

# **“Acting on Acts”**

## ***‘Breakfast and the Bible’/‘Supper with the Scriptures’***

### **Acts 3**

The Acts of the Apostles is unique in the Bible. It’s an account of the exciting events which followed the resurrection of Jesus and the genesis of the first communities of his followers. Acts starts with the return of Jesus to heaven (the Ascension), continues with the coming of God’s Holy Spirit (Pentecost) upon the first believers, and goes on to describe how those first followers of Jesus were equipped to continue his work on earth and to take that message far away from Jerusalem and into Europe.

The author of Acts is widely thought to be St. Luke, who also wrote the Gospel that bears his name. Although he probably never met Jesus face-to-face, Luke gathered together the eyewitness accounts of those who did and has faithfully passed them on to us. But he did witness the miraculous growth and work of the first Christians and this too we can read, thanks to his hard work.

So far in Acts 1 and 2, we have learned: that Jesus taught his disciples for forty days after his resurrection, told them to wait for the coming of his Holy Spirit, was ‘taken up to heaven, and how, ten days later, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. On that day, Peter preached powerfully and the number of believers grew from 120 to over 3000! Luke has told us that the fledgling church met for teaching, fellowship, sharing the Lord’s Supper and prayer (2:42). Now it is time for the church to spread out and take the message of Jesus onto the streets in words and actions. And right from the outset, this brought the believers into conflict with the Jewish leaders.

#### **An amazing healing (1-10)**

At the end of Chapter 2, Luke has given us an important insight into the actions of the first followers of Jesus. These included daily meetings in the temple courts (2:46). The courtyard of the temple was an area where people would meet for discussion and debate. In the light of 3:1 it seems that the first believers also joined in with the formal set prayers in the Temple itself. In the morning and the afternoon, this would include the offerings of a burnt offering and incense, as laid down by the Law of Moses. It was conducted by the priests in the sanctuary but with a congregation of worshippers outside who would have prayed whilst this was happening. In the course of the prayers, a priest would have come out to bless them. The early believers were all Jews and would have seen no theological objections to continuing with the Jewish forms of worship, even though Jesus had come to fulfil (and therefore do away with) the sacrificial system laid down in the Old Testament. At this point, the religious authorities did not exclude them from the temple, presumably as they did not see them as a threat. All that was about to change!

One day, Peter and John, on their way to the afternoon prayers, were accosted by a man crippled from birth. Since the man was put there every day, it seems highly likely that Peter and John had passed him before but Luke does not record why they had not done anything to help him before. Jewish law regarded alms-giving (ie giving charitably to help those less fortunate) as a worthy activity and something of which God approved. So the man positions himself where many pious people would be going up to worship.

Peter and John tell the man to look at them. While others may have simply dropped in the odd coin without paying the man much attention, Peter and John want to engage him

as a human being. Not surprisingly, the man responds with intent, assuming that he is about to get something from them. His initial hopes would have been dashed by Peter's response, "Silver and gold I do not have..." but something far better is about to be offered. And so Peter pronounces healing "...in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth", ie by Jesus' authority – this is no magic formula. The result is an astonishing miracle.

Whilst there is everything right about giving money to help those less fortunate than ourselves, what Peter offers is not just a treatment of the symptoms but goes to the very heart of the man's problems. In this way, Luke is showing us powerfully that the healing ministry of Jesus is continuing through the disciples of Christ, by the power of his Holy Spirit. This is another thing that Pentecost has achieved! The contrast for the beggar is truly amazing: he has never walked in all his life; now he can not only walk but, as Luke records, he can walk and leap (8)! Furthermore, he will be able to work to earn a living and no longer have to beg. He has received self-esteem as well as physical healing. No wonder he wanted to go into the temple to praise God! And it is not surprising that those who witnessed the effects of the healing were amazed (10).

### **The healing explained (11-26)**

Just as on the Day of Pentecost, an amazing act of God is followed by an explanation from Peter. He first is at pains to dispel any misunderstanding – namely that the miracle is not Peter's doing. Instead he points quickly to God and to the one whom God has glorified, Jesus Christ – the very one they have asked to be executed! He gets straight to the point! Perhaps there is a message for us there? Notice too how he identifies with where the hearers are coming from; this is not any god but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – i.e. the God of the Hebrew scriptures, the one who is worshipped day and night in the Temple. He links the rising of Jesus with the healing of the man. The resurrection of Jesus from death was the greatest miracle of all time, and all other miracles flow from it. This Jesus who has defeated death can also overcome the physical, emotional and spiritual problems which beset humans too.

Peter might have left it there, but he saw an opportunity to go further and elicit a response from his hearers. This good news was not just for the crippled man but for everyone. It is not enough simply to observe what God is up to – he wants us to engage with his words and actions and to make up our own minds. Just as on the Day of Pentecost, Peter appealed to the OT scriptures, so he does so again. This, incidentally, shows the value in our being conversant with the scriptures and feeling confident in applying them to the situations in which we find ourselves.

So from verse 17, Peter sets the context for Jesus' death, a fulfilment of the words of the OT prophets. This time he does not wait for people to ask what they should do (see Acts 2:37), but tells them straight up that they should repent in order to receive forgiveness. Surely, this is a boldness and authority which has come from the Holy Spirit – we cannot imagine the pre-Pentecost Peter saying these things. The result will be 'times of refreshing' (19) – a lovely phrase which carries with it a picture of invigorating coolness after wearying heat. It is also reminiscent of Jesus' words offering rest to those who come with heavy burdens (Matt. 11:28-30).

The verses that follow are clearly messianic – in other words, Peter is claiming that all the prophets have foreseen the day when God's faithful servant would come to the earth to usher in his eternal kingdom. The Jews considered that the Messiah's coming and the end of time would be one and the same. But Peter is explaining that, yes the Messiah has come, but that he has returned to heaven for a time (21) until the day of final restoration arrives. (In this way, God has given all people, not just Jews, the chance to respond to his love and receive his forgiveness – see on 25-26.)

Peter rounds off by appealing to Samuel and all the prophets who followed him (24) as people who spoke of this day. This is a bit problematic since Samuel, although a great leader, is not recorded as actually uttering many prophecies! Nevertheless, he was looking towards the coming of David as the greatest king of the Old Testament and, perhaps, Peter sees in him a yearning for one even greater than David – namely the Son of David. And the reference to Abraham (25) reminds us that God’s blessing, initially for the Jews (26) is to be for ‘all peoples’, ie Gentiles (non-Jews) as well as Jews. So it is important to note that, even in the very earliest days of the church of Christ, its leader, Peter, understood what Jesus meant by his command to the disciples that they will be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

*Peter and John went to pray.  
They met a lame man on the way  
He asked for alms and held out his palms,  
And this is what Peter did say:  
Silver and gold have I none,  
But such as I have give I thee,  
In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.  
He went walking and leaping and praising God,  
Walking and leaping and praising God,  
In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.*