

Peter's Second Sermon

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If churches of Christ today can be said to have a favorite book of the Bible, it is the book of Acts. We probably spend more time on Acts in our Bible classes, both at the children's and adults' level, than we do on any other book. There are several reasons for this preference. First, Acts is the only book of the Bible devoted to the history of the first-century church. If we want to learn to be like the first-century church, we must begin our inquiries with Acts. Second, Acts has as much to say about what we must do to be saved as does any book of the New Testament. If we want to go to heaven, we need to care about Acts. Third, Acts provides us with a framework for understanding the other writings that have come down to us. Without Acts, the apostle Paul is just a guy who wrote a bunch of letters.

So, then, Acts is an important subject for study, but in our adult classes at the moment, we're studying the early Old-Testament prophets. The solution to this apparent problem is not to ignore the prophets—Isaiah in particular is crucial to our understanding of the gospel—but to supplement our Bible classes with preaching from Acts. This morning, then, we're going to return to Luke's great history and study Peter's second sermon.

Healing the Lame Beggar

This sermon, however, only makes sense in the context of the miracle that precedes it, the healing of the lame beggar. Luke describes **THE SETTING** in which this miracle occurs in Acts 3:1-3. As apparently was a custom of the Jewish people, Peter and John here are going to the temple to pray at about three o'clock in the afternoon. There, they encounter a beggar, a man who has never been able to walk, who sustains himself by soliciting alms from passersby.

This setting is important for two main reasons. First, it means that the miracle that is about to take place is not going to occur in private. Instead, Peter is going to perform this miracle in front of a large crowd, most of whom do not believe in Jesus. This audience is not a sympathetic one. It is not predisposed to accept Peter as a miracle worker. If these people acknowledge a miracle despite not expecting one, that's evidence for us that a miracle did indeed take place.

Second, Luke gives us important information about one who will soon receive healing, the beggar. This is not some ringer brought in by Peter and John to help them fake up a miracle. This is someone who has himself carried to the temple steps every day in the hope that devout Jews will pity him and help him financially. Every Jew who worships at the temple, then, is going to be familiar with this man. Many of them may well know that he has been lame from birth, that he isn't faking his injury because he's too lazy to work. They know that only God could help a man like this walk.

This is the situation then—a man with a genuine, serious medical problem, asking for help in a public place. This is a situation that would expose a charlatan, yet Peter uses it to work **A MIRACLE**. We see the story of the healing in Acts 3:4-8. Once again, there are two points here we should look at. First, we need to be impressed by the greatness of this mighty work. This man didn't see some incremental, undetectable improvement. He went instantaneously from being unable to walk to being able to jump around like a three-year-old. Even today, we can't do that. A modern-day surgeon might have been able to correct the problems with this man's body, but even then, we would have to put him through months of physical therapy before he would be able to walk again. Peter healed him in a moment.

Second, this portion of the story dispels any remaining doubt about the genuineness of the miracle. We've already seen that this man couldn't have been in cahoots with Peter and John. His disability was a matter of public knowledge, just like we know that Stephen Hawking is stuck in a wheelchair. Of course, that leaves open the possibility that this is a long-term faker, but that explanation doesn't hold water. He's been living off of alms for decades. How would Peter and John get him to give up his income stream? By giving him the silver and gold that they don't have? That doesn't make sense either. The only thing that does make sense is that he was genuinely lame and genuinely healed.

Equally important to our understanding of what takes place is **THE CROWD'S REACTION**. Luke presents it in Luke 3:9-11. The people see this guy hopping around through the courts of the temple, they see him clinging to Peter and John, delirious with joy, they recognize him as the man who five minutes ago was lying on the steps, begging for alms, and it doesn't take them long to put two and two together. They are astounded at the obvious evidence of miracle.

