

THE CURE FOR DEATH

by Ray C. Stedman

In the last year or so of Paul's life, when he was imprisoned in Rome, he wrote a letter to his son in the faith, Timothy. And, looking back across the years of his ministry, he spoke of the coming of our Savior Christ Jesus, "who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel," {2 Tim 1:10 RSV}. That is the great and central fact in the good news about Jesus Christ: He has done what no other can ever do -- he has abolished death. That is what is unique about the gospel.

Death has many forms. We actually begin to die long before we take our last breath. Death seizes us in many areas of our life other than the physical. There are many forms of death. Boredom is death. Sickness, of course, is death, but despair is also death. Fear and worry are forms of death. Mental illness is death, but so is bitterness of spirit. Death can seize our life while we live, and rule over great areas of our life long before we ever die. We know that from experience. But the great good news of Jesus Christ is that he has come to abolish death, death in every form, whatever it may be.

This morning, in Chapter 9 of the book of Acts, we are going to leave the Apostle Paul, home ruminating in Tarsus, and come again to the Apostle Peter. We find him right where we left him, traveling around among the churches of Judea and Samaria, ministering to them in the power of Jesus Christ. Like all true Christians, he is a channel of the power of Jesus Christ and we find that power doing one thing through Peter everywhere he goes -- abolishing death. There are three different forms of death involved in the three incidents that we look at in this passage. We will see how in each case the power of Jesus Christ abolishes death.

The first incident is a picture of death's power to paralyze:

Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints that lived at Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years and was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." And immediately he rose. And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord. {Acts 9:32-35 RSV}

If you have ever been to Israel, you have probably been to Lydda. If you fly into Israel that is where you land. The airport outside Tel Aviv is at the ancient town of Lydda, known now as Lod. It was to this village that Peter came on his way down from Jerusalem, visiting among the new churches of Judea and Samaria. The church had been thrust out from Jerusalem and pockets of Christianity had begun in all the villages in Judea and Samaria. In Lydda he finds a man who had been paralyzed for eight years. He says to him, "Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed."

Now Peter was no faith healer. He was not like the group in America today who go about making grandiose claims of possessing powers to heal people. Peter never said that he had any power to heal anyone. "Jesus Christ heals you," he says. Peter was but the instrument and channel of his healing power.

Just this last week, one of the well known faith healers of America was found dead in his hotel in San Francisco. The coroner's report on the cause of death has just been published: It was acute alcoholism. That is a rather tragic commentary upon the fakery and hypocrisy involved in much of the so-called "faith healing" of our day.

Make no mistake about it -- God can heal physically, and he certainly did in this case. But Peter acts only as a channel of Jesus Christ. He simply says to this man, "Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed."

I covet some of that power. My wife and I say that to our children every morning, but they neither rise nor make their beds.

When Peter said it, speaking as the instrument of Christ, it worked. This man was made well -- instantaneously, completely delivered.

As we have seen before in Acts, these physical miracles are in turn for us a picture of the spiritual miracle that God wants to perform in every human spirit. God heals physically. He still does, and there are numerous perfectly valid instances of modern healings. But one thing is true of those today, just as in New Testament days: God heals physically only selectively. He never heals everybody that is sick. Our Lord did not even in the days of his flesh. He healed selectively, because it is intended to picture the healing of the spirit. That is what God really wants. Any healing of the body is, at best, temporary. Every one who was ever healed in New Testament days died later on. The healing of their bodies was just temporary because it was designed to be a picture -- God's wonderful way of illustrating the healing of the spirit which would be eternal and which is really what God wants. We must understand this as we come to these New Testament accounts and as we view modern day stories of physical healings.

Here we have a paralysis of the body. For eight years it held this man impotent, unable to fulfill life as God intended human life to be lived. He was paralyzed; he could not move. That can happen to the spirit as well. In fact it does happen to many. It very likely has happened to some of you here this morning. Some of you are suffering from paralysis of the will, from paralysis of the spirit. There are things you have been wanting to do, knowing that you ought to do them. For years you have been saying, "Oh, I wish I could do that. I'd like to. Someday I want to do it." But you never have. You are suffering from paralysis of the will because you are looking to your own resources. You are expecting that somehow you will get some new sensation or feeling and when you feel motivated then you will do it.

