

### **Acts 3: 1-26 and 4:1-31**

Acts 1 verse 8 says this: *“but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* Over the first few chapters of the Book of Acts we have seen that happen haven’t we. Peter took us through the events of Pentecost a couple of weeks ago. On that world-transforming day the Holy Spirit fell upon God’s people and equipped them to be witnesses to the gospel of Jesus in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth.

And as Dan explained last week, the coming of the Spirit drew thousands of people together as the church of Jesus Christ. Having been saved by grace through faith in the crucified but risen Saviour their lives were transformed, and so Acts 2: 42 tells us that as a result of their faith in Jesus these new disciples *“devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship and to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”* True Christians live differently. They meet together, they study God’s word together, they pray together and they are willing to give generously and serve one another out of love for Jesus and for those who he died to save.

But they were not content to sit in their holy huddles and enjoy being part of the church: having understood the seriousness of their sin and the wideness of God’s mercy to all who repent they wanted to see other people come to know Jesus too. That’s what’s going on in this passage. It may have been an extraordinary event but it started with 2 disciples of Jesus wanting to share the good of Christ with someone who needed Jesus. And my prayer this morning is that as we hear the gospel proclaimed with great boldness and clarity and see the fearless and courageous stand of those early disciples that the Lord will do a work in our hearts and equip us for this task. Because friends, this is the work we are called to do. Like those early apostles we live in the age when the gospel of God needs to be proclaimed by the people of God with the power of God. It’s a scary task and there’s plenty of opposition. But if we belong to Jesus then it’s a task we are called to do.

So let’s look at it together and see what we can learn.

#### **A Miraculous Transformation**

As well as meeting together in their homes it seems that the believers also met together to pray in the temple. They had stopped making the sacrifices but the temple was still a place of prayer. And as Peter and John went to the temple on one afternoon at the time of prayer they saw a man being carried to what was known as the Beautiful Gate. Perhaps it was a good place to beg, and when he saw Peter and John he asked them for money.

Peter and John didn’t have any money, but as apostles of Jesus Christ they had something far better. And so in the name of Jesus Peter commanded the man to walk, and taking him by the hand he helped him up. And all of a sudden this cripple who had been unable to walk for over 40 years was dancing and leaping and praising God!

What a miraculous transformation! Because that’s what it is, isn’t it! This is a miracle! People who had passed by this man on their way into the temple, perhaps for years, recognised him as the man who been lame for decades and were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened. That’s what verse 10 tells us. This was a mighty miracle and no one, not even the priests or the captain of the temple guard or the Sadducees that Peter and John end up in front of later in the account deny what has happened. By God’s grace and mercy and in the powerful name of Jesus this man had been miraculously transformed.

Now I could spend the rest of this morning looking at just these first few verses because they raise a lot of questions. Can God still do miracles like this? Does God still act in the same way today? And if so, do all Christians have this power, which Peter and John seem to have, to command illnesses to go in the name of Jesus?

So does God still act in the same way today? Yes. Yes he does. There are countless stories from across the globe and across history where God's miraculous healing power has been seen at work because God hasn't changed. His power is undiminished, and I know some of you would be able to testify to miraculous answers to prayer. And it's a good job isn't it? If God could no longer break into his world with acts like this, then how could we trust him to keep his promises to take us to be with him forever? How could we trust God's promises to forgive sins if he had changed over time? No, God's power is undiminished, he hasn't changed and God still does act in the same way today. And that means we should pray for people who are sick and ask God to heal them. James chapter 5 tells us that. And as we pray we are to trust totally in God's power and authority over sickness.

But, and it's a big but, we should not expect to be able to command sickness to go, even when we command it to happen in the name of Jesus, because you and I do not have that kind of authority. The first apostles, or some of them at least, did have this authority – and perhaps that was necessary for the gospel to spread so quickly after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. But I don't believe that Christians today do have that power to name and claim miracles of healing. So whilst we should pray for the sick we should not expect everyone we pray for to be healed. God does promise complete healing for all those who trust in Jesus, but not now; not in this life. In this world we will have trouble, and sickness, and sorrow and pain but one day that will all be taken away when we see Jesus face-to-face in his glorious and perfect eternal kingdom. But right now we live in a fallen and broken world and Christians are not immune to that. In the face of sickness we are to pray for God's healing but we are also to submit to God's perfect will. God is sovereign. He is in charge. And often through times of sickness or sadness or distress God teaches us things we would not otherwise learn. So in our prayers for healing we are to ask humbly, trusting in God's power but we are also to acknowledge God's sovereignty, being willing to accept both good times and hard times from his gracious and loving hands.

