

Acts 3-4

Lesson 2

The story of the spread of the gospel message continues in Acts chapters 3 and 4. Luke continues to fulfill his purpose of conveying the history of how the gospel message first began to spread in Jerusalem. This chapter consists of five main sections: 1. 3:1-11 Peter heals a lame man; 2. 3:12-26 Peter preaches to the people; 3. 4:1-22 the leaders of the temple arrest Peter and John; 4. 4:23-31 the church community responds to persecution with testimony (martyrdom in the classical Greek understanding of this word) and prayer; 5. 4:32-37 the narrator summarizes the new lifestyle of the community of believers. It is important to recognize here that Luke words things in such a way as to leave the impression that an indefinite period of time has passed between the events of chapter 2 and what is recounted here beginning in chapter 3. This lack of precision is deliberate and should serve as a caution to those who would use Acts to develop a meticulous

chronological reconstruction of events surrounding early Christian history.¹

Peter and John ascend to the temple at the “ninth” hour, which equates to three o’clock in the afternoon by our reckoning of time. Luke chooses to add local color to this story by giving us specifics regarding the location’s geography (i.e. the Beautiful Gate). This added detail likely lends veracity to the account that Luke recounts here and will add texture to the story for those familiar with the temple layout. The time of prayer is associated with the ninth hour, which is likely the second of three Jewish prayer times (Daniel 6:10). These services were likely well attended as the lame man came to collect alms from those who would be attending this service. He would have wanted enough people to make it worthwhile to come and beg for alms.²

It is also of note that the Apostles continued to practice the tenants of their Jewish religion in the same

¹ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2007), p. 65.

² J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, pp. 66-67.

place and time as they had done before the ascension of Jesus.³ Many times it is portrayed that after the day of Pentecost Jews and Christians simply separated. Luke's account certainly does not bear this out. Peter and John are going up to the Jewish Temple in order to continue the Jewish traditions regarding prayer that certainly are seen as dating back at least to the time of Daniel. The separation of Christianity would take many decades and would come very gradually. The synagogue and the Jewish people were still the repository of the word of God in the form of the Scriptures. If you wanted to read scripture at this time in history you went to the synagogue. It is of note that later on in Acts as Paul will spread the gospel message the first place he would go when he arrived in a new place was to the synagogue.⁴ It is important to recognize that the separation of the church from Judaism would take more than a hundred years.⁵

³ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pp. 166-167

⁴ Acts 17:1-2; 18:19.

⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, Second Edition (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 312-318.

This narrative, in Acts, also serves as a connecting point between the blessings of God that are being enjoyed by the restored people who have responded to the Pentecost proclamation and the continued mission of the Apostles to serve as witnesses to what they have seen and heard. These Apostles carry on the prophetic power of Jesus in both their words and their deeds and are to act as the leaders over the restored people of God, which this current audience will have seen as Israel. The apostles are to stand in the place of the 12 patriarchs “judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:28-30). A conflict between those claiming power over Israel and the apostles is developing.

They have no money to give to the beggar, but what they do is perform a miracle for his benefit and they continue to win the favor of the people through their performance of this miracle. In this section Luke shifts our attention from the community as a whole to Peter and John fulfilling their role as Apostles of Jesus Christ. The issue of authority will arise here in the ministry of the Apostles in the same way it had in the initial stage of the ministry of

Jesus (Luke 5:21-26). Luke communicates the very simple truth that the apostles are prophetic successors of Jesus Christ, the one whom the so-called leaders in Israel had crucified.⁶ This incident represents a direct challenge to the authority of the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees, the Priests, the scribes and the Sadducees.

The response to the miracle performed through Peter is amazement and, at least from the lame man, praise to God. All of the commotion then draws a crowd and Peter takes the stage to set into context what has just happened. Peter gives glory to God for what has happened and then proceeds to proclaim the gospel message, to witness. Peter focuses on four main things that have occurred and require consideration. First, Peter wants to persuade his audience that even though they acted in ignorance in calling for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ they were wrong (vss. 14-15). Peter lays blame for the crucifixion clearly at the feet of the audience that is currently listening to him. They bear

⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, in the Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 71.

responsibility for the death, in some measure, of the “author of life.”

