peter (she was John Mark's mom).

The night before his scheduled trial, Peter was asleep in his cell. He was chained between 2 guards while 2 more guards stood outside the cell door.

Suddenly, the cell brightened and an angel appeared. The angel struck Peter's side, waking him up.

"Get up quickly!" He said (the chains fell from Peter's wrists).

"Put on your clothes and sandals." He said. Peter did.

"Put on your coat and follow me." He said. Peter followed.

All the while Peter thought he was having the most awesome dream.

They passed the 1st guard then the 2nd. They came to the iron gate of the prison and it quietly opened before them. Together they walked through the open gate and down to end of the street. Suddenly, the angel was gone and Peter found himself alone – but not in his cell. Amazed he said, *"Now I am certain that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."*

Peter made his way to Mary's. He knocked on the outer door. A servant girl – Rhoda – came to the door. She recognized Peter's voice, but instead of opening the door, she rushed into the house:

"Peter is at the door!" She exclaimed.

"You are out of your mind," they told her.

"It is Peter, I tell you!" She shot back.

"It cannot be Peter. Must be his angel." They concluded.

Meanwhile, Peter was still at the door knocking. When someone finally opened the door, the whole group was shocked. Peter "shushed" the crowd, explained what had happened, told them to inform James (Jesus' brother) and the other disciples then he left and went into hiding.

In the morning, Peter was M.I.A. and all hell broke loose among the soldiers as they tried to figure out what had happened. A thorough search was conducted and the guards were questioned. Not finding Peter and not satisfied with their explanation, Herod ordered that the soldiers be executed, then he returned to Caesarea.

Herod had been having some difficulties with the people of Tyre and Sidon, but after they had secured support from one of his personal servants, they asked for peace because they were dependent on Herod for their food.

The day arrived and Herod presented himself to the people dressed in royal robes. He sat on his throne and addressed the crowd.

"This is the voice of a god, not of a man." They shouted.

Herod had a choice to make – point the crowd to the true God or accept their worship as a god. He chose the 2nd option. An angel struck him down and he died.

That brings us to 44 AD – 10 years after the death of Stephen.

- Acts 12:24 - *But the word of God continued to increase and spread.*

What do we do with this story?

- We must resist the urge to make this story Peter-centric. The story is at once, about Peter and having nothing to do with Peter. Peter was the willing vessel. The power to heal, raise the dead, convert a gentile family, and walk out the front gate of a super-max prison came from God in the person of the Holy Spirit. The powerful presence of the Holy Spirit is evident in every moment of this story.

This story reminds us that even in seemingly impossible circumstances, God works in the lives of people who are willing to be vessels for Him.

- What we have seen so far in the book of Acts is a crossing of geographical, ethnic and cultural boundaries.

With each new boundary that was crossed the church was forced to adjust its thinking about what it really meant to “go into all the world.... until every nation, language, tribe and people knows about Jesus.”

That work continues because the mission has not changed.