And when healing does come it's never down to us or our holiness, just as this man's healing wasn't down to the holiness of the apostles. This man was healed because of God's mercy and grace, giving him something he did not deserve and that he had not earned, and something actually far more wonderful than he asked for. In the words of the old chorus, he asked for alms (for money) but God gave him legs. And whether or not our prayers for healing are answered in the way we would choose, we can trust that whatever God gives is for our best. Tim Keller puts it this way: "God always gives us what we would have asked for in prayer if we knew everything that He knows." That shouldn't stop us praying, but it should stop us doubting because through faith in Christ we always get far more than we deserve.

But like many of the miracles Jesus did, the miracle was not an end in itself. This miraculous transformation gave Peter the perfect opportunity to tell people about Jesus.

### **A Bold Explanation**

The healing of this man created such a stir that crowds came running to find out what had happened, and Peter seized the opportunity to point the crowd away from him and John and on to Jesus.

And Peter doesn't pull any punches does he? He confronts the crowd with some stark truths about how they had rejected and crucified Jesus, the one Peter describes as the servant of God (verse 13), the holy and righteous one (verse 14) and as the author of life (verse 15), the Messiah. He tells them how by God's power Jesus was raised from the dead and he's clear that it is faith in Jesus that has led to this lame man walking.

I think Peter is quite kind and gentle in verse 17 when he suggests that the people and their leaders acted in ignorance in rejecting and crucifying Jesus, but he wants them to win them over. So he points them to the Old Testament where the prophets said that the Messiah would suffer and die so they know it's been God's plan all along, and then he calls them to repent; to turn from their sin, to trust in Jesus and follow him. Knowing about Jesus isn't enough; seeing his power at work isn't enough. Peter tells the crowd that faith in Jesus is God's ordained way of people being saved that unless they come to God in repentance and faith, trusting in Jesus, then they will be cut off from God and the people of God for all eternity.

Being a good Jew wasn't enough to earn their way into heaven. That's what Peter says here. If he was giving this sermon in the centre of London today he would say that being a good person isn't enough to get you into heaven or that being a good Muslim or a good Hindu isn't enough to get you into heaven. He'd even say that being a good Anglican isn't enough to get you into heaven! We are saved through faith in Christ alone. He alone is the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except through faith in him. And if we fail to come to him, then we will be cut off from God and everything good for all eternity.

Now it's one thing saying that to a friendly crowd who are intrigued and want to hear more, as Peter has here, and maybe you've had an opportunity to speak to someone about the Lord Jesus when they have almost begged you to tell them what you believe. But what if you were faced with people who hate what you stand for because that's what Peter and John faced next isn't it. They created such a stir that the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came and arrested them and locked them up in the cells overnight. And when they brought them out before the ruling council the next day, how did Peter and John react? Did they soften their words so they would be let out? Did they apologise for disturbing the peace and promise to behave in future? No! Filled with the Holy Spirit Peter told them that by rejecting Jesus, they were fighting against the God they claimed to worship. Peter even quoted Psalm 118 verse 22 to them: *"Jesus is, 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.'"* By ignoring Jesus these leaders and priests, who frankly should have known better, had missed out on the focus of God's saving work for the Jewish people and for all humanity. Peter laid it on the line for them in verse 12: *"salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."*

Now fortunately in this country we are largely free to tell other people about Jesus without fear of arrest, but I wonder if you would be able to give a reason for the hope we have in Jesus? If a friend or a neighbour asked you why you are a Christian, what would you say?

You might not feel comfortable standing up before huge crowd or a courtroom full of lawyers laying out the claims of Jesus, but all of us need to know the gospel so well that we can talk to our friends and family about Jesus. So if someone asked, would you be able to explain why Jesus died on the cross for you? Do you know your Bible well enough point someone to some Old Testament passages like Isaiah 53 which looked forward to Jesus' coming and to some New Testament passages which explain why he did? Would you feel confident enough in the gospel of Jesus to say, as Peter does here, that there is a coming day of

judgement and that only those who receive God's free gift of forgiveness by trusting in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour will have eternal life? Friends that is the gospel message and like coming to church and praying and reading our bibles and giving and serving all Christians have this call to be witnesses to Jesus by our words, as well as our lives. Can you do that? Can you tell of all that God has done for you and all that he will do for others if they trust in him?

