

BY FAITH IN HIS NAME

by Ray C. Stedman

In Acts, the action book of the New Testament, we are examining the first miracle in this present age in which we live: The instantaneous healing of a lame man who, waiting at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, had asked for money from Peter and John as they went up to pray. And, you remember, Peter had turned and said to him, "Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have I give to you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk," {Acts 3:6 KJV}. And taking him by the hand he lifted him up, and the man's feet and ankles received strength, and he began to leap and shout and walk around the temple courts, praising God. Now, Dr. Luke tells us what followed immediately, beginning in verse eleven of chapter three:

While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's, astounded. And when Peter saw it he addressed the people, "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" {Acts 3:11-12 RSV}

I hope your imagination can capture this scene. This healed cripple, in his unbounded joy, is holding onto Peter and John with both arms. They are trying to get away, but he will not let them go. The Greek is very strong -- it means that he clung to them with great strength. The people around, seeing this commotion, rush over to Solomon's porch of the temple, and, recognizing the former lame man who sat at the Beautiful Gate, they are astonished at what has happened to him.

And when Peter looked at their faces, he saw two things: He saw this astonishment -- the fact that they were bug-eyed with amazement at what had happened; and he saw a sense of reverence for himself and John developing, a mistaken hero worship. This told him that these people, like many today, really did not believe in a God who could act in history. Even though this had followed the ministry of Jesus, in which they had seen many miracles like this, they are absolutely astonished at this one. And it also told Peter that they were ready to substitute a false explanation. They were attributing it somehow to a possession of magical powers on the part of Peter and John.

This provides the background for Peter's address which follows, the message by which he explains what has happened here. The key to this message is his opening words: "Men of Israel..." There is a very definite Hebraic cast to what Peter now says, because he recognizes that these people to whom he is speaking are all Israelites. And, in what he says, you need to underscore the word "you." "Men of Israel, why do **you** wonder at this? You should know better. You ought to know that God is this kind of a God. He has acted in your history many times like this. He breaks through suddenly and remarkably and supernaturally, and you ought to know that. Why do you stare at us as though we had done this? You Hebrews ought to know better than that. After all, God has used many other men in your history in remarkable ways, and you should be aware of this."

I do not think we will understand this passage fully unless we see that Peter has in mind the background of these people and that he assumes they know the Scriptures and ought to have anticipated something like this.

Beginning with Verse 13, you have the message that Peter gives, and it is a most remarkable one. It falls very easily into three divisions, and in each one of these divisions Peter says something most startling.

In the first division he begins with a series of facts which could do nothing but arouse the guilt of these people. Now, psychologists today tell us that the worst thing you can do in trying to help someone is to arouse a sense of guilt within them, that if you make them feel guilty you shut the door to any real help to them. But the remarkable thing about this message is that Peter, without hesitation, moves to a recital of facts which arouse the guilt of these people:

"The God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses." {Acts 3:13-15 RSV}

We have seen before that Christianity always rests upon facts. And here is a series of unquestioned facts which Peter puts before these people, in which they had been deeply and inextricably involved. Notice the contrast he draws between the acts of God and the acts of men. He says, "God -- the very God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of your fathers, the God whom you have worshipped -- God glorified his servant Jesus; but you delivered him up. God glorified him; you delivered him to be crucified."

"And furthermore, the man to whom you delivered him -- Pilate -- who was a pagan, Gentile ruler and who did not have the background of theology or of the understanding of God's activity that you have, was convinced of his innocence and tried to release him. But you -- you denied him. You people, who ought to have recognized him as One sent from God, denied him, but Pilate tried to release him."

"And third, the One you denied was the Holy and Righteous One." Here he is using terms that these Hebrews would have understood, because they come from the Old Testament. These are names applied to Messiah, and they recognize his deity, his divine nature, the fact that the One who was coming would be God himself. Peter says, "You denied the Holy and Righteous One when he came. Instead, you asked for a murderer to be granted to you. In his place you demanded that Barabbas be delivered up to you, and he was a murderer. In other words, you denied the Giver of life, and asked that a taker of life be delivered up to you."