It is to that very kind of condition that this story makes its appeal. Jesus Christ says to you, "Rise, and begin to live. Do what you want to do, in my name. Stand up and be strong, in my name. Rise, and be well." I have seen this happen to those who finally begin to believe that Jesus Christ will make them well. I have experienced this myself. There have been times when I have wanted to live at a higher level of experience in life. I knew it was God's will for me, but I just couldn't do it for awhile. It seemed as if every effort I made would fail, until I began to realize that I was reckoning on something in myself. When I understood that Jesus Christ, in me, was enough to do what God wanted done -- I believed it. I saw that this was what he meant. Then I began to do what needed to be done, depending upon him for strength. And when I did, wonderful things happened. That is what this account is for -- to show us that Jesus Christ can heal us from the paralysis of death.

The next incident is even more difficult, for here we find death in its most fearful form -- the actual ending of life:

Now there was at Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which means Dorcas or Gazelle. She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days she fell sick 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 to him entreating him, "Please come to us without delay." {Acts 9:36-38 RSV}

Here is an emergency. Death's power to interrupt service is pictured for us in this account. The outstanding characteristic of this woman, Dorcas, was grace and ministering in selfless love. She helped others. Her very name, both in Hebrew and Greek, means Gazelle. A gazelle is an animal characterized by grace and charm. Here was a woman exhibiting grace and charm in her life. She was the founder of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and there have been chapters of it in many homes since then -- women who spend their time sewing and making garments for others. The pay is low, but the profit and the productivity are tremendous. Suddenly, unexpectedly, her service was brought to an end. She fell sick, the power of the enemy striking hard and viciously, and she was laid low and died. But now the sequel:

So Peter rose and went with them. And when he had come, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping, and showing coats and garments which Dorcas made while she was with them. But Peter put them all outside and knelt down and prayed; then turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, rise." And she opened her eyes, and

when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave her his hand and lifted 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. And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner. {Acts 9:39-43 RSV}

This is a marvelous miracle -- a restoration from the dead. Here is a woman whose ministry of love and selflessness was interrupted by death. But now, by the hand of God and the power of Jesus Christ, she is restored to ministry and she resumes her good works. Of course she later died again because this is but a picture, intended to teach us that this can happen to the human spirit too. Something can interrupt the progress of a spiritual life which is beginning to blossom, to flourish and bear fruit, to grow and minister to others. Some circumstance, some event or experience, can interrupt and change it and cause it to die. The person loses that zeal, earnestness, and eagerness, and becomes cold and hard, indifferent and unconcerned, bitter of spirit. He literally is like someone dead.

A lot of people are like that. Some have been dead for years and are still walking around. That reminds me of the famous comment by Dorothy Thompson, the newspaper reporter, when she heard of the death of Calvin Coolidge. She said, "How could they tell?" Many are like that. Their life of service has been interrupted by some incident which has been like the hand of death laid upon a zealous and earnest ministry. They have grown cold and indifferent, the very picture of death.

This can go on for years. Edwin Markham, the great Christian poet, once knew a banker whom he entrusted with the settlement of an estate. The banker betrayed him, and Markham lost all his money and was rendered penniless by the deed. It made him bitter and for several years he could write no poetry. Then one day as he was trying to write he was sitting at his desk aimlessly scrawling circles. As he doodled, making these circles, suddenly the thought struck him of the great circle of God's love, of how it takes us in. He was struck with inspiration and wrote these words:

I drew a circle and shut him out;
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

He forgave the banker and was able to resume his ministry. After that came some of his greatest poems. This is what Jesus Christ can do. He can heal a dead spirit, raise it to life and restore it. He can heal the bitterness that may be in your life, rendering you cold and indifferent to the needs of others.

