

14 weeks ago we began our exploration of Acts, and with it, investigating the power of the Holy Spirit that fuelled the early church to change their world. This is our 15<sup>th</sup> week. The good news is that we are over halfway there – we have only 11 weeks to go in our 26 week journey.

26 weeks. An Olympic Marathon is run over 26 miles. Does it feel like a marathon? Like some marathon runners, you may feel like you have hit the wall and can go no further. But press on, because I think perhaps our most fruitful weeks are ahead. God is going to teach and challenge and inspire and empower us by his Word. He already has.

Before we jump into this week's passage I want to name some things that God has been reinforcing in my life through our explorations of Acts. It is easy to jump from week to week, passage to passage, message to message, point to point and to not allow the truth of God's word to sink deep into our souls where it does its best work. So just for a moment, let's hit the pause button and name a couple of recurring principles we see in Acts. This is what I have learned so far:

### **A changed life changes lives.**

Well, der. Of course. We already know that. Our church's vision and mission is summarized in the statement '*changing lives, transforming the world.*' Nothing new here.

While it's nothing new, while this is not a blinding revelation, some hidden secret in the bible – in this truth is the heart of the gospel. Think of the two giants of the New Testament after Jesus who walk the pages of Acts – Peter and Paul.

Before his Pentecost experience Peter was a fear-filled, guilt-ridden, failure-followed shadow of a man.

After Pentecost, Peter became a courage soaked, grace-filled, stunningly effective apostle of Christ.

Before his Damascus Road experience, Paul was a religious bigot.

After his blinding vision of Jesus, Paul became a spirit-filled missionary.

Both men were irrevocably changed by their encounter with the resurrected Jesus and baptism in the Holy Spirit. Released from the bondage of fear and guilt and shame, they sought to deliver others from the same.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, a changed life changes lives.

In the power of the Holy Spirit a transformed church community transforms its city.

How many of you know God has blessed us as a church? If you are not sure, look at the property we have, the incredible opportunities we have to serve, the growth we have experienced, the new families who call Newlife home.

If you are still not sure whether we are blessed, just have a good look at the person you are sitting next to. That should convince you!

Every blessing we experience is a gift of God's grace. After all, we are just one, big, happy, dysfunctional family! Anything good in this church is God's work, because in the end only God is good.

We have great programs, great ministries, great staff and great volunteers.  
As we look to the future, we have great dreams, plans, aspirations and strategies.

There are so many exciting things ahead. We are experiencing God's favor.

But as good as all these things are, in the end they do not change a human life and they do not transform cities like the Gold Coast.

Lives are changed when they encounter the Good News in Jesus Christ.

Cities are transformed by a groundswell of transformed individuals.

Journeying through Acts has given me a renewed passion, a keener urgency, a spirit-fired obsession for making sure that here at Newlife we keep the main thing the main thing; preaching Christ crucified and risen to a world that desperately needs to meet him. The gospel is the power of God that leads to salvation!

So my prayer is that every person that calls Newlife home would be irrevocably changed by an encounter with the resurrected Jesus and baptized in the Holy Spirit so that they might transform our city and world.

Changed lives change lives.

After his encounter with Jesus, Paul said he 'was seized by Christ.' (Philippians 3:12)

May we be seized by the love, grace and mercy of Jesus!

**The second thing I am learning through Acts is that joy is the Holy Spirit's calling card.**

Again and again Luke makes sure we know that when people encounter Jesus the result is joy. After being healed by Peter, the crippled beggar heads into the temple walking and jumping and praising God. After being baptized by Phillip on a desert road, an Ethiopian eunuch continues his long journey home rejoicing.

The Holy Spirit is a joy-giver. The apostle Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit and lists joy second after only love.

This truth makes it all the more both a mystery and a tragedy that there exists so many miserable Christians. One miserable Christian is one too many. Too many of us who claim the name of Christ mope around seemingly joy-less, like we have nothing to be thankful for.

Joy, real God-given joy is infectious. When the crippled man jumped and hopped into the temple courts after he had been healed hundreds were drawn to him and his story and then heard Peter preach the gospel. Joy is infectious and inviting and contagious. Joy draws a crowd. The absence of joy drives people away.

Joy-less Christianity is one of the most effective barriers to evangelism.

Let me push it a bit further. There is absolutely no reason why we should not experience joy in all of life, no matter our circumstances. Even in the midst of trials and tribulations joy is ours through Jesus Christ.

You see God has done everything needed for us to experience joy 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the rest of our lives. In Jesus Christ every promise God has made to us is fulfilled. Paul said it this way:

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 1:20)

Let this sink in. Every promise God has made finds its yes in Jesus.

