

HEALING, PRAISE, AND CONFRONTATION

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

By Steve Zeisler

Most people have church routines. When you come to church you probably park your car in the same place and sit in the same seat. You might have the same discussion with your spouse about getting ready on time, who is going to brush the kids' hair, and so on.

At the beginning of Acts 3 we come to a Scripture text with a similar pattern. Observant Jews (including many who were new Christians) came to the temple routinely at the time of prayer. But on this occasion something new intervened, and that is what we want to consider in this message.

Acts 3:1-3:

Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour [3:00 PM], the hour of prayer. And a certain man who had been lame from his mother's womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple. And when he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he began asking to receive alms.

These verses depict a longstanding pattern. Chapter 4 will tell us that the lame man was more than forty years old. For many years, perhaps even in childhood, he had survived by begging. He had friends who would carry him to the same place every day, one of the gates of the temple called the Beautiful Gate. And especially at times like the ninth hour when the devout would be entering the temple, he would beg for alms. So when he asked Peter and John for alms, he wasn't addressing them in particular, but calling to everybody as they were going by. Peter and John (perhaps Jesus, as well) had likely passed by him many times before. This day, however, the repeated pattern would be broken with the intervention of God's gift.

I want to elaborate on the scene to help us understand what was going on. The more we can use our imaginations, especially in narrative passages like Acts, the better we connect with and learn from them.

The temple gate: a barrier

In 20 AD Herod the Great began a building program to take what we know as the Second Temple and make it a grand thing. The temple of Solomon, of course, had been destroyed by the Babylonians. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem, they had built a small temple and tried in fits and starts to make it a thing of honor to God, but without success. So in 20 AD Herod the Great, a cruel, violent, and proud man, finally decided that he would do something religious on a grand scale, as he always did. He was currying favor with Rome by his generous treatment of its subjects. He was currying favor with the Jews to whom he was partially related. And he was probably trying to buy off God in spending great sums of money to make the temple beautiful.

For this reason, the temple mount, the platform on which the temple was built, was by the time of Acts quite large--the size of thirty-five football fields. The temple was a towering structure made of white marble and richly

ornamented with gold. Josephus tells us that it could be seen from enormous distances when the sun was shining because it would reflect so brightly. Inside it had heavy curtains that were well-made and beautiful in their own right. The structure was supported by ornately carved oak and cedar beams. Everything about it was impressive and breathtakingly beautiful.

The reference to the Beautiful Gate reminds us of something that was true of both Solomon's Temple and the Second Temple: It was purposefully built as a system of concentric circles. There were lines you had to cross at various points as you came closer to its center. If you started in the wilderness of Judea, you would have come first to the towns of Judea, then to the walls of the city of Jerusalem, perhaps through the residential areas or business areas of the city, and finally to the temple mount. You would have entered the courtyard of the Gentiles, where anybody would be welcome. Beyond that was a gate through which you could pass only if you were a Jew. The inner courtyard was called the courtyard of the women. If you were a Jewish woman you were allowed to go only that far. If you were a ritually cleansed, Jewish man you could enter the temple itself, the holy place. At the front of the temple was the altar, which only priests could attend, and only priests who had no deformities. Beyond the altar in the holy place was the holy of holies, which only the high priest could enter only one day of the year to be in the very presence of God.

The Beautiful Gate was in the courtyard of the women. This beggar didn't go through it to the temple itself, the holy place.

Luke actually may have been using subtle irony in calling this the Beautiful Gate. It was commonly called Nicanor's Gate. There is no reference to the term "Beautiful Gate" in other literature. Luke's use of irony might have been an acknowledgment that as a Gentile he would never have been permitted to get as far as the Beautiful Gate himself.

Imagining this lame beggar who spent every day at the temple, we observe that the temple was a place that both raised hopes and dashed them. The temple was the place where God had determined to make himself known. It was the place where he called for his people to come to him, to hear word of his forgiveness of their sins, to be reconciled to him, to acknowledge that he was a God who kept his promises. The temple reminded them that God was determined to dwell among people, that he was available to them and invited them to come to him.

But all the gates on the way there also said that there were some who were not allowed to come. The issue of sin was always raised as the people approached the temple. Brokenness and failure and inadequacy, the things about them that they hated in themselves, might turn the gate into a barrier instead of an entrance.

