

A Call to Repentance

Over the past two Sundays, we have looked at the first sermon preached by the first followers of Jesus. It was delivered by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, after the Holy Spirit had fallen on Jesus' disciples as they waited for the promise in Jerusalem. We looked at it in two separate parts: one was Peter's explanation of what the people in Jerusalem were seeing - people declaring the praises of God in all the different languages of the Roman Empire. In the second part, Peter explained to the gathered crowds that Jesus was their Messiah, that they had killed Him, but that God had raised Him from death and exalted Him in heaven.

Now, we turn the page to the next chapter of Acts, chapter 3, and find that another opportunity opens up for the preaching of the good news of Jesus' resurrection. The setting is the temple in Jerusalem, specifically a gate near the east side of the temple courts called the "Beautiful Gate". If you look at the diagram on the screen, you'll see that this gate leads from the outer courts, including the Court of the Gentiles, into the Court of Women and from there into the areas where the altar was and where the sacrifices were made. So "Beautiful Gate" is inside the temple precincts and is connecting the areas where crowds would gather with the areas specific to Jewish worship.

On one particular afternoon, there was a prayer meeting in the temple at 3 o'clock and Peter and John were on their way into the temple area. At the same time they were going in, a man who had never walked - he had been lame from birth - was being carried in and laid beside the Beautiful Gate by some of his good friends or maybe family (they did this every day!). The purpose of bringing him there was to give him the chance to beg for his living from the people who were going to worship and so, when he saw Peter and John, he asked for money.

Peter and John looked at him intently, and Peter said, "Look at us!" The lame man looked at them eagerly, expecting a gift. But Peter said, "I don't have any money for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Messiah of Nazareth, get up and walk!" Then Peter took the lame man by the right hand and helped him up. And as he did, the man's feet and anklebones were healed and strengthened. He jumped up, stood on his feet, and began to walk! Then, walking and leaping and praising God, he went into the Temple with them.

(Acts 3:4-8)

There's no indication in the text that this happened during one of the Feast Days that brought pilgrims in by the thousands. When there were no such celebrations going on, the population of Jerusalem was probably only about 25 - 30 thousand. Of those, there were probably many fewer who would be regulars at the afternoon hour of prayer and they would easily recognize this lame man who begged daily at the Beautiful Gate. This was not some stranger who they didn't recognize. This was a man they had seen in the same place at the same hour of the day for years - remember that he had been lame from birth. If you think you know someone and you expect to see them in a certain way, you can be pretty shaken up, shocked, when they appear in a completely different way.

And that's what happened with the people who had gathered at the Temple that day - verse 10 tells us, "they were absolutely astounded" when they realized who this man was and they rushed out to where he was clinging on to Peter and John and stood there in awe, just staring, because of what had just taken place.

With a big crowd gathering and an amazing miracle having just taken place, Peter saw the opportunity to preach, and he took advantage of that opportunity:

"People of Israel," he said, "what is so astounding about this? And why look at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power and godliness? For it is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of all our ancestors who has brought glory to His servant Jesus by doing this. This is the same Jesus whom you handed over and rejected before Pilate despite Pilate's decision to release Him. You rejected this holy, righteous one and instead demanded the release of a murderer. You killed the author of life, but God raised Him to life - and we are witnesses of this fact. The name of Jesus has healed this man - and you know how lame he was before. Faith in Jesus' name has caused this healing before your very eyes. (3:12-16)

We'll pick it up again in a bit, but let's highlight some of the aspects of Peter's message.