Second, they proclaim that God has vindicated Jesus as is apparent from his having been raised from the dead. There is great importance in the word “witnesses” used here. The word translated here as “witnesses” is the Greek word μάρτυς (martyr). It is significant that this word has changed meaning dramatically through the years. In today’s world we might use it for someone who suffers, and perhaps even is “martyred” for their beliefs. Originally the meaning of this word was simply to be a “witness.” The Apostles are witnesses of the ministry, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They place the miracle that they have directed in the context of faith in this same Jesus Christ whom this audience had killed and God raised again from the dead and through his name the miracle of healing the lame man has been performed.

Peter acknowledges that they had had Jesus killed in ignorance, but now that the ignorance has been removed they must make a choice and this audience is called upon to

repent so that their sins can be wiped out. Peter links powerfully and distinctly the name of Jesus with the Messiah and the prophecies concerning him proclaimed in Scripture. The promise is that times of refreshing will come from the presence of God at the appointed time. This same word for refreshing is used in the Apocryphal book of 4 Ezra (2 Esdras)⁷ to refer to the earth's being refreshed and relieved by the Messiah from the violence suffered by oppression from Rome. This word can be used to denote "end-time," eschatological deliverance.⁸ Peter is proclaiming that Jesus is the source of this anticipated end-time eschatological deliverance for which they yearned.

This would bring up a whole host of images for the people of Israel as they dreamt of the time when the Messiah would come and fulfill all the promises that God had made through the centuries to people of Israel. This Messiah now awaits the time of restoration. The focus throughout remains on the message and not upon the

⁷ 11:46 "... so that the whole earth, freed from your violence, may be refreshed and relieved, and may hope for the judgment and mercy of him who made it." NRSV

⁸ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 71.

questions of the audience just as it did in Acts chapter 1.

Jesus waits in heaven for the time when the full measure of the blessings of God will flow. How was this Messiah going to bless them? He was going to turn each of them from their wicked ways.

Needless to say the message of Peter and John was not welcomed by the priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees, they were extremely annoyed: Arresting Peter and John and then leaving them in custody until the following day expresses this annoyance. The leaders of the Jews recognize that Peter and John represent a direct challenge to their authority and power. Despite the arrest, many believed the message, and the power of the message continues as the group of believers has grown from the 3,000 men on the day of Pentecost to about 5,000 here. The church continues to grow despite the pressure to stop the “witness” of the apostles.

The leaders of the Jews demands to know by what “power” or what “name” they have healed the lame man. Notice there is no attempt to deny that the healing took

place. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit answers their question with such tremendous boldness that they are clearly taken aback. The response, from uneducated men, who had been with Jesus along with the presence of the lame man who had been healed, startles the council. They then order them to leave while they discuss their options. Their solution was to order them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. The response from Peter and John is once again bold and defiant. They claim that they are speaking a message from God and they ask the council whether it is right to listen to God or to man? They leave this question before the council.

The council are afraid to do anything further because they fear the people. This is a startling contrast, on the one side you have Peter and John acting with consummate boldness claiming that their authority comes from God: On the other hand the council refuses to do what they desire to do out of fear of the people. The council does not seem concerned at all with what is right before God, they are looking at things from a very secular, human power

oriented perspective. Once Peter and John are released and make their report, to the believers, of what has occurred they rejoice because they see this too as an answer to prophecy. There is an exact quote from Psalm 2:1-2 of the Septuagint and this event is seen as representing the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Clearly, the Christians see that conflict is coming and rather than seeking victory through some form of human power, vengeance or even justice, it is of note that here what they pray for is “boldness,” and to demonstrate the hand of God in healing, signs and wonders. Their concern is with the proclamation of the message of Jesus Christ not with their own safety, or even for justice. They understand that they serve the ultimate source of justice. They are focused on the message set before them to such an extent that this is what they pray for in the name of Jesus. This is more than simply some kind of formula, they perceive themselves to be his ambassadors continuing his message and mission on earth. They understand their purpose in life.

They do not have to wait long for the answer to their prayers. When they finished praying the place where they were at was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they speak with boldness. They are attuned to the will of God and as their will is aligned with his will God honors their prayer powerfully and decisively. They are all filled with the Holy Spirit. The prayer and concerns that the people demonstrate here indicate a tremendous change from what could normally be expected from people who sense injustice and also sense that they have the power to address it. Their concern is that all people hear the gospel message, recognizing that this will bring about something greater than they could have imagined in their former mindset.