The temple in New-Testament times was a place made beautiful by an evil man. It was attended by priests who, lacking faith, were more political than spiritual in their responsibilities. It had become, as Jesus said, "a den of robbers" (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46) when he approached it as Messiah. It was a place where the devout hoped to find God, but where many found themselves sitting at the gate, unwelcome within. Yet it is impossible for human souls not to long for the presence of God, inspired by the temple.

So we see that the lame beggar's experience was a metaphor for the experience of most of the folks in the world. If you could read the hearts of the people you interact with, most have oriented themselves toward a place where God is. They can see the marble and gold shining in the sunlight at a distance. They know that God cares enough to name a place for himself and to invite people to come. And they have made some effort to go. They've gotten as far as the city, or as far as the courtyard of the Gentiles, or as far as the courtyard of the women. But at some point the gate was not an entrance but a barrier, and they couldn't go any farther. They didn't know how to answer the questions of their own brokenness and fear and inadequacy.

Most of the people around us are subsisting on alms, spiritually. They are getting just enough spare change to survive another day. They wish it were true that God would meet the needs of their hearts. They know that other answers

don't work. But they have never found the key to open the gate. They don't know how to go near enough to find the love that is greater than death, to where their brokenness and fear and inadequacy and sin are finally done away with.

In the parable of the sower Jesus said some have hearts so hard that the devil comes and takes the seed of the word of God away (Matthew 13:19; Luke 8:12); there is very little response to conscience and they move on. There's not much you can say to them. But the majority of the people in the world are not that way. They are just surviving and wishing for more, but they don't know how to find it.

One last consideration, by way of setting the scene, regards the condition of Peter and John when they approached the temple that day.

In the holy of holies

It is clear that they came as those who were already the recipients of the grace of God. They came to give thanks. They came buoyed by the love of God, which they were already certain of by the gift of the Spirit, who already embraced them. They came as those who regularly fed on the body and blood of Christ so that they were forgiven for their sins and strengthened for their journey. Acts 2:42-47 depicts the life of the church as they experienced it on the day that they went to the temple. This was their ordinary condition:

“And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

They were not waiting for the Day of Atonement, the one day of the year when the high priest would come from the holy of holies and tell the gathered multitude, “Your sins are forgiven.” Their sins were forgiven every hour of every day. They lived in continual fellowship with the Lord. The temple was a place where they had historically learned to seek God, and it was a place of honor for what it had meant to their people, but it was not where they had to go to find acceptance from God. They were already the beloved of God, the home of the Spirit. In fact, they *were* the temple (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Verses 4-10 tell us what happened next.

A changed life

And Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze upon him [the lame beggar] and said, “Look at us! And he began to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, “I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene--walk!” And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. And with a leap, he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him

walking and praising God; and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to beg alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Think about how the scene must have unfolded. If a beggar has a crowd of people streaming by, he is trying to make eye and voice contact with the maximum number to receive the maximum amount of money. So giving attention to one particular person for any length of time means that some folks are going to slip by without his having any contact with them. So when Peter and John said, "Look at us," it wasn't to this man's advantage to do what they said.

Although Peter and John had clearly gone by this man before many times, for some reason the Spirit of God in them indicated that this time they should stop. The man was saying to each passerby, "Give me alms, please... Give me alms, please... Give me alms, please...." When they got to him they said, "Look at us," and then Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold." There I think Peter paused. The beggar faced a dilemma. Attending to Peter and John meant a loss of opportunity with other passersby, yet perhaps their interest in him was significant even if they had no alms to offer.

In Peter's subsequent preaching, he said that faith in the name of Christ made this man well. And this is what his faith consisted of: When they said, "look at us. We don't have silver and gold," they waited to see if he would turn away or listen. And he leaned forward and listened. So Peter continued, "But we do have something for you. In the name of Jesus Christ, walk!" and he reached down and took his hand. In that moment the man's life was changed. It is a highly dramatic scene. Everywhere around, people who knew his history were filled with wonder. He didn't even begin walking unsteadily, with difficulty, but with strengthened ankles, and then he leaped, danced, and praised God!