"Furthermore," he says, "you killed the Author of life." This is a word that is better translated the "Pioneer" of life -- the first One who had life. It is speaking of the resurrection of Jesus -- the first human being ever resurrected. Others have been restored to physical life, but Jesus was the first ever to rise from the physical life of mankind to a higher level, to resurrected life. "He is the Pioneer of that life, the first One -- and you killed him. But God answered you by raising him from the dead."

All of these were facts, he says, that were attested by witnesses -- "We are the witnesses of this." This is striking because, once again, we see that Christian faith always rests upon well-attested, well-documented facts. It is not a religion of ideas, or mere sentimental hopes that men have had; it rests upon facts -- the kind of facts which can be attested to by witnesses, as in a court of law. This is the way we prove what happens today -- by declaring certain facts and bringing in certain witnesses to establish them. This is exactly the basis upon which Christian faith always rests. These things happened, and these people cannot deny it.

As a result, Peter has so laid hold of their hearts that, as on the day of Pentecost, they are cut to the heart by the conviction of guilt which these facts arouse. In a sense, every sermon, every message, ought to be a form of major surgery like that, which cuts down through all the illusion, the fantasy, and the dream worlds that we build around ourselves, cuts right through to reality. To me, that is the joy of Christianity. The conventional idea -- that Jesus and the apostles were some misty-eyed dreamers who went about speaking of beautiful worlds and fantastic ideas -- is exploded when you start reading the Scriptures. There you discover that it is Jesus and the apostles who are the hard-nosed realists, who are always injecting hard truths into a world ruled by illusion. This is what is happening here.

Now, why would Peter do a thing like that? Why start out with making these people feel this terrible load of guilt? Because, as psychologists correctly tell us today, guilt is a destructive force in human lives. We cannot live with guilt. Every one of us has experienced it. The fundamental characteristic of fallen man is that he feels guilty. There is not a person in the world who has ever been free of guilt. It is a very disturbing, unhappy feeling, which we find moves quickly to produce other emotions. Guilt promptly produces fear. If you feel guilty, you soon will begin to feel afraid. Remember when you were little, and you did things that did not please your parents, and felt guilty about it? You discovered immediately your reaction was to hide, because you were afraid. So guilt always moves to fear, and fear is an unpleasant companion to live with, too.

And it always moves to something else. It takes one of two courses. Fear either moves a person to run and

hide, to escape in some form, or it moves him to hostility and resentment and bitterness and anger -- one or the other. If it moves to escapism, it soon becomes despair. Because if you hide from life, life soon loses all its color and all its flavor and all its meaning. This is what is happening to a whole generation in our day, a generation of young people who, feeling a deep sense of guilt and fear, have tried to escape by means of drugs or sex or some other channel. This has resulted in a wide blanket of despair which has settled down upon humanity everywhere. And despair becomes destructive of humanity. Life turns off and seems hardly worth the living, and this results oftentimes in outright self-destruction. If guilt and fear do not produce escapism, they produce hostility -- a feeling of resentment, of bitterness. And bitterness produces violence. This is why this generation and the world in which we live -- of all classes -- is a world either escaping or given to violence. And violence is destructive of the humanness, the humanity of individuals. So the result is always the same: this deep sense of guilt and fear, working through channels of escape and hostility, to end up always in destruction in one form or another.

Why would Peter want to awaken this kind of force in these hearts? The answer is that, before the guilt and fear which are awakened by these words can move on either to escape or hostility, Peter moves to his next point, which is God's answer to guilt -- and the only answer there is to guilt in the human race. Peter describes a faith which lays hold of the grace of God:

"And his name [the name of Jesus], by faith in his name, has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith which is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all." {Acts 3:16 RSV}

