

POWER TO HEAL

by Ray C. Stedman

Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at that gate of the temple which is called Beautiful to ask alms of those who entered the temple. Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked for alms. And Peter directed his gaze at him, with John, and said, "Look at us." And he fixed his attention upon them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and walked and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. {Acts 3:1-8 RSV}

In Dr. Luke's summary of the life of the early church, he has told us in Chapter 2, Verse 43, that "fear came upon every soul" after the events of Pentecost. And, in the days that followed, he says, "many wonders and signs were done through the apostles." We have no record of all the wonders and signs done in that opening period, but we do have this one -- the story of the lame man who was healed at the Beautiful Gate of the temple. Evidently Dr. Luke has selected this one from a number of miracles which occurred then, in order that it might teach us something very significant. So we need to give it careful attention.

You notice that this lame man was seated at the gate of the temple. As Peter and John went up to the temple, according to their custom, they found him there. It is interesting that Peter and John were still going to the temple in order to meet with the early Christians. Evidently they still gathered in the temple court, where Jesus had customarily taught, and were meeting there for prayer and study together, for fellowship and the breaking of bread. They had not yet forsaken the temple.

Later on, when the book of Hebrews is written, we find that these early Christians are exhorted to leave the temple, because the temple was no longer the significant meeting place of God with man. The temple was just a building. Already these Christians were learning that God had designed a real temple. The temple of stone was but a symbol of the real temple where God intends to meet man. That real temple is the human body. "You are the temple of God" {cf, 1 Cor 3:16}, Paul writes, and God wants to meet you inside of you, where you live, down in the deepest part.

Later on these Christians had to leave the temple, but there was no immediate break. God is patient and understanding with his people, and he knows that we need to learn slowly.

So Peter and John were going up to the temple. It was the ninth hour, or three o'clock in the afternoon, which was the usual time of prayer for the Jews. But it also had special significance to the Christians, because it was the very hour on which Jesus had died on the cross, the hour when he cried in a loud voice, "It is finished," bowed his head, and gave up the ghost {John 19:30}. As Peter and John were on their way into the temple they met this man who had been lame from birth.

It has always been a puzzle to me why this man had not been healed by Jesus. Evidently he had been brought to the temple habitually for a long, long time, and Jesus must certainly have seen him as he passed into the temple. But he never healed him. All of which indicates that God has his time for great events, and that until his time strikes, things go on pretty much as usual. Then God's program moves into gear, and things happen which could have happened at any earlier time but did not, for a special reason.

At any rate, here was this man waiting at the gate of the temple. And the striking thing about this is that when he asked alms of Peter, Peter stopped, and said to him, "Look at us." This is very important, because it is right in line with the activities of Jesus whenever he wanted to heal anyone. He never walked up to someone and merely touched him and healed him, without first directing his attention to himself. He always captivated the

attention of the individuals he wanted to heal, directed them to focus their gaze upon him. The reason is that this arouses a sense of expectation. It always quickens faith. This is what happened here. This man expected to receive something from Peter and John. He did not know what he was going to get -- thought it was money, I am sure -- but his faith was quickened by Peter's words. This is very necessary in order to receive anything from God. You must expect something from him.

One of the reasons why there are people in our PBC congregation who have been coming here for years, but whose lives are hardly any different than when they first came, is that they have never given their attention to God. There are not many -- almost everybody has been changed as we have met together here with God -- but there are some. They have never expected to receive anything when they came. Unfortunately there are those, young and old alike, who turn off their minds when they get into a church service. They start thinking of all kinds of other things, start taking mental trips and playing mental games. I have always thought it would be most interesting after service to know where everyone had been! But unfortunately, the life-changing truth that goes out from the Scriptures misses them, passes right by, and they can sit here for years and never be changed.

There are young people who have been raised in this church, but who are no different, exhibit no evidence that God is at work. This is largely because they never have heard that word, "Look at me," and paid attention.

This is why Jesus always said to the crowds to which he preached, "He who has ears, let him hear," {cf, Matt 11:15, 13:9, 13:43, Mark 4:9, 4:23, 7:16, Luke 8:8, 14:35}. Let him listen. This is always necessary for the working of faith.