If this man's first condition was a metaphor for the state of most people in the world, who have gone as far as they can toward God and do not know how to get any farther, then I think his conversion is also a metaphor for coming to faith. The good news is really good! God will change us. Forgiveness doesn't mean just getting by; it means a feast in the presence of God. It means leaping and dancing and singing and joy and inclusion. It means love, not just survival.

Attracted by what was happening, a crowd gathered and began to ask questions. While the man hung onto Peter and John, not wanting to let go, Peter preached.

Peter's sermons all flow from questions asked by his listeners. This sermon is very forceful. Peter says, "You must repent because you are guilty. The stakes are high: life and death." He doesn't pull any punches. But he didn't preach until he was asked.

The best way to imagine ourselves as God's servants among unbelievers is that we are entering conversations they are already having with God, answering questions they are already asking, although they may not know it.

Verses 11-26:

And while he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement. But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered up, and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which

comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all. And now brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time. Moses said, ‘The Lord God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed in everything He says to you. And it shall be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’ And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days. It is you who are the sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ For you first, God raised up His Servant, and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.”

A cure for guilt and ignorance

Peter’s first sermon in chapter 2 of Acts emphasized David’s witness of Christ. This sermon expands it to the witness of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the prophets from Samuel onward. We are hearing now all of the witnesses of the Old Testament declaring that Jesus is the Lord. Those who heard this sermon were guilty of Jesus’ execution. And not only they, but everyone who has read this sermon since, including us, would, given the option, prefer Jesus’ execution and would call for a robber. There is an insistence in Peter’s sermon that Jesus died for those who deserve to die, and if they don’t receive God’s gift in Christ, there is hell to pay.

The other thing Peter said was that his hearers were ignorant of the ways of God. Remember Jesus said from the cross, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

This sermon declares that there is a cure for both guilt and ignorance. There is an answer to lives that have been decimated by the sinful choices that come naturally to humans. In calling for repentance in verses 19 and 26, Peter listed three blessings: First, the outcome will be forgiveness of sins. Second, there will be a season of refreshment by the Spirit and life will be filled with God’s presence. And third, his return in the future will put things right.

Let me suggest three ways we can apply the lessons of this chapter.

The fellowship of the Spirit

First, the temple with its great height and immense beauty, its wide reputation, would within forty years, be razed to the ground. In the final week of Jesus’ life his disciples called attention to it: “Lord, look at the great temple, these wonderful stones, this massive structure!” (Matthew 24:1; Mark 13:1; Luke 21:5). And the Lord’s response was, “It won’t last.”

But what does last is the community of the Spirit. The church of Christ, while difficult to keep track of, often “below the radar” of the notice of the world, has lasted from the day it was born until now. It is growing everywhere in the world. It is ultimately the most powerful force in the world. It is the salt that keeps this world from becoming more rancid than it is. Ray Stedman used to call it “a kind of invisible government, influencing and moving the visible governments of the earth.” (1) We undervalue the common experience of ordinary Christians who are willing to take a

risk to love each other, use their gifts, serve with kindness, and speak of Jesus. We are too impressed with large and loud enterprises, religious or worldly.

A second application is that the giving of alms is not the gospel. The early church sold what they had to actively care for the poor, but they did not confuse that with the gospel. We should express the life of Christ in generosity, kindness, and love to the poor. But when all we do is help hurting people survive better in the midst of their difficult circumstances, then we are missing the great opportunity--to speak of the love of Christ, which can change lives, not just moderate circumstances.

Third, we live among people who are just getting by, wishing to know God, unaware of how to find him. They long for change but don't know where to go to experience it. They are getting by on scraps and spare change when a banquet is available. My challenge is this: ask God to give you a conversation like the one that Peter and John had with this beggar. You have scores of ordinary conversations with people concerning the weather, your family, or work. But somebody in your acquaintance in the near future is going to be open. You can say to them, "Look at me--let's talk about something different. Let me give you more than you have. Are you open to a greater experience of God than you have had so far? Will you take a risk?" You are probably going to sit in the same seat next week in church. But between now and this time next week, ask the Lord for an opportunity to give away what you have been given.

Scripture quotations are taken from New American Standard Bible, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

NOTES

(1) Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life*, Revised Edition, © 1995, Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 18.

Catalog No. 4744
Acts 3:1-26
4th Message
Steve Zeisler
February 24, 2002

[Back to Index page](#)

Copyright © 2001 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the prior written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to: Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.