

Acts 3:1-10 - Empowered by the Spirit

The first three chapters of Acts form a triad, focused on the Spirit and the empowerment for witnessing to the name of Jesus that the Spirit will bring. Chapter 1 showed the apostles waiting for the Spirit, chapter 2 marked the coming of the Spirit, and now chapter 3 shows the apostles being empowered with the Spirit.

The power of God's salvation not only creates generosity but also drives concern for the weak and afflicted, as seen in Peter and John's interaction with this beggar. He is not just a statistic to them but a person. There is no wealth required to be a channel for God's grace to transform this man's body and heart. While Peter and John have no money, neither does the beggar; he has nothing whatsoever to offer in exchange for healing, but that is no hindrance to the grace of Christ, who extends his power of healing to one who has no right or ability to claim it.

Acts 3:11-26 - Peter Preaches in the Temple Square

As people marvel at the power of the apostles, Peter immediately renounces praise and redirects their gaze to Jesus Christ: everything is about Jesus, whom God has glorified (v. 13) by raising him from the dead. Peter insists that this miraculous healing is the work of the same God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob whom his fellow Jews were on their way to worship. Even though they have failed to honor God's Messiah and are filled with sin that deserves judgment, God nevertheless continues to call them back to rest in him.

Peter preaches - Jesus is "the Holy and Righteous One" (v. 14). In Isaiah 53:11 the "servant" of the Lord, a messianic title, is called the "righteous one," and this is picked up later in Acts as well. Jesus is also the "Author of life" (3:15), and yet his own people have rejected him and killed him. Peter points out that the suffering of the Messiah was foretold by the prophets. Isaiah spoke of the Messiah as one who "was pierced for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities" (Is. 53:5). David foreshadowed the suffering of the Messiah in a psalm that Jesus quoted on the cross: "They have pierced my hands and feet . . . they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (Psalm 22:16; cf. Matt. 27:35). God tends to work triumph through the paradoxical means of weakness.

This is not a concept unique to Acts or the New Testament. God has always been concerned that his people reflect on what he has done and tell others about it. God's people have always been primarily witnesses to his greatness. "I have redeemed you," God says in Isaiah. "'You are my witnesses . . . and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he'" (Isa. 43:1, 10). Peter concludes by urging them to respond with repentance so that they can receive "refreshing . . . from the presence of the Lord" (v. 20). Though they are guilty of killing the promised Messiah, God is not seeking to punish them but instead he wants to bless and restore them. Marvelous grace!

Acts 4:1-22 - The People's Response

Peter and John are known to be "uneducated" and common men, yet they speak with "boldness". Credentials or eloquence in public speaking are not necessary to proclaim the gospel to others. The power of God is that much more astonishing when working through regular people.

Our many flaws are not barriers to God's work or love; instead, they glorify God all the more. Peter points to Jesus fulfilling one of the Psalms: "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone". Jesus himself mentioned this prophecy during his earthly ministry (Luke 20:17), and Peter elaborates on it in the first of his letters (1 Pet. 2:4-8). Though rejected by his own people and crucified, Jesus was vindicated when God raised him from the dead. He now occupies the chief position, the cornerstone, around which the entire church is built up.

Acts 4:23-37 - The Believers' Prayer

Here we see the prayer that God answers: the prayer for boldness to speak his word. In light of the threats from the established powers, it would be understandable for the believers to pray for relief from persecution. Instead they ask for renewed courage to proclaim the word of God. But if these Christians avoided prayers for protection, it was not because they believed God was unable to protect them. In fact, by quoting Psalm 2, they are claiming the truth that God is sovereign over kings and lords. Rulers oppose God in vain, not simply because he is stronger but because he orchestrates the plots of evil people to conform to his will. The believers can be bold because they know that the effects of evil are fleeting, and those who oppose the gospel are no threat to God, who is always in control. What others intend for evil, he will work for good (Gen. 50:20). The ultimate example of this was the crucifixion of Jesus, which seemed like the final triumph of evil over good but was in fact the very culmination of God's plan to redeem the world.

The experience of the Spirit at Pentecost fulfills John the Baptist's prophecy of the one (Jesus) who would baptize in the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; cf. Acts 1:5). The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost has a specific purpose in redemptive history: to show that God's salvation is now flowing out to people from every nation, tribe, and language. This is repeated in the three outpourings of the Spirit that follow in Acts 8; 10-11; and 19. Luke's focus in Acts 2 is on the fulfillment of prophecy, not on paradigms for personal experience. Luke is introducing the expanding gospel ministry of the Holy Spirit as the gospel is beginning to spread.

Acts 6:1-15

The "priests" mentioned in verse 7 are significant. It was this very group up to this point that was the most vehemently opposed to the gospel. This reminds us of the scope of the gospel: it is to be preached to everyone, even those who hate Christians and desire their deaths. Priests and Pharisees were a major group of antagonists during the life and ministry of Jesus. They instigated and influenced his death, and Jesus reserved his strongest words for religious leaders. Their faith in Christ in Acts is a reflection of the power of the gospel and the grace of God to those who opposed Jesus.

Stephen was the first listed of the seven Hellenists selected to minister to the widows (vs. 5). Like the apostles, he not only ministered to the needy but was primarily concerned with the ministry of the Word. He preached Christ in the Greek-speaking synagogues of Jerusalem, where he was seized and dragged before the Sanhedrin. Stephen is also described as being filled with faith, the Holy Spirit (vs. 5), grace, power, and wisdom (vs. 10). He is the first person after the apostles said to have performed wonders and signs. His "power" was not physical strength or worldly knowledge or influence but the power of the Holy Spirit. Stephen's face is described as being like the face of an angel. There was apparently a visible manifestation of the brightness of the glory of God on his face, as there had been with Moses (Ex. 34:29-30) and, to an even greater extent, with Jesus at his transfiguration (Matt. 17:2).

Questions for Group Discussion:

1. What are some things that you have personally witnessed that have caused you to feel “wonder and amazement” at the work of God? How might that move you to praise God and speak out for him this week?
2. In what ways can you take the initiative, as Peter did in chapter 3, to pursue open doors for gospel declaration?
3. Why do you think we are tempted to resort to other means for building Christ’s church rather than the preaching of the word? (Acts 4:1-22) What does this passage teach us about the power of the preached word? Who do you think is called to “preach the word?”
4. Think back to the issues with Ananias and Sapphira. How, as local church members, can we address compromise in each other’s lives with both seriousness and graciousness?
5. Read this quote from Al Mohler’s commentary on Acts 5 - *“Acts 5:12-16 reminds us once again that the Lord builds his church, not humans. You may imagine how some Christians might have thought that no one would join the church once word had got out of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira. The church is not built on marketing strategies or pragmatic advertisement schemes or feel-good programs. The church is built on the power of God’s word and Spirit. Persecution, fear, and negative reports could not keep God’s Spirit from saving sinners and bringing them to Jesus. We should never look for alternative means to spread the gospel that downplay the centrality of God’s word or undermine the truth about his judgment or his salvation. The apostles watched the Spirit at work in bringing men and women to Christ because they were committed to sharing the message of Christ in the power of the Spirit, and so could leave the results to God.”*

How is it both freeing and liberating to know that we are called simply to be faithful, leaving the results to God?