The third incident is most significant, for it concerns a healing in the spirit of the Apostle Peter himself. It begins with another man who is living twenty-seven miles up the coast from Joppa, in the Roman garrison headquarters at Caesarea:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." And he stared at him in terror, and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and bring one Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those that waited on him, and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. {Acts 10:1-8 RSV}

This is a significant movement in the book of Acts. Here for the first time we have an account of the gospel going out to a Gentile household. The Gentile who is selected for this is a most unusual man. He is a military man, a soldier in the Roman army. Most of these Roman centurions, captains over a hundred men, were hard military-minded men, usually very rugged individualists, and cruel. But this man is different. He is a godly man. He is devout, i.e., he knows there is a God, and he is seeking for him. He fears God -- he respects him deeply. And he gives alms. He is a generous man. More than that, he is a praying man. He spends much of his

time in prayer, "praying constantly to God."

That is an admirable person. And yet you will notice that the Holy Spirit very clearly is underlining for us a very important fact. Here is a man who is religious, devout, sincere, earnest, and prayerful, but he is not regenerate. He is not yet saved. There are many people today who think that all you need to do to be acceptable in God's sight is to be religious, to be sincere, to be generous, to live a good, clean, moral life. Here is a man exactly like that, but he is not yet born again. You see, those characteristics are not eternal life; they are the prelude to eternal life. They indicate a heart that is hungry, open, and ready, but which has not yet received Christ.

There are many people like this today, earnest people, sincere people, perhaps many here this morning, who are moral, upright, and generous, but who are not yet born again. All the morality and generosity will come to no avail until it leads you to the gift of God which is eternal life in Jesus Christ. That is what you need. That is what this man needs, and God is moving to answer the need.

This answers the great question about the Bible which I am asked more frequently than any other, especially by non-Christians. I hear it again and again. "What about the man who has never heard of Jesus Christ? What about the man who lives up to the light he has, and is faithful to what he knows, but has never heard of Jesus Christ? What happens to him?" Here is a story of what happens to a man like that. When he is obedient to the light that he has, God will take it upon himself to give him more light and to lead him to the place where he can come to know Jesus Christ. This is in line with what you read in the epistle to the Hebrews, Chapter 11, Verse 6, where it says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." It goes on to say, "For whoever would draw near to God..." must have two qualifications, just two. He must believe:

1. That God exists and
2. That he rewards those who seek him, i.e., that he will meet someone who is seeking after him, and give him more light along the way.

That is what you find very clearly here in the case of Cornelius, is it not? He believed that God existed. He was tired of all the emptiness of the Roman paganism that he knew, and of all the sensuality that was connected with its worship. He was seeking God; he knew that God would help him. He was praying, asking God to help him, and God does.

Notice how he does it. He does not send an angel to preach the gospel to him; angels are not commissioned to preach the gospel. God sends an angel to him and tells him where he can go to find a man who will preach the gospel, who will tell him the truth about Jesus Christ.

When the angel appears Cornelius is very frightened, as we would be. But the angel tells him to send down to Joppa for a man named Peter who is living in the house of Simon, a tanner. That is about as good an address as you can ask for. If you are looking for a man who is living with a tanner he is not very hard to find. Just follow your nose and you will find him. Tanners are those who tan hides, and it is a smelly occupation. To find Peter they merely need to follow their noses when they get to Joppa.

We also have the account of how God is working at the other end to prepare these men to come together:

The next day, as they were on their journey and coming near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. And he became hungry and desired something to eat; but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heaven opened, and something descending, like a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." And the voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. {Acts 10:9-16 RSV}

What a strange experience! You ask, "Why did this happen to Peter?" The answer is that God wanted to heal

the death in Peter's spirit, the death of prejudice, of bigotry and snobbishness. This is most interesting, because here is an apostle, an inspired apostle, born again, filled with the Holy Spirit. And yet, present in his life is a great area of bigotry which has been there since he was raised as a Jew in Judea. As he grew up he was taught this kind of pharisaical bigotry. The Old Testament tells us that God has separated the Jews from the rest of mankind. He did not choose them because they were smarter or superior in any other way to anyone else. In fact, God tells them that he did not choose them on that basis. That is stated in the Old Testament very clearly. He chose them because he wanted them to be a demonstration to all the other nations of the relationship God wants to have with every nation and every people. In other words, the Jews were to be the pattern of God's relationship to every people. Only in that sense were they a called or chosen people.