Of course however wonderfully we explain the truths of the gospel, even if through the grace and mercy of God it is accompanied by a miraculous sign, there is no guarantee that those who hear us will believe. And that's the case here isn't it. This court, which incidentally is made up of the same people who tried Jesus, might have been impressed by the way that Peter and John spoke to them but they didn't believe. They couldn't deny that the lame man had been truly healed because he was standing there with them, but they would not accept Jesus even after seeing that! In fact, they wanted this whole thing to go away, so they ordered Peter and John not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus again. They even threatened them about what would happen to them if they did!

And what was Peter and John's response?

### **A Courageous Declaration**

You can see it in verse 19: *"but Peter and John replied, "which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.""* What did they say? "Nothing will stop us speaking about Jesus!"

After being threatened and released they met with the church and they prayed together. And their prayer gives us a wonderful insight into their depth of faith. Look down at verses 24 to 30. They begin by praising God for his sovereign rule over the nations. In fact God's rule is so strong that even when people like Herod and Pilate conspired to put Jesus to death they ended up doing what God's will had decided beforehand should happen. And so confident are the disciples of God's rule over his world that they don't pray for peace and tranquillity to live out their lives of faith in peace. No, they prayed for the boldness to keep on preaching despite opposition; they prayed for courage to stand firm in the face of threats, and they prayed that God would be at work through his Spirit to transform lives and to back up their words of witness with mighty acts of power. And as they prayed, Luke tells us, that *"the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."*

Having been strengthened by God's Holy Spirit, confident in God's promises and knowing how vital it was that the gospel to be proclaimed, the early church went out and kept telling the good news of Jesus. And when those threats turned into reality and believers were arrested, beaten and even killed did the church give up? No, because the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of those who believe. And nothing is more important than that!

Now fortunately in this country we don't face those kinds of threats, but so often we still refuse to speak up. Why is that?

Sometimes we don't know where to start – and that easy to resolve. There are plenty of tracts available which would give you a good gospel outline to learn so you can explain about the gospel of Jesus when someone asks you about your faith. Why not take one and learn it and write it in your own words?

But sometimes it's not ignorance that stops us speaking about Jesus, it's fear. We are frightened we will get it wrong. We are frightened people will be offended by what we say. We are frightened what people

will think of us and the impact that will have on our friendships, our families, our work lives. Whatever the reason, often we are frightened to speak up and so we keep quiet.

Do you recognise that in yourself? I do, I get frightened sometimes. Sometimes I keep quiet when I should speak up because I'm worried how people will react, and I have to say, I feel wretched when I do.

And whilst part of the answer might be better preparation and having answers and responses at my fingertips, what I really need, and what you really need if you struggle with this too, is to pray the prayer the disciples prayed here at the end of chapter 4.

It's a prayer that reminds us that God is sovereign and in total charge of his world – because if that's the case why should we fear anything or anyone?

It's a prayer that reminds us of Jesus' death on the cross in our place and the great hope and salvation that is ours by faith in Jesus- because with that in mind how can I fear what people may say?

And it's a prayer for the power of God to be at work in us and through us so we might have courage and boldness to speak up for Jesus no matter what the opposition or the threats that we face, and for God to be at work by his Spirit to save and transform so that the truth of our words is confirmed. That's what we need to pray, my brothers and sisters. And I wonder if you will pray that with me!

Friends, the centuries may have rolled by but God hasn't changed and the gospel message hasn't changed. He is still the God who forgives repentant sinners, the one who brings hope to the hopeless, strength to the weary, purpose to the drifting and joy to the grieving. And he is still the God who, by his undiminished power and according to his perfect purposes, can make the blind see and the lame walk. And as disciples of Jesus it is still our calling to go out and pass on this message of grace and hope to a lost and broken world.

It's sometimes a hard task, I know that. It's sometimes scary, I know that too. But in our frail and timid hands we have eternal treasures to share. Whether people believe is not up to us. Changing hearts is God's business. Our task is to go and tell. Let's pray for opportunities to come and for the boldness to do just that, so that God may have the glory and his kingdom on earth grows. Amen.