God’s promise of forgiveness for sinners finds its yes in Jesus.  
God promise of acceptance for the rejected finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of eternal life for the spiritually dead finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of peace for the anxious finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of power for weak finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of mercy for the guilty finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of courage for the fear-filled finds its yes in Jesus.  
God promise of blessing for the poor finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of comfort for the mourning finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of deliverance for the oppressed finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of wisdom for the confused finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of love for the rejected finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of rest for the weary finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of hope for the hopeless finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of freedom for the captive finds its yes in Jesus.  
God’s promise of grace, amazing life-transforming grace, finds its yes in Jesus!

Every promise God has made finds its yes in Jesus. As we say ‘amen’ to every one of these ‘yesses’ joy – abundant joy – will overflow from our lives and into our world.

Is joy missing in your life? The answer is not in self-help books or trying harder or in putting on brave face or pretending. Joy comes when we celebrate the promises that are ours in Jesus Christ. As we declare ‘amen’, joy starts to well up in our heart, until eventually it fills us and overflows.

Paul tells the church at Philippi:

Rejoice in the Lord always. (Philippians 4:4a)

Joy is God’s gift to us. Rejoicing is our choice. Will we choose to celebrate the ‘yes’ we have in Jesus with a loud ‘amen’ in our heart? We rejoice ‘in the Lord’; in celebrating what we have in Jesus our savior, Lord and friend. Just in case we miss the point, Paul goes on to say:

I will say it again: Rejoice! (Philippians 4:4b)

No matter your circumstances, no matter the challenges you face – even in these circumstances you are more than a conqueror because in Jesus Christ God the Father said ‘yes’ to you and ‘yes’ to me and ‘yes’ to this whole world. Now if that does not deserve an ‘amen’, I don’t know what does!

Every time we sing a hymn or a song soaked in the promises of scripture we rejoice. Why don’t we do that now?

### **Sing ‘Majesty’**

Now I have finished my introduction, let turn to today’s sermon! Our theme is the Holy Spirit’s power to perform miracles.

Last week we had an amazing time exploring Paul’s dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. In Luke’s account, Paul now disappears into the background and Peter again comes to the fore. Peter was travelling around Israel visiting the growing pockets of Christians in the scattered towns and cities. Let’s read from Acts 9, verse 36:

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!"

Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. (Acts 9:36-42)

The New Testament church was awash with miracles.

Abnormal occurrences were normal and to be expected.

To expect the supernatural was natural in the early church.

Amongst the hundreds, thousands of miracles performed by Peter and Paul and the other apostles and disciples why did Luke detail this and the other ones in his historical account? Luke has chosen to tell this story in particular for three reasons that I can identify:

#### **First, miracles follow the example of Jesus.**

The account of Peter raising Tabitha has striking parallels with the story in Luke chapter 7 of Jesus raising a widow’s son. Luke recognized the similarities immediately. Luke is making the point that miracles follow the example of Jesus.

#### **Second, miracles are performed in the power of Jesus.**

Peter shoos the grieving widows from the room where Tabitha is laid out and then drops to his knees and prays. Peter turns to Jesus in prayer; it is in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit that Tabitha is raised from the dead. Just as Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered to perform signs and wonders, so too were Peter and Paul and others empowered to perform the miraculous. The same Holy Spirit that rested on Jesus during his earthly ministry now rested on the early church.

### **Third, miracles lead to salvation through Jesus.**

The news of Tabitha's miraculous raising spreads like wildfire through Joppa. People are astonished; they are gobsmacked and full of questions? How? Who? Why?

Miracles are signs that make people wonder. They make people wonder if God is real? If God really is good? If God really is active?

And in that state of wonder, people are unusually open to hearing and responding to the good news of Jesus. And so it was in Joppa. Luke tells us that many people came to believe in the Lord through Tabitha's miracle.

We could stop right here and have a nice, neat sermon. Short even! But it would not be an honest sermon. You see, I have a problem with miracles. My problems are not with believing that Peter really raised Tabitha from the dead, or that hundreds were healed and delivered in the early church and through the ministry of Jesus. My problem is this. Does God really heal today? And if he does, why doesn't he do it more. In my darker moments I go to that place of believing God can't, or for some reason, won't move in the same way he did in the time of Acts. And that leads me to an even darker place of questioning. Is God really good?

But as we have been journeying through Acts, God has been challenging my mindset. More particularly, God's word has been challenging my thinking. Let me explain.

Every person in this room is a theologian. By this I don't mean we have all been to Bible College or seminary. Simply put, all of us are engaged in thinking about God. We all have questions about God or beliefs about God or experiences of God – if we didn't, we would all be doing something different with our Sunday morning. No, we are all theologians. The question is how our theology – our understanding of who God is and how God acts – how is our theology formed and shaped?

I have often shared with you that John Wesley is one of my heroes in the Christian faith. Wesley founded the Methodist movement. Hundreds of thousands came to faith in Jesus through his ministry. Wesley, as well as a wonderful preacher, was an insightful thinker. He identified four primary sources for our understanding about God.