But in typically human fashion, and I am sure we would have done the same thing, the Jews distorted that calling of God, that pattern of the Old Testament. They began to believe that God had called them because they were already a superior people, and that God was their exclusive possession, as well as that they were the exclusive possession of God -- that God was not interested in Gentiles, that he liked only Jews. This has given rise to anti-Semitism by the Gentiles in reaction. Many Gentiles are saying, in that shortest of all poems,

How odd
Of God
To choose
The Jews.

But the Jews said it first. "How smart of God to choose the Jews." This whole idea had been accepted by the Jews as divinely encouraged and ratified. And so Peter grew up with the attitude that God did not like Gentiles. Gentiles were a sort of animal, not quite human. They were not even to be spoken to, let alone to be invited into your home. A good Jew, as Peter had been taught, would have nothing to do with a Gentile. If he even touched one accidentally on the street he would go home and wash. This bigotry was deep in the apostle's heart.

God is trying to cure him and he does it by revealing truth in graphic form. He sends a vision of a sheet full of animals which Peter had been taught were unclean. But God's command is, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." Peter begins at once to argue with the Lord, just as did Paul, as we learned last week. He says, in the King James Version, "No so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." Obviously you cannot be consistent and say, "Not so, Lord." If you say "Lord" then you must not say, "Not so." And if you say "Not so" then he is not Lord. Yet this is the inconsistency that so many of us experience. We are continually arguing with God and telling him that we know best.

Notice also the marks of legalism here. Peter says, "Lord, I have never eaten anything common or unclean." "I have never..." -- that is the language of legalism. "I have never done anything like that in all my life." This is the way you can recognize a legalistic spirit. It is being proud of the negative, proud that you have never done something. Now it is true that as a Christian, led of the Spirit, there are things you will not do. There are things that are wrong to do, that are harmful, and God has forbidden them for our own protection. It is not wrong that there are things that you will not do. What is wrong is being proud that there are things that you will not do. The grace of God is manifest by finding a degree of satisfaction, if you do at all, only in the positive, not in the negative.

The world is not impressed by the fact that we Christians will not do certain things. We say,

"I don't dance,
I don't drink,
I don't smoke,
I don't chew;
I don't go out with girls that do,"

and we expect the world to be impressed. Well, they are not impressed at all. There are many of them who will not do certain things for reasons other than religion. There is no merit in that. No, if all we can say is that we don't do certain things then we have nothing at all to interest a non-Christian.

What non-Christians are looking for are Christians who are able to do, able to live at a level of life that no non-Christian can, who have hearts that are filled with faith and confidence in the midst of a tumultuous and crumbling age. What impresses the non-Christian is to observe Christians whose homes are filled with loving acceptance of one another, who can communicate with each other, and thus are able to have a home that is bound together with warmth, joy, and peace in the midst of a world where homes are falling apart on every hand. In short, they are impressed by Christians who are able to do, not able not to do.

So Peter is proud of the fact that he had never done certain things and that marks him as legalistic. And God rebukes him. God says to him immediately, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." "How dare you call unclean what God has called clean! When God has cleansed it, don't you dare call it unclean!" That is what Peter is taught here.

I have often used this story with those who are troubled about the background, the past, of someone else or of their own lives. The fact that someone has been involved in some thing evil in the past can brand them for the rest of their life. Even though they become a Christian and are forgiven of God, others treat them strangely because of their background. But that is doing exactly what Peter did. That is calling unclean what God has called clean.

Sometimes we do this to ourselves. I have had people say to me, "I just can't forgive myself. The things that I've done are so bad that even though I know God has forgiven me, I can't accept myself." And I say, "Do you know what you are doing? You are calling God a liar. You are calling unclean what God has called clean. How dare you call unclean that which God has cleansed?" Oftentimes that has been effective in delivering them.