The conflict that is being played out here in this part of Acts concerns who will have authority over the people of God. Will it be the Sanhedrin and the traditional Jewish rulers or will it be the Apostles? There is a confrontation taking place here and the answer to this question is decisively answered in the shaking of the place where they

prayed and the filling with the Holy Spirit of those who had just prayed. The answer is that the Apostles are the leaders of God's people and not the traditional group that holds the trappings of power at the temple.

In addition something else amazing takes place as the whole group has a unity of heart and mind that can only come through the power of God. No one claimed private possessions, but everything that the group owns was held in common. This group of people are not just uniting around a charismatic leader they are uniting around one another in a powerful display of their faith. Those who were wealthy even sold what they had so that the needy could be supplied. This marks a new exodus where the people of God begin their journey as God's people toward the promised land (Exodus 12:33-50).

The power of the Apostles is being highlighted in this section as not only the new leaders of Israel, but also as the proclaimers of a new order of things. Luke uses the caricature of possessions to show not only that the Apostles wield spiritual power, but also that they wield power on

earth. The willingness to give up possessions in this context indicates that the entire worldview of these recent converts has been altered and they now have a different set of priorities. They are a people on a mission, that mission is to spread the message of salvation as witnesses (martyrs) of Jesus Christ.

The laying of the money from the proceeds of selling property at the feet of the apostles very graphically demonstrates the power, and authority of the Apostles. In addition, a very important character, Barnabas is introduced in this vignette. Barnabas is shown here to be in utter submission to the Apostles, and Luke takes the extra effort to display this submission to the leaders of the church here as Barnabas will be an important figure later in the narrative of Luke's composition.⁹ This idea of submission to the leaders of the church; here the Apostles, and later Elders, will be a key element in the order and functioning of the church. This is perhaps an area where our democratic ideologies cause us confusion. In the early church there was

⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, in the Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 91.

no democracy, Jesus Christ was king and he appointed leadership, first directly, then through the power of the Holy Spirit. The church is a Theocracy and a crime against the church will be seen as a crime against its King not simply against its earthly leader. This conception also places great responsibility upon those in positions of leadership. They are representatives of the king and stand accountable to him.

Chapter 4 ends with the story in midstream, it continues into chapter 5 with a powerful demonstration of the power of God and of the authority of the Apostles of the church.

Synopsis

This section begins with Peter and John going up to pray at the temple, but on the way they heal a lame man. It is noteworthy that they continue to worship at the temple and in ways that were common to the Jewish people of that time. Becoming a Christian has not transformed this aspect of their lives. The healing of this lame man draws a crowd of people which affords Peter the opportunity to proclaim the gospel message. He calls upon them to accept this message and turn from their wicked ways.

The commotion of the healing and Peter's sermon draws the attention of the temple authorities who arrest Peter and John and throw them into prison overnight. In the morning they question them regarding the power and name that they used to heal the lame man. Boldly and provocatively Peter proclaims that the healing was done through the name and power of Jesus. The boldness of Peter and John astounds the council and they decide to tell

them not to “speak or teach” in the name of Jesus anymore. Peter proclaims that they are doing what they are doing at the direction of God and what they ask is not proper. The council threatens them and then releases them.

After their release Peter and John go and report back to their friends what has happened. They see in this even the fulfillment of prophecy and they pray for boldness to continue to proclaim the message. After their prayer the place where they are is shaken. The events draw this group ever closer together and they hold all their property in common and share with each other as each has a need. We are introduced to Barnabas and to the practice of selling property and the laying of the money at the feet of the apostles for dispersal.

Main Points

1. Peter and John continue to practice aspects of their Jewish faith.
2. The message is powerfully proclaimed not only in word, but with deeds.
3. Conflict with the temple authorities begins.
4. The church prays for boldness in proclaiming the gospel.
5. The church shares all their material goods in common.
6. Barnabas is introduced.

Questions

1. Why do you think Peter, John and the other Christians continued to worship at the temple?
2. Why do you think the lame man was healed?
3. What blessing does Peter offer to those who accept Jesus Christ? Why do you think this is what is offered here?
4. Why do you think Peter and John were really arrested?
5. How to Peter and John view their imprisonment and the threats they received?
6. Why do you think God shakes the place where they were praying?

7. What do you think the meaning of the believers
having all of their possessions in common is?