What does he mean? Well, he is demonstrating the reaction of God to the guilt of man. Here is a lame man who is part of this guilty nation. Though he was handicapped and incapacitated in himself, yet he was part of this nation which had rejected its Messiah and had cried out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" when Pilate had wanted to let him go, {Luke 23:21, John 19:6}. He was just as guilty as anyone else in that crowd that day. Yet here he stands in perfect health, restored and made whole by God's power. "And," says Peter, "the ground of his acceptance before God, the only thing that made God do this wonderful thing in his life, was nothing of merit in himself but simply his faith in the name of Jesus." This is what Peter is getting at. He says, "God is demonstrating for you people how he reacts to human guilt. He reacts in love and grace, on the basis of the name of Jesus, by faith in the name of Jesus. That is what made this man whole. Don't look at us; we didn't do it. When we spoke the name of Jesus, this man believed in the power and authority and the work of that name, and immediately there came flowing into his body the strength his limbs lacked. This is why he now stands here in perfect health before you, as a demonstration of God's answer to human guilt." And with "Exhibit A" right there before their eyes, he goes on now to declare to them what can be the result in their lives:

"And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn again, [literally] unto the blotting out of your sins, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old." {Acts 3:17-21 RSV}

Here Peter is declaring that God's answer to man's guilt, God's answer to man's condemnation of his Son and rejection of the Lord of life, is a forgiveness and a restoration which takes into account man's ignorant blindness. Peter is saying to these men, "As God sees what you did, he sees it not as the deliberate act of a perverted and twisted will trying to strike back against him; he sees it as the blundering act ignorant minds that did not realize what they were doing."

I wonder if, in these words, we do not have an echo of Peter's memory of those words he heard from Jesus on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," {Luke 23:34}.

Perhaps nowhere else in Scripture do we see more clearly how God sees man. He sees him as ignorant, as blind and stupid, blundering along in his darkness, not knowing what he is doing.

This is the problem today, is it not? Is this not what all the events of our time are bringing sharply to a focus in our lives -- that we do not know what we are doing in trying to run this world? We do not know what we are doing in trying to run our own lives. How many people have said to me, "Oh, I had no idea what I was doing! I look back now and all of a sudden I discover that all my sincere efforts to do what I thought to be right were wrong, and I've loused everything up!" Well, that is exactly what God expects of us. That is what he has been trying to tell us all along. You see, it is only man's pride that starts boasting about all his achievements while ignoring his weakness and his folly and his atrocious blunders that he makes in all areas of life. But God's grace is revealed by the fact that he is ready to write it off on that basis and say, "I know that you didn't mean to; you're just blind, stupid."

Somebody passed along to me this week a very revealing clipping from Herb Caen's column in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, in which he is recounting the problems, the dilemmas, that this present generation faces. Among other things, he writes,

Our well-meaning generation is living and learning the hard way. Even the Welfare State is a disaster. When you see the people jammed into buses being jolted home after a hard day's work, you can understand their unreasonable anger at people on relief. When we see yet another skyscraper rising we look at it with foreboding. Once we were thrilled and delighted with our growing skyline, each new building a cause for celebration and self congratulations. And now we see it for what it is: a rising menace that almost literally scrapes the sky out of existence. We sympathize sincerely and generously with blacks, the people trapped in ghettos, the starving and the hopeless. And yet everything we try to do turns out ill-advised, insulting, condescending, or so far wide of the mark as to be pointless. There are still those, nevertheless, who wonder why our generation drinks so much.

This is what Peter is saying. This is humanity -- ignorant, blind, stumbling along, patting itself on the back, priding itself on its achievement, and yet making the most atrocious blunders, all of which catch up with us sooner or later. Not only in the realm of politics and economics is this true, but even in the realm of ecology -- so that every time we flush the toilet something terrible happens to our ecology! "And yet," says Peter, "what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled." That is, by the means of human stupidity and ignorance, God's purposes were nevertheless worked out. That is grace, is it not -- that through all the blindness and the folly, the foolishness of human life, God is still working out his purposes?

And now Peter goes on to announce what they are: "Repent therefore, and turn again, unto the blotting out of your sins" -- and two great things will happen:

- (1) "times of refreshing will come from the face of the Father," and
- (2) "he will ultimately send Jesus Christ unto you to restore all the things which were spoken by the mouth of God's holy prophets from of old."

