

The Continuing Acts of Jesus: We Weren't Just Being Kind!

Acts 4:1-22
April 23, 2017
Dan Hoffman

Please open your Bibles to Acts chapter 4.

If you are new with us this morning we have been in Acts for a bit now; we are walking through the text verse by verse. And what we have seen over the last several weeks is that Acts is about God working in the lives of very ordinary people in order to accomplish a very extraordinary agenda.

So Acts 1 verse 8 is the thesis, or the outline, of the book. This verse drives the plot forward and determines what Luke is going to include in the story and what he is going to leave out. So about 40 days after Jesus rose from the dead, just before He ascended back to heaven, He told His disciples:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

The story of Acts then is about a bunch of cowardly tax collectors and uneducated fishermen encountering the risen Jesus and being filled with His Spirit in a way that turning their worlds right-side up. And then they start spreading the news about Jesus from Jerusalem where they were from, all the way to Rome.

But the book isn't really about the Apostles, it is about Jesus, and His Spirit. So Peter gets some stage time towards the beginning of the book, Paul gets some attention towards the end: a few of the other Apostles get honourable mentions, but Jesus is the only character who appears throughout all 28 chapters – this is His story.

Acts is about Jesus continuing to work in the lives of His followers – that's primary. But connected with this Acts is also about people recognizing the involvement of Jesus in their lives. Peter and the others are given eyes of faith and are able to see God in the midst of their mundane.

So the context of our passage today revolves around Peter and John heading to the temple for prayer at 3 in the afternoon not long after Pentecost. This was something they did all the time. And every day they passed this lame beggar sitting by the gate. The text tells us he had been there since he was born, about 40 years earlier.

So Peter and John had passed this guy a hundred times – a thousand times! And even Jesus had passed this guy.

But today something was different. As Peter and John were walking past he called out to them and asked for money – now that wouldn't be different. But then the text says: "Peter looked straight at him." And in that moment Peter saw that God was at work in this situation today. Jesus wanted to heal this man.

And so Peter told him to get up in the name of Jesus, and the guy did!

And then a huge crowd forms because everyone knows this beggar. And they start gawking at Peter. And Peter responds: Wait a minute. Why are you looking at me? I'm nothing special? I've got no power. I'm not even particularly godly. Peter says all this in chapter 3 verse 12. And then he says: "It was Jesus' name, and faith that comes through Jesus, that has healed this man. Jesus was working and I just saw what He was doing and chimed in to participate.

And we stopped there and took time to emphasize that two miracles were going on here. Now everyone sees the spectacular one – some lame guy gets new legs – that's a pretty big deal! But we noted that there is no promise in the text that every time you see someone who can't walk you should just pray and heal them.

Now can God heal lame people? Yes! Does God heal lame people today? Yes, I've heard stories of this. But does everyone who is lame get healed? No. And that's because people don't do miracles – God does.

If there was a formula here for how to heal people, then any godly person could learn it, and harness the power of God. But God doesn't work like that. God heals people when God wants to. And so the only way people are going to see the miraculous is if they are part of what God is doing. Remember Peter, John and even Jesus had passed this man before but obviously never sensed that God wanted to heal him then.

And so the second miracle, which is just as spectacular, but often goes unnoticed, is that Peter and John had eyes to see where God was at work and the boldness to partner with what He was doing. And this is what we need to foster and practice. Because partnering with what God is doing is like tuning in on the radio. The air is full of radio waves, and so if all you hear is static it isn't because everyone has gone radio silent, it is because you aren't tuned in. And in the same way if you aren't seeing God work it isn't because He isn't present, it is because you aren't looking with the right eyes. But when we tune our eyes to see God we find that He is all over the place.

...

I want to call Spencer up to share a brief story of seeing God work in and around him over the last several weeks.

[Spencer – testimony of watching God provide for the youth]

Here's what I want us to see here. If you have no eyes of faith then a story like this might make you smile, but it could all be just coincidence. But here is the reality – and this is going to come out as we look at today's text – God is at work in our city, in our

neighbourhoods, in our families, at our workplaces, and a lot of the time we are just wandering around oblivious to His involvement. But when we ask God to open our eyes, and train ourselves to be sensitive to His voice, we see Him work all the time.