Now what happened? The minute Peter had this man's attention, he did two things which are most interesting:

- First, he admitted his bankruptcy in the material realm: "Silver and gold have I none," he said. "That's what you are looking for, but I can't help you there."
- And then, he demonstrated his amazing adequacy in the spiritual realm: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

And, in that electric moment, as this man was looking at Peter and John, and heard these words, at the mention of the name of Jesus something remarkable happened. Strength came flowing into his ankles, and Peter, sensing it, took him by the right hand and lifted him up. The man rose and began to leap and shout and jump around, trying out this new-found strength in his legs which he had never known, because he was lame from birth.

No wonder it had an amazing effect upon the people:

And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and recognized him as the one who sat for alms at the Beautiful gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. {Acts 3:9-10 RSV}

There was an immediate two-fold effect. These people were convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that God was at work. They heard this done, and saw it. And it was done in the name of Jesus -- that name which signifies all that Jesus Christ is. That is what your name means. People ask, "What's your name?" And you tell them. From then on, whatever they see in you, that is what your name means to them. You sign your name on a check. That check is good to the extent of what you have deposited in the bank. It releases that amount to the one to whom the check is addressed. That name represents you. So the name of Jesus is not a magic formula that Peter uses here to produce a miracle. Peter is saying, "This is the Power on whom I am depending. I am not reckoning on silver and gold. That is not what you need, really. I am not counting on that as the resources from which I draw." Undoubtedly this beggar did need some silver and gold. He probably needed some food and clothing and other things. But that is not what Peter offers him, because he did not have it. He offers him the authority and power and the resources of the name of Jesus. And all that Jesus was, was working through Peter at that time.

That is exactly what the church is called to do -- what every Christian is called to do -- to declare our bankruptcy in the realm of the material. The church is not called to meet the material needs of the world. Now, I do not mean that it is wrong to give money. It is not wrong at all. The parable of the good Samaritan keeps us in balance here, and shows that we can help people with our money. But that is not what the church is called to do, basically. That will be a result of the helping in other areas. The basic call of the church is to release the life of God, to declare the power of God, and to make available to men what God only can do, in the name of Jesus. This is what happened here. These people saw it and were convinced that God was at work, and they were prepared to listen to an explanation. That explanation occupies the rest of the chapter. We will not take it now but will save it for our next study.

But all this does indicate in a remarkable way a basic pattern for witness. You say you want to be a witness? Well, how do you witness for Christ? You do not witness by learning a certain set of facts about Christianity and going out to peddle these, as though you were selling encyclopedias, or were trying to get so many subscriptions to the Christian faith. Unfortunately, that is what many people think witnessing is. But it is not. True witnessing always follows this pattern:

1. First God works: God does something. God changes a life. God does something that only God can do, that man cannot do at all.
2. And then man explains what God did: The person to whom it happened says what happened to him. That is what witness is.
3. And, as a result of it, God works again: And another ground of witness, another explanation, is given. And that is the successive pattern of witness, all through the ages.

But, you see, witness does not begin with an explanation. Too often we have sent out people with the *Four Spiritual Laws* or some other device, and have said, "Now tell people what God is going to do." That is not witnessing. It may sometimes have an effect, but it is not the normal pattern. The normal pattern is to let God do something, and then explain it to people. First God does something to you, and then, as people see that, they ask you what happened. This is why Peter says, "Always be ready to give an answer to every man who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with gentleness and courtesy," {1 Pet 3:15 KJV}. That is what witnessing is.