1. Notice how Peter connects to what the people already believe. We saw this before in chapter 2, and here again in chapter 3 we see him making a strong and deliberate connection between what they have seen and what they believe to be true from their Scriptures. Peter tells them that it is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of all their ancestors who has done this. Well, of course - that would make perfect sense to them. After all, who else but God alone could heal a man lame from birth?
2. But the second thing Peter does here is to connect God's miracle with Jesus: "The God of all our ancestors ... has brought glory to His servant Jesus by doing this." So, after making that one strategic connection to their place of faith, he now connects it to a new source of faith, which he's just about to describe - faith in the name of Jesus.
3. But first, he has to establish their need for a Savior, and he does this by pointing very specifically to their guilt in the unjust execution of Jesus Messiah. He tells them that the Jesus to whom God was bringing glory by healing this lame man was the same Jesus they had rejected, the same Jesus they had handed over to Pontius Pilate. And there's no soft-pedaling in Peter's words; he doesn't say something like, "We all make mistakes", but he hits them hard with their guilt before God. He tells them that they had rejected the holy and righteous one, the one God had chosen, and demanded instead the release of a murderer. He told them that they were responsible, they were guilty of killing the author of life - what could be worse? They thought of themselves as God's chosen people, as the children of God's servant Abraham, as the heirs of God's promises - and now they are being accused of killing God's representative on earth - in fact, if you take into consideration this phrase, "the author of life", they are guilty of killing God Himself.
4. But then the dramatic turn in Peter's speech - now he claims that this Jesus whom they killed has been raised back to life by God, and that they, Peter and John, are witnesses to this event. The idea of witnesses was very important in Jewish law and

tradition - every matter had to be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses. So Peter's claim that Jesus is alive is of no consequence unless there is someone there to support that claim - and there with him is John, who is also a witness of Jesus' resurrection.

5. The fifth main point of this speech is that, just as Peter and John are witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, so the crowds gathered that day in the temple courts are witnesses of the miracle of the healing of the lame man: "You know how lame he was before. Faith in Jesus' name has caused this healing before your very eyes." Now the question will be, "What are you going to do about what you've just seen? You knew this man before, you see him now in a new state of health and you have to come to grips with it."
6. Finally, Peter tells them the key to the miracle: faith in the name of Jesus. "The name of Jesus has healed this man ... Faith in Jesus' name has caused this healing." This is the presentation of a whole new way of approaching religious life - the way of faith in the name of God's servant, God's Messiah, Jesus. The faith of their fathers was a faith in the God behind the law, behind the temple services, behind the rituals and sacrifices of their religion. But Peter is introducing something radically new - faith in a name, faith in a person, a person they had recently seen crucified, but who has, apparently, the power to heal. How can they access this new way of life and the power that comes with it? That's what Peter addresses next:

Friends, I realize that what you did to Jesus was done in ignorance; and the same can be said of your leaders. But God was fulfilling what all the prophets had declared about the Messiah before hand -- that He must suffer all these things. Now turn from your sins and turn to God so you can be cleansed of your sins. Then wonderful times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord, and He will send Jesus your Messiah to you again. For He must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through His prophets. Moses said, "The Lord your God will raise up a Prophet like me from among your own people. Listen carefully to everything he tells you." Then Moses said, "Anyone who will not listen to that Prophet will be cut off from God's people and utterly destroyed."

Starting with Samuel, every prophet spoke about what is happening today. You are the children of those prophets, and you are included in the covenant God promised to your ancestors. For God said to Abraham, "Through your descendants all the families on earth will be blessed." When God raised up His servant, He sent Him first to you people of Israel, to bless you by turning each of you back from your sinful ways. (3:17-26)

That's a long passage and we won't be going through it piece by piece today. But I do want to highlight a few things that I think are important for us to think about and learn from.

1. At first, it seems like Peter is letting the people off the hook, at least a bit, for Jesus' execution. He calls them 'friends' and tells them that what they did to Jesus was done in ignorance. Then he goes on from there to say that God was in control of events, that He was fulfilling what all the prophets had declared about the Messiah

and the sufferings He would have to endure. If you're acting in ignorance and you're being used by God to fulfill promises He made through His prophets centuries earlier, then you must be doing okay, right? Not so fast . . .