Alternatively, when we are oblivious to God's involvement we just miss out. God's work isn't hampered. Praise God we don't have the power to throw His agenda off course. Amen? But we just don't get to be part of it. And in the worst-case scenario God lovers like us can find ourselves refusing to acknowledge His presence. And when this happens we end up quenching the Spirit and fighting God. That's the danger.

So today we are looking at chapter 4 which continues the story from 3. I mention this because between most chapters in Acts there is a big period of time passing – but not here. So Peter and John saw that Jesus wanted to heal the beggar, and they got to be part of it. And then Peter preached his second 3-point sermon: Jesus is really awesome. You are really terrible; you killed the Author of Life. But God saw this coming and raised Jesus from the dead. So repent, receive the forgiveness bought for you on the cross. Get baptized and give your life to following Jesus. And then we get chapter 4. Let's pick it up in verse 1:

[Read Acts 4:1-4]

So the crowds are blown away after seeing God work, and hearing Peter make the connection between a lame beggar getting new legs and Jesus. And the people responded on mass. Verse 4 says the church grew to about 5000 men, so probably just as many women and then a bunch of kids. So the church in Jerusalem is somewhere around 15,000 people. That's church growth!

But not everyone is excited. Enter the priests, the temple guard and the Sadducees. Now these guys are responsible for the order of the temple. Their job is to make sure everything is happening the way it is supposed to. This is the pastor, the deacon board and like a good mega-church they've got a security detail too.

And they are disturbed. They are mad that people are getting excited about Jesus. And they are mad that things are happening at the temple that they aren't in control of. Think about it: it would be like if we were having a service Sunday morning, but at the same time in the back alley right here there was a healing rally. And I was trying to maintain order and keep your attention, but what was going on outside was way more fun. I'd be mad. And they were particularly mad because they had just gotten rid of Jesus, and now they had to do it again. So they try to restore order.

...

If you've been around church a bit you've probably heard people say "God is a God of order. This comes from a short verse in Corinthians where Paul corrects the church for getting too excited about using their gifts such that they were drawing attention to themselves instead of to Jesus. But the problem is this line often gets used today by guys like the Sadducees who are actually concerned about losing control, not about the glory of Jesus. So they end up trying to shut down what God is doing.

“Let’s not do anything unexpected, let’s have order in the temple.” That’s what the Sadducees were about. And their love of order worked well with their lack of faith.

You see the Sadducees were ran the temple, but they weren’t faith-filled people. They were more interested in power and knew that controlling the religion of Israel was the best way to control the people. So they used the temple to that end.

We know from several of the encounters Jesus had with them that they didn’t believe that God was doing anything in their day. In fact they didn’t believe in the miraculous at all.¹ So these are religious people who don’t see God is involved in their lives, but are still religious. Dangerous!

And with their security detail they lock Peter and John up for the night. But while they Peter and John are being hauled off in handcuffs they are making an altar call, and people are saying “yes, I want to be part of this. I want what some of what they are getting.” It’s amazing. Isn’t it awesome how ineffective handcuffs are when the Spirit shows up? Look at verse 5

[Read Acts 4:5-12]

The religious leaders, who were directly involved in Jesus’ crucifixion, are on a witch hunt. Things are out of control in the temple. Things are changing and someone needs to pay. So they ask: “What power are you tapping into that you managed to cause all this ruckus in God’s temple?” Implication: You guys are channelling demons.”

And then we get verse 8. And look, Peter gets another baptism in the Holy Spirit’s power. And the evidence is that words come out of his mouth instead of his foot going in. Remember this is Peter we are talking about. This is the coward who won’t admit to a little girl that he knows Jesus.² This is the guy who tries to build houses for Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. This is the guy who can’t talk his way out of a paper bag without embarrassing himself. But here we are seeing Spirit baptized Peter, and it is a different story.

Here is what is happening. The priests are refusing to see that God is behind the lame man’s healing. They see the miracle. But because accepting it would mean a change in the way they were used to doing things, and a diminishment of their power, they attribute the miracle to the demonic instead of God.