We saw already that this man's lameness was a matter of public knowledge. What has happened here is that now his healing has also become a matter of public knowledge. The final objection that we might make to this miracle is that nothing like this ever happened, that Luke made the whole story up out of whole cloth. Today, 2000 years after the fact, that might seem possible, but in the first century, it wasn't. The book of Acts was probably written about 63 A.D., less than 30 years after the events of Acts 3. It wouldn't have been any easier for Luke to invent this story of public healing and have it believed than it would be for us to invent a story that we healed Christopher Reeve before he died and have that believed. In both cases, the deception would be too public to be possible. People would know it wasn't true. The only way that Luke can get away with telling this story is if it IS true, a historical record of an extraordinary event.

Peter's Sermon

It is in the midst of the confusion caused by the healing of the lame man, as people are rushing together to marvel at what has happened, that Peter begins his sermon. His topic, of course, is Jesus, and we will be guided by his words as we prepare to eat the Lord's Supper. Interestingly enough, this sermon starts with **AN INDICTMENT**. We read it in Acts 3:12-16. Here's the structure of Peter's opening argument: "You people took God's servant Jesus, handed Him over to Pontius Pilate, asked for a murderer to be granted life in His place, and ultimately killed Him. However, we're here to tell you that we are eyewitnesses to the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. If you doubt our story, consider this formerly lame man right over here who's hopping around like a bunny rabbit. We couldn't do this by ourselves, any more than you could, but God healed him through us to glorify Jesus and prove that He is the Christ." If you remember our discussion of Acts 2 a couple of months ago, this is very much the same style of argument. Peter is relying on the evidence of the miracle and on the witness of John and himself to show that Jesus is Lord.

This is perhaps the best practical example in Scripture of the principle laid out in Hebrews 2, that the purpose of miraculous spiritual gifts was to bear witness to the preaching of the apostles and other early Christians. Peter didn't heal the lame man just-because; instead, the point of the miracle was to draw a crowd, so that Peter could use the miracle to make the case to unbelievers that Jesus was the Christ. Today, by contrast, the word has already been attested and doesn't need further attestation. Nor, indeed, do most people who claim to have miraculous spiritual gifts today also claim to be introducing a new revelation. Instead, their tongue-speakings and their healings have exactly the just-because character that miracles in the first century didn't. The most they can be is a confirmation with nothing to confirm.

Even though Peter used his miracle to confirm his indictment, he quickly moved from indictment to **SOLUTION**. We'll let him explain for himself, in Acts 3:17-21. Even though the Jews are responsible for putting to death the Son of God, there are two reasons why God hasn't squashed the lot of them already. First, they acted in ignorance. On the basis of the evidence that Jesus had presented, they should have known that He was the Christ, but they never took the time to think it through. Second, the only reason why they were able to kill Jesus was because God allowed them to. That death was something that God predicted through the prophets, and indeed, it was necessary for the Anointed One to suffer for God's plan to be fulfilled. In other words, it's not too late for Peter's audience yet.

However, they still have to do something. They still need to have their sins blotted out by repenting and returning to the Lord. This also sounds a lot like Peter's Acts 2 sermon, but there's one significant difference between the record of that sermon and the record of this one. Here, Luke does not describe Peter as mentioning baptism.

I've heard it said that every account of conversion in the book of Acts includes baptism. That's not precisely true. Obviously, we don't see the word used in the text here, but we need to be careful not to make more of that omission than we should. Luke's purpose in writing Acts is not to provide a verbatim transcript of every sermon. Instead, we would do better to think of the Scriptural record as inspired sermon summaries that preserve the arguments and main points of those sermons for us in greatly condensed form. Even though we can rely on these texts, the quotation marks in our Bibles are definitely NOT in the Koine Greek! When we read nothing of baptism in Acts 3, then, the only thing we can rightly infer from that absence is that baptism wasn't an essential part of Peter's argument on that day. So what? Baptism isn't essential to the logic of every sermon I preach either. However, I still believe that it is essential for salvation, just as Peter and Luke both did. Luke simply chose not to discuss the topic here.