I want to interject at this point, if I may, a little dissertation on this whole matter of healing. Here is this remarkable miracle. And because it occurs here in the book of Acts, there are many people who say, "This is what ought to be occurring in the church all the time. People ought to be healed like this every day. Anybody who is sick ought to have someone walk up to them and say, 'In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise and walk.' Miracles like this should happen all the time." There are many claims along this line. There are those who say it is actually wrong for a Christian to be sick. They tell us that Jesus died not only for our sins, but for our sicknesses as well. Quoting Isaiah 53, "by his stripes we are healed" {Isa 53:5c KJV}, they claim that Christians who rely upon doctors or even medicines are revealing a terrible lack of faith, for God has provided healing, just as he has provided redemption. This kind of "whipping-post" theology -- the idea that he bore our sicknesses by his stripes, by the fact that he was beaten for us -- is very current today, and is the basis for the activity of many "faith healers" who hold large meetings in which they tell people that God expects them to be well, that it is only their lack of faith which keeps them from being well. And thousands of people are exhorted to come up and let someone pray for them so that they might immediately be healed. What about all this? Is this what this account suggest to us?

There are two classes of Scripture which deal with the subject of healing; therefore there are two purposes for healing set forth in the Scripture. I cannot deal with all the passages individually; time will not permit. So I will simply group them in these two classes:

First there are those which clearly indicate that healing miracles were intended to be authentications of the message of the gospel. That is, they were indications to the people at the beginning, or in any age in which they might appear, that certain people really are genuine messengers of God, that God speaks through them. One such passage is at the end of Mark 16. Jesus is meeting with his disciples after the resurrection, and he

tells them,

"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them, they will lay their hands on the sick; and they will recover." {Mark 16:15-18 RSV Margin}

There have been many movements based upon this passage that say this is the prerogative of any believer. But what they fail to notice is that there is a change in number in the pronouns our Lord used. Mark, like the other Gospel writers, is gathering together a number of things that Jesus said on this occasion, and this is a highly condensed account. What needs to be noted about this passage is that Jesus says first, to all of them, "Go and preach the gospel to every creature," and then he says (singular), "He who believes the gospel and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." Then he changes back to the plural: "And these signs will accompany those who believe..." He means those right there to whom he is talking, because he has just rebuked them for their unbelief, has just scolded them because they would not believe he was risen, even though he was standing right in front of them in a resurrected body. So he says to them, "And these signs will accompany those among you who believe..." Believe what? Why, believe in his resurrection -- that he really is alive, and that they have seen him. "These signs will accompany you..." and he lists them. Then Mark says, to confirm this,

And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs which attended it. {Mark 16:20 RSV Margin}

These are then what Paul calls "the signs of an apostle". In Second Corinthians 12 he refers to himself as having done the "signs of a true apostle" which, he says, are "signs and wonders and mighty works," {2 Cor 12:12 RSV}. Thus that promise is given to the disciples as authentication of their initial ministry. It is not a passage to be claimed by anyone, anywhere, who believes the gospel. This is confirmed by Hebrews 2, where the writer says that the Lord first preached the gospel, "and it was confirmed unto us by them that heard him, God also bearing them witness by signs and wonders and diverse miracles," {Heb 2:3-4 KJV}.

The second class of passages indicates that God does heal, in any age and at any time, and according to his purpose, by grace. That is, God is a gracious Father, and there are verses which suggest that we have every right to ask him to heal us physically, and that oftentimes he will do so. James 5 is a good example, where we are told, if anyone is sick, to gather the elders together and let them pray. God will hear the prayer of faith and raise the sick. James says, "Confess your faults to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed," {Jas 5:16 RSV}. This is perfectly right.

But God does not promise always to heal. There are numerous instances in Scripture when he definitely does not heal even those who are strong in faith. When Paul wrote to the Philippians he referred to his dear friend and theirs, Epaphroditus. They had heard he had been sick, and he said,

"Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow." {Phil 2:27 RSV}

Here is a clear instance when the apostle himself, mighty man of God that he was, could not heal a sick friend. But God spared him nevertheless, and restored him. So we simply have to put this miracle in Acts 3 in perspective. It was a great authenticating work.

Someone has well said that every miracle is a parable, designed not only to demonstrate the power of God, which can literally, physically heal instantaneously and completely, but also to illustrate, in symbolic form, people's needs and the miracles that can happen in their inner lives.