Now Jesus said this was going to happen about two years earlier. He was teaching His disciples and said:

“I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges Me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. But whoever

¹ Acts 23:8; Matthew 22:29-33

² Matthew 26:69

disowns Me before others will be disowned before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

“When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.” (Luke 12:8-12)

Jesus knew this exact situation was going to take place and so prepared Peter for it. And now Peter found himself standing before the synagogue rulers, who were denying the Spirit had anything to do with what they had seen. In fact they are trying to credit Satan for the Spirit's work – that's blasphemy against the Spirit. And boom! Peter gets baptized in the Spirit's power, and he lets them have it.

“If you are holding us responsible for some random act of kindness done to a beggar we need to set the record straight. We weren't being kind, we were participating with Jesus in what He was doing to increase His kingdom. You remember Jesus – yes, I'm talking to you Caiaphas – well Jesus not only came back from the dead, but if you are really asking for how this happened let it be known that it is by the power of Jesus' Spirit that this guy is standing up.

And let me connect the dots for you: Since Jesus came back from the dead, and now does things like this, we know that all salvation, including yours, is found only in the name of Jesus.”

...

Now I can just see Peter shaking after this comes out of his mouth. These are some of the most powerful words he has ever spoken. And they are offensive. Peter tells these pastors and religious people, you aren't okay. You guys smell really nice, but your hearts are full of festering evil. You are guilty God-killers. And you need Jesus or things aren't going to work out for you in eternity.

Now this is the same thing Peter said in his previous two sermons. Peter only has one sermon, and it is the gospel. It's the message that none of us are good. And all of us need Jesus' forgiveness if we are going to be saved, and that is what Jesus offers.

The declaration of God, through Christ, is not that we are innocent, but that we are pardoned. We are guilty, but we are forgiven. Our crimes against God have been paid for by the blood of Jesus.

...

Now when this message gets preached people always respond in one of two ways. Some see their brokenness and celebrate the unfair gift Jesus has given them. And others are offended by the idea that Jesus offers them a pardon.

Some people hate that God would meet us where we are, because that always means God confronting us in our sin. God comes to us and says “you need to get off the throne of your heart. That’s My spot.”

And we say “no, I like it here. It’s my life. This chair is mine!”

And Jesus says “I made you, I own the rights to your heart. And haven’t you done a pretty terrible job of being your own god? Haven’t you messed things up pretty badly? You’re not happy. You’ve bought the lie that happiness happens when you get what you want, but you want the wrong things. You want things that break your relationships and leave you perpetually grasping for more. You lust after things that never satisfy and leave you anxious and depressed. You aren’t winning the game of life, you are losing. And it is only when you stop trying to be god and let Me be God that things will change.”³

...

Ironically the good news of the gospel starts with the bad news of reality. And this is offensive to people who don’t have eyes of faith. Sinners don’t want the truth. They don’t care about facts. And so even when the miraculous stares them in the face they refuse to see it. This is what happens here. Look at verse 13.

[Read Acts 4:13-17]

... In the name of He who must not be named. There is a funny thing – but not funny “ha-ha” that happens when people are confronted by Jesus. And that is that our sinful heart blocks our eyes and ears.

I mean look at this, they are actually saying the words “we can’t deny that the power of Jesus has healed this man – that’s a fact. But we don’t want Him doing this anymore.” Do you see how insolent that is?

This is why I don’t spend much time with the field of apologetics. Apologetics is the art of using reason and logic to defend the faith. Now I think there is a time and a place for this – let’s us be smart about our faith – but the fact is that reason doesn’t birth faith.

...

When I was studying at Regent there was a debate between a Christian and an atheist at UBC. I was working at Earl’s restaurant at the time and invited some of my co-workers to attend the debate with me.

Unfortunately at the last minute the big name atheist backed out so the head of the atheist club on campus had to stand in for him. Obviously he wasn’t nearly as prepared for the debate. And so, in front of hundreds of UBC students the Christian was very effective in presenting arguments.