That is a remarkable statement. Peter is looking down the course of the whole age, and he says, "Here are the principles by which God is going to operate: Wherever there is a turning back to him, there is immediately a dealing with the problem of guilt. God blots out sins."

I do not know anything more difficult to get people to believe than that. It is amazing how many Christians have heard all their lives that God forgives their sins, blots out their sins, deals with this great problem of guilt which is at the root of all human ill -- and yet they still do not believe it! They are still trying in some way to work out some standing or merit before God, or to do something in themselves which will make themselves acceptable to him.

But Peter says God arouses guilt only because he has the solution to it, and that is the blotting out of sins in the name of Jesus. Faith in the name of Jesus blots out your sins.

"And from that," Peter says, "two things will happen: first, there will come times of refreshing," i.e., periods in human history which will be characterized by relative peace and prosperity, times of order and joy and

happiness and relative contentment in society.

We need only to look back through history to see how true this is:

After the spiritual awakening of the Wesleys, England was saved from the disaster of revolution which the French had just gone through. The country was turned around, and there emerged a period of relative prosperity and joy and contentment. There were still many problems, granted, but it was a time of refreshing. And there have been other such times in history. The Protestant reformation in Germany under Martin Luther was such a time. And other times have been recorded. But these times of refreshing, seasons of refreshing, come only when a people turns to God and seeks the blotting out of sin.

"Furthermore," says Peter, "it will result, ultimately, in the return of Jesus Christ." That is, only when God's people turn back to him, ultimately, is God going to return his Son again from heaven. That is very, very significant.

It confirms what I have long suspected from the Scriptures -- that when Jesus Christ returns again, he is not coming back in a time of a low ebb of faith. He is not coming when faith is almost burned out and God's people are going through a time of barrenness, a spiritual desert. Rather, he is going to come back at the height of an awakening, a time when God's people have returned to him, and there has been a blotting out of sins, and there is a release of the fullness of the power of the Spirit. In the midst of that, Jesus Christ will return. The world around will be barren and disconsolate, despairing; but there will be a time of life and vitality on the part of the people of God.

Peter closes with this appeal to act:

"Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul that does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.' And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came afterwards, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you in turning every one of you from your wickedness." {Acts 3:22-26 RSV}

Paul tells us that, historically, the gospel was to go to the Jew first and then to the Gentile. And that is the program which is followed in the book of Acts. Soon it will turn to the Gentile world, for in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile; they all come on the same ground. But Peter's argument is, "Look, you are Jews. You know the prophets, you have been reading them. And your own Scriptures urge you to believe in Jesus." Peter brings it home with a personal emphasis: "God has sent him to you to turn you from your wickedness."

I wonder if Peter did not learn all this knowledge of the Old Testament application to the Christian life from what Jesus taught him during those forty days after his resurrection, when he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures and, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself," {Luke 24:27 RSV}. Peter is really recounting those words here.

And he is saying, "The final issue is this, and each of you must settle it for himself: Will you allow God to turn you from your wickedness?"

Will you begin at the place where God begins -- not out at the periphery of life, clearing up a few surface problems, but right at the heart,

- With your problem of guilt,
- With your lack of acceptance of yourself before God,
- With your sense of inadequacy and inferiority --

and deal with that before Jesus Christ and, in the name of Jesus, believe that God loves you and receives you and makes you his own, and you are privileged to live as his child, his son, in the midst of this present life?

That is where Peter leaves the issue. Perhaps you would like to answer this question Peter leaves with us: What are you doing with Jesus?

Will you allow God to turn you from your wickedness -- in the name of Jesus?

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for these searching words. We see the truth of them, and we know that all of Scripture stands behind this great proclamation -- that you are eager to deliver men and women from their sins. May there be some who, right now, will turn in faith to the Lord Jesus and, receiving him, begin that marvelous process of being turned from wickedness, that process which restores humanity and makes possible the fulfillment of all the hopes and dreams of every heart. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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