We read that this happened to Peter three times. That always makes me laugh. This stubborn man! He had to sit through the picture three times before he finally got it. But it began to come through after awhile. It may be that this happened three times because three is the stamp of the Trinity. God is saying by this three-fold occurrence, "Look, we all agree on this -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: We don't like this bigotry. This is against the Spirit of God -- this whole business of prejudice because of color or background or past or deeds or circumstances or whatever. It is contrary to the Spirit of Jesus Christ." Even the mighty Apostle Peter had to learn that lesson. He had to be taught it, not by the filling of the Holy Spirit, but by the teaching of the Holy Spirit.

Just this last week I learned that one of our former interns has been dismissed from his work as Youth Director of a church in Southern California. He was eminently successful in reaching into the youth culture of that area, bringing many of the hippy young people into church. The board of that church let him go, citing as their reason the fact that many were complaining because he was bringing in "the riffraff from the street." What a horrible, tragic, misconception of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who came to seek and to save that which is lost! Yet how widespread that is in America today.

My daughter at Wheaton College wrote to me and told of a moving incident that occurred at chapel there not long ago. Dr. Hudson Armerding, the President of Wheaton, got up in chapel and shared with the entire student body the dilemma that he was facing as a college president. Many supporters of the school were becoming upset by the fact that when they visited the campus they saw many long-haired youths there, and many with beards. This bothered them greatly and they had refused to give money because of it. Dr. Armerding said the school is really in a financial bind because of this trend. Their whole operation is being threatened by the withholding of funds by certain donors who had been strong supporters of the school, up until then. And the whole student body sat there breathlessly anxious to learn what the administration's stand would be.

Then Dr. Armerding called out of the audience the young man who had the longest hair and beard in the whole student body, and asked him to come up. This was a complete surprise to the young man, but he came to the platform. Dr. Armerding turned to him and said, "You have long hair, and you have a long beard. You represent the very thing that these supporters of the school are against. I want you to know that the administration of this school does not feel as they do. We accept you, and we love you. We believe that you

are here to seek and to find the truth as it is in Jesus Christ." And he reached out and embraced him! The student body rose as one man in a moment of acclaim for their President, for his expression of that kind of love and acceptance.

That is what God wants. The Spirit of Jesus Christ has come to remove all the middle walls of partition that separate human beings. Jesus said, "He that is with me gathers; but he that is against me scatters," {cf, Matt 12:30, Luke 11:23}. You can judge your life by that statement. What is your effect on others? Are you gathering? Are you healing? Are you harmonizing? Are you breaking down middle walls and healing schisms and bringing people together? Or are you dividing? Are you creating factions? Are you separating? Are you sending people into little groups that are each other's throats, one against the other? The great lesson that God taught the Apostle Peter on this occasion was that these Gentiles were to be his friends, and to be accepted by him. Now Peter takes the first step toward this goal:

Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision which he had seen might mean, behold, the men that were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood before the gate and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. And while Peter was pondering the vision [he thought he'd pray about this for a little while], the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down, and accompany them without hesitation; for I have sent them." And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house, and to hear what you have to say." So he called them in to be his guests. {Acts 10:17-23a RSV}

Ah, the barriers are crumbling; the walls are breaking down! Peter invites these Gentiles in to be his guests. That is the first step. He had never done anything like that before. But that is the language of liberty. Legalism says, "I have never"; liberty in Christ says, "Well, I have never done anything like that before." And so Peter begins to open up, to accept and take these men in.

We will pick up the account there next Sunday morning. But right now may this impress upon us the character of the grace of God -- that he desires to remove all the prejudice from the human heart, and to make us see each other as we are, members together of one race, all equally in need of his redeeming grace in Jesus Christ.

Prayer:

Spirit of the Living God, as we close, we pray that you will search our hearts, as you undoubtedly are doing, and judge us in this area. Have we been prejudiced? Have we been bigoted? Have we looked down our nose at someone who does not dress as we do, or speak as we do, or who does not react as we do. Lord, forgive us for that. What an ugly, evil thing that is. Judge it in our midst. Cleanse us from it, so that we, like Peter, may be responsive to the teaching of the Spirit, who is instructing us to put these evils away, to break down these middle walls of partition, and to be accepting with the love that is in Jesus Christ. We pray in his name, Amen.

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