³ Paragraph adapted from Matt Chandler’s sermon “Ministry in Jerusalem” <http://www.tvresources.net/resource-library/sermons/ministry-in-jerusalem> (Accessed April 22, 2017)

He talked about the phenomena of universal morality and how this pointed to a divine source. He talked about the complexity of nature and how this pointed to an intelligent Designer. And he talked about the mysteries of the Bible and the historical fact of Jesus and the resurrection as the greatest evidence that God wasn't simply Designer and Creator but lovingly involved in our lives. And the atheist got wildly outplayed.

And as I watched the debate I was excited, but then when I talked with my friends afterward it was a total let down because the result wasn't faith, it was anger. My friend said: "it was like racing a Porsche against a horse and buggy."

He wasn't impressed by the logic, he was insolent and totally un-phased. You see he attended the debate saying: "I don't want to believe, so help me find reasons not to." This was the posture of his heart.

"I like being god in my own life. I know what I want to do. I know what is best for me. I don't want to believe in Jesus. I don't want Him to be Lord in my life because if He takes that place He is going to take me to places I don't think I want to go."

And isn't that exactly what is happening here? Even with a lame beggar standing in front of them – a man they've passed on the road for 40 years – they refuse to entertain the thought: "Maybe this is real."

Instead all they can say is "Let's crush this thing. How do we get these guys to stop talking about He who must not be named? Do you see the fear? Fear always comes from the enemy, and it blinds anyone who gives in to it. How do we make these joyful miracle workers look like idiots? How do we make sure all this Jesus stuff dies?"

And then we get verse 18:

[Read Acts 4:18-22]

Now here the priest misspeaks and Peter jumps on it. The priest forgets, or maybe he didn't know, that Peter had already denied Jesus and then been forgiven.

One of Jesus' big stops after the resurrection was to forgive and reinstate Peter. "Do you love Me Peter? Do you love Me? Do you love Me Peter?" "Yes Lord." "Then feed My sheep."⁴ God in the flesh stood in front of sinful Peter and forgave Him, and Peter's never going to deny Jesus again. So he says: "You can threaten all you want. You can raise the stakes. You can crucify me on a stake upside down. It isn't going to change me. I mean you decide whether I should listen to you or to God. I've seen God move and I just can't stop talking about it."

And there was nothing they could do. They wanted to kill Peter and John and probably the lame guy too, but all the people were praising God so they couldn't touch them. Faith was birthed in 2000 men, and faithless insolence was nourished in others.

⁴ John 21:15-19

...

This has always been what happens when the gospel gets preached. Some people hear it and rejoice over the offered pardon, and others are offended and harden their hearts. And when someone's heart is hardened there is no amount of evidence that will change their mind.

But that's not our job – salvation is God's miracle. Our job is to look for where He is working and partner with Him. And then keep talking about what we've seen and heard.

...

So here is the challenge. Some of you are in a spot today where you need to respond to the gospel. You need to stop pretending you are happy with the messed up life you have dug yourself into, and you need to receive Jesus' offer of pardon and let Him take the throne in your life.

Maybe you've been fighting this for a long time, but today something is different – today the miracle is you see that God has been calling you to Himself. The string of calls finally makes sense today, and you are ready to give your life to Jesus.

If that's you then I urge you not to leave here this morning without praying with someone. After the service a few of our deacons are going to be at the front. They are going to come up at the beginning of the song we are about to sing. And when you see them then come on up. Just stand beside them and they will pray with you.

...

Or maybe you're here and you've given your life to Jesus years ago, but you are convicted that you aren't bold with your faith. Maybe you haven't been publicly acknowledging Jesus. Maybe you've allowed the fear of what people will think to keep you quiet.

Or maybe your testimony of Jesus is weak because you haven't been seeing Him move and partnering with Him so you don't have any stories of faith to tell. And you feel convicted about that. You know you need more boldness. And you are hungry to see Jesus move so you can participate with what He is doing.

If this is you I would encourage you to come up as well, and our deacons will pray with you that Jesus will open your eyes and give you opportunity to partner with what He is doing to increase His glory and expand His kingdom.

Don't leave today without asking for God to do the miracle He wants to do in your life.