2. The very next thing Peter says is that the people who were present in the temple that day needed to turn from their sins ... and turn to God... (that's repentance; turning from one course of action and turning towards another ... "so you can be cleansed from your sins." It's pretty clear. Ignorance is not an excuse and neither is doing something God had promised = but doing it with evil intention. The words and actions that had been done by these people that led to Jesus being crucified were actions that rendered them guilty and which needed to be forgiven ... along with all their other sins.
3. This part of Peter's sermon makes two more terrific promises: a) that turning to God will result in experiencing wonderful times of refreshment - and this is the refreshment that comes from being filled with the Holy Spirit, and b) that Jesus will come back again. "He will send Jesus your Messiah to you again. For He must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through His prophets." So now, Peter says, you will experience God's refreshing presence, and in the future you will see Jesus at His return.
4. At the beginning of this message, we noted that Peter made a connection between what the people in the temple that day had witnessed, and the God of the Scriptures that they believed in. Now, at the end of his message, he does it again, and he does it in four ways.
 - a. First he quotes Moses from Deuteronomy 18 where Moses, the great law-giver of Israel, one of the heroes of the Jewish people, says that God is going to raise up a Prophet who will be like Moses in some way and that the people need to listen carefully to whatever this Prophet tells them to do. He then concludes that whoever does not listen to this Prophet will be cut off from God's people, will be destroyed. The Jews understood this prophet-like- Moses to be a picture of their Messiah, but had not seen Jesus as the fulfillment of that role when He was with them.
 - b. Then Peter moves on to Samuel, who had been priest and prophet for King David, the King whose descendant would be the Messiah. It was Samuel who told Saul, in 1 Samuel 13:14, "The LORD has sought out a man after His own heart and appointed him leader of his people," and then, a short while later, Samuel found David and anointed him as the next king of Israel.
 - c. And third, he goes back to the father of the Jewish people, Abraham, to whom God made the promise that all nations on earth would be blessed through him. But Peter is careful not to jump too quickly to all the nations - first he tells the Jews that the blessing of God has come to them first, that God's servant Jesus was first sent to them, to bless them by turning each one of them away from their sinful ways, back to God.
 - d. Fourth: it's not enough for Peter to highlight a few of the heroes of the Jewish history and faith. He also mentions that "every prophet spoke about what is happening today." If every prophet speaks about some event, surely that event is the most important thing to happen. Peter is dramatically calling his own people to recognize the significance of Jesus' rising from the dead and the power that is now being shown in things like the healing of the lame man. And then he tells them, "You are the

children of these prophets” - and the heirs of the promises God made through those same prophets: “and you are included in the covenant God promised to your ancestors.” What you are witnessing, what you are hearing, this is for you. This is your heritage, the thing you have hoped for and waited for and believed God for. It’s here and it’s for you. And even though Peter and John were at that point arrested and thrown into jail for the night, we read in chapter 4 that many of the people who heard this message believed it and the number of believers now totaled 5000 men plus women and children.

To sum up: Peter and John saw a man looking for help, financial help, and they gave him something far greater than what he was looking for - something that only God could do for him. The effect on the worshipers in the temple that day was amazing, and Peter used that opportunity to explain the good news of Jesus to them.

Here’s what I think we need to grab hold of from this story:

1. There’s no really good news without bad news. In other words, if everyone is fine, if everything is hunky dory, then who needs Jesus? Why do we even want to be forgiven if we haven’t done anything really bad? Peter doesn’t soft-pedal this issue, but comes right out and calls these people to account for insisting on Jesus’ death, even when Pilate was ready to release Him. He tells them that they need to repent, to turn around: “Turn from your sins and turn to God, so you can be cleansed of your sins.” Obviously, he was pointing the finger at them for things that were obvious to everyone there and so they couldn’t avoid the issue of their guilt. In our relationships this issue has to be handled differently - I think it’s best to include our-selves in the issue of sin and the need for forgiveness: “We’ve all done things we’re ashamed of, things we wish we had done better, or at least failed to do things that needed to be done, that we wish we had had the courage to do - and we need to be forgiven by God.” All in all, telling people the bad news, in a loving and gracious way, not singling them out, but letting them know that they share in this stain of sin, makes the good news make sense. Peter did it in a very blunt and confrontative way - maybe that’s what was needed in that situation - but, somehow, it needs to happen so that people can see their need.
2. Once the bad news is clear, the good news is relevant and necessary. We have the solution to the problem that all humans face, the problem of our sin that leads to death, the problem that our sin causes others, the problem that sin creates in our relationship with God. The solution is to believe the good news, to trust that Jesus has done everything necessary to pay for our failures and to allow us to be so fully forgiven that we are considered righteous in God’s sight. That’s the claim of the New Testament, that all we need to be justified in God’s sight has been done for us, on the cross, because we were not capable of compensating for our failures to honor God as we should. And so we find Peter proclaiming the arrival of a gift, forgiveness and acceptance and the promise of God’s presence for each one who will be humble enough to say, “I agree with this verdict, that I’m not good enough to demand acceptance into God’s heaven, and I accept, joyfully, gratefully, the offer of eternal life to all who believe.