The first and most important is Scripture. Wesley stood with Calvin and Luther and the early church Fathers in believing that all the truth about God can be found through the pages of the Bible.

But Wesley knew that we don't come to the Bible as empty vessels. We read the Bible through particular lenses. And those lenses provide us with different ways of viewing God's truth in the Bible. It explains why two different people can read the same passage in the Bible and come to different conclusions.

First, we read the Bible through the lens of tradition. Tradition is the understanding of God that is formed in us by our background, what we have been taught and read and so on. Tradition is a lens we read the Bible through.

For example, a person raised as a Seventh Day Adventist will most likely read the Old Testament Sabbath commands literally as the tradition that has shaped them makes Saturday (seventh day) Sabbath rest paramount.

Second, we read the bible through the lens of reason. God has given us the capacity to think and reason and we bring this intellectual capacity to our reading of scriptures. God has given us a brain and expects us to use it.

Last, we read the bible through the lens of our experience. We are all as unique as the different experiences of life that we have. And those experiences shape how we explore truth in the scriptures. How does what the bible say stack up against our experiences. Is it consistent, and if not, why not?

What Wesley said makes sense. We form our understanding about God as we read the bible through the lenses of tradition, reason and experience.

The problem comes when the bible stops being our source of truth and we elevate one or more of the other three above the centrality of the truth in the scriptures. Let me explain in relation to miracles.

As I have shared before, in some protestant traditions there is long-held conviction that miracles were for the New Testament church and that when all the books of the bible were written, miracles ceased. This tradition leads those who hold it to read miracle stories as true events, but ones which are never repeated in our day and age.

With respect to reason, we live in a scientific rationalistic age. At its extreme, scientific rationalism says that unless an event can be scientifically explained or proven than it must be fabrication or lie. So miracles are not supernatural events performed in the power of God, but have some rational explanation that has no need of God.

Then there is experience, the most personal and powerful of the three. This is where my problem with miracles begins. I have no problem reading the bible and believing that miracles are not only possible but also part of God's saving work in our world. Reason does not hold me back from believing this, and nor does any tradition that has shaped me detract from this belief.

It is my experience, or more particularly, my lack of experience of miracles that makes it hard for me to believe that what the bible teaches about miracles is actually true. I have prayed for people to be healed, and they are not. And each time this happens my confidence in the promises of God in the bible is shaken. Yes, I have seen people healed. I know people who have. But still my experience of lack, of absence has become defining.

As Wesley taught, we should read and interpret the bible through the lens of tradition, reason and experience. We better understand the God's truth this way. Is my understanding consistent with what the church has taught, what makes sense and my and other's experiences.

But when we elevate reason or tradition or experience to be our source of truth above what God says in his word, they stop being lenses and start to become blinkers. In discovering truth reason, experience and tradition are helpful servants, but terrible masters. They can blind us from the very truth God longs us to know.

Over the last few months, for a whole heap of reasons, I feel God has been convicting me to take of my blinkers. You see, when it comes to miracles and healing prayer, I have elevated my shaky experiences above God's clear and direct teaching in scripture. And it is clear.

God does perform miracles through his servants. God does heal.

And God commands us to pray for the sick and for the oppressed and to expect them to be healed and delivered.

And so still with many of my questions – doubts and fears even – that is what I am going to do.

I am going to pray and expect for miracles.

With that commitment this is what I discover in the story of Peter and Tabitha.

### **Miracles can happen as we turn from unbelief.**

Before praying for Tabitha, Peter shooed out of the room the widows who were weeping and wailing and mourning her death. With their departure the belief that life was over for Tabitha was silenced.

A little like the Father who brought his son to Jesus to be delivered from an evil spirit, when it comes to miracles I am a man of shaky faith. And so I pray the words that father uttered, 'Lord I believe, please help my unbelief.'

### **Miracles can happen as we turn to Jesus.**

After clearing the room Peter drops to his knees. He knows he can't raise Tabitha from the dead; only Jesus can. And so in the power of the Holy Spirit, that is what Peter asks Jesus to do. And Jesus does.

### **Finally, miracles can happen as we step out in faith.**

After praying, Peter looked directly at Tabitha's corpse and commands her to get up. Only then does she open her eyes. Only as Peter steps out in faith is Tabitha resuscitated.

Hebrews tells us that faith is being certain of what we hope for. Faith is belief in action.

Miracles can happen.

I am committing myself to praying for just that; that as we pray, as we ask, as we step out in faith that God would perform signs in our midst that would make not just us, but our city wonder. Part of me wishes that I did not have to pray this way – life would be easier, more comfortable, less stressful, free of unnecessary contention and controversy. If I didn't pray this way I would protect myself from the acute and painful disappointment when miracles don't happen the way I ask. But God is calling me and us to believe his word and to obey it.

As an act of raw obedience I am going to step out in faith and expect that God will meet me there.