You see, what happens to your body is not nearly as important as what happens inside you. All the time, your body is getting older and grayer and stiffer and more difficult to manipulate. Some of us feel this very much. But what is happening inside? That is the important thing. Paul says, "The outward man perishes, but the

inward man is being renewed day by day," {cf, 2 Cor 4:16}.

And these outward miracles are pictures of what happens in the inward life. You can be crippled and lame and blind not only physically; you can be crippled and lame and blind spiritually. Even as believers you can be crippled, blinded, oppressed, limited. All of these physical afflictions have spiritual counterparts.

Here in Acts is a parable of the whole age in which we live. This miracle occurred at the beginning of the age, to teach us what the age is like. This lame man is a picture of the world, lying at the door of God, asking for help. Here is a sick, lame, crippled society, unable to be the kind of men and women God wants them to be, and looking in vain to the church, to the door of God, for help. They do not know what to ask for; neither did the lame man. They ask largely for material help. And the church has often made the mistake of doing its best to help only on that level. As I have said, there is nothing wrong with that kind of help; it ought to be given. But that is not the real help the church can give. If that is all we give, we are no better off than the Red Cross, or the Community Chest, or some other secular organization. What is needed is what Peter and John gave -- not silver and gold, but the name of Jesus, the power of a new life, the impartation of a new strength in order to achieve the result they achieved: A man was made whole. This is what God offers today. He offers to make men and women whole, not only outside -- sometimes, but inside -- always!

At Mount Hermon this weekend a number of us met together in a Christian gathering. We divided into groups, in each group relating what God had done for us individually, and what was the supreme thing it meant to each of us to know Jesus Christ. A number of wonderful stories were shared, as men and women were telling how they really were made whole, or were moving in that direction, by the power of Jesus Christ at work in them. One man said,

"All my life, when I was a boy, I was so inadequate. I was always envying people who could do things. I always seemed to have all left thumbs, and I never could do anything. I was quiet and unobtrusive, a mouse studying to be a rat, and I envied those who seemed to have what it took. They seemed to have such adequacy, such confidence. I tried to produce that, studied all kinds of methods, tried this and tried that, but I never could learn it. I could never muster the adequacy I needed -- until I found Jesus Christ, and I learned from him the great secret that he was my adequacy, that he would work in me, and that it didn't make any difference what I was like, if I'd count on him, he would do it through me. It would appear to everybody else it was I doing it, but it was really he. That has changed my life. It has given me a real sense of confidence, until now my friends tell me they think I'm a very confident person. But I don't have any more than I ever had -- except I've found the One in whom I can be confident."

That is man made whole!

Once when I was in Denver, I met a boy who told me that he had been the ping pong champion of Colorado. He lived for ping pong. He thought it was tremendous. Ping pong was his whole life. But after he became champion, he said, it all turned to dust and ashes in his mouth. He discovered that man is made for bigger things than ping pong. He found Jesus Christ, and in finding him he was made whole, and ping pong meant nothing to him anymore.

That is what this miracle is saying to us. It is not a question of the physical life but of the spiritual. God is offering to heal men and women and make them whole, mature, grown up. That is what the church is all about. That is what we are moving toward, as the healing hand of Jesus Christ is laid again and again upon our hearts and upon our lives, making us whole, as God intended men and women to be.

Are you like this lame man? Perhaps you have been lying at the gate looking for help, and you don't expect any more than a friendly hand, or a little help along the line. But God has so much more to give you -- so much more -- if you will hear that amazing name, the name of Jesus -- all that God has, wrapped up in that one name and made available to you.

This is the great word we have to declare today: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk," and be what God wants you to be.

If some of you are looking for help, let your faith center upon him. Look upon him!

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for the name of Jesus. It has lost none of its power. It is still transforming men and women, as it always has -- and not only spiritually, but occasionally physically. We thank you for those demonstrations of your power yet today. We know that you heal. We know that you can change a sick and ailing body and make it well and strong. But also you can take a sick and ailing spirit and make it well and strong, whole, wholesome, easy to live with. And Lord, some of us who are sick and lame and blind, weak and oppressed, now look to that precious name and ask the Lord Jesus, in his power, to set us free. We thank you for the results -- in his name. Amen.

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