In another difference from the Acts 2 sermon, even after Peter reaches his punch line, he makes **A SECOND ARGUMENT** that Jesus is the Christ. It appears in Acts 3:22-24. In Acts 2, Peter relies on a pair of prophecies uttered by David. Here, he reaches back hundreds of years before David shepherded his first sheep, to a prophecy given by Moses. In this text from Deuteronomy, Moses predicts that Israel will be blessed with another prophet like him, a prophet who would give the people the law, and a prophet whom God would expect the people to obey. During His ministry, Jesus frequently used language that implied His equality with Moses, but this is the first time that one of Jesus' disciples makes this claim for Him. However, it won't be the last. Many of the arguments advanced by Paul and the author of the book of Hebrews depend on this duality between Moses and Christ. Today, the point for us is simple. God expects us to obey Jesus. If we don't, then God will destroy us for our disobedience.

This takes us to Peter's **THIRD ARGUMENT**, which, like the second, has some significant future implications. Read with me from Acts 3:25-26. According to Peter here, the Jews should be expecting the Christ not only because He was prophesied, but because God made a covenant with the ultimate ancestor of their nation, Abraham. What's more, even though Jesus came to be a blessing to the Jews first, He will become a blessing for all the nations of the earth. Here, Peter himself is prophesying. Even though he almost certainly doesn't have a clear idea of what he is talking about, he is predicting the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles, which he himself will carry out. From the beginning, then, Christianity was proclaimed not as another Jewish sect, but as a faith for the entire world.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, there are several concepts here we need to consider. First, Peter reminds us, as he did in Acts 2, that the faith we hold is a reasonable one. About 15 years ago now, a man named Lee Strobel wrote a book called *The Case for Christ*. We wouldn't be far off if we think of Peter's words here, as with the gospel of John, as a first-century case for Christ. Peter's goal is to persuade his audience to become disciples by laying out the evidence that

Jesus is the Son of God, and he makes a strong argument. Here, the three-legged stool of Acts 2 has given way to a four-legged variant. The miracle, the apostles' testimony, the prophecies, and the covenant with Abraham all combine to urge us toward belief in Jesus. We're here this morning to remember Him, and we should be. He is truly Lord and Christ.

However, even as our intellects can appreciate the power of the gospel, we must ask if our lives reveal that power. We reasonably acclaim Jesus as the King of kings. Do we treat Him like one? If not, we must answer the question of Luke 6, where He asks us, "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I tell you?" Let's consider our success in giving our lives over to the obedience of Christ as we partake of the Lord's Supper.

Peter and the Sanhedrin

However, as seems to happen a great deal to preachers in the book of Acts, Peter's sermon is interrupted in mid-preach, which leads to a confrontation between Peter and the Sanhedrin. This stems from two different **RESPONSES** to what Peter has to say. Luke explains in Acts 4:1-7. Let's start with the simple response first. We've already seen that Peter makes a strong argument, and the way that his audience reacts confirms this. Many of the people who hear him obey the gospel, and the size of the Jerusalem church increases from 3000 people to 5000 men.

However, not all the reactions are so favorable. Remember, this whole encounter is taking place on the temple grounds, in Solomon's portico. All the temple muckety-mucks have to do is look out the window, see the crowd, and mosey over to check it out. Once they get to Peter, though, they quickly decide that they don't like what they're hearing.

The text tells us that they have three main problems. First, Peter, a fisherman from Galilee, is teaching the people. The religious establishment doesn't like that because it's taking religious control out of their hands. Second, Peter is preaching Jesus. That's another no-no, because these same men have recently invested a lot of effort in killing Jesus. Third, Peter is proclaiming the resurrection from the dead. As Luke notes here, the chief priests were Sadducees, and one of the dominant features of Sadducee doctrine was that they denied the resurrection from the dead. That had been a hypothetical dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees for generations. However, if Jesus has raised from the dead, that moves the subject of resurrection generally from speculation to fact, and that was a huge threat.

There's an important lesson here for us today. 2000 years ago, the gospel was an assault on the status quo, and it made enemies of people who preferred the status quo. If we preach the same gospel today, we can expect it to have the same effect. People who want to change their lives will hear it gladly; people who want to stay where they are will be offended by it. We're not comfortable with that. We would rather try to finesse things so that we can win souls without getting pushback from anybody else. In reality, the only way we can avoid pushback is by avoiding the subject of Jesus entirely. Jesus made people mad, His apostles made people mad, and if we imitate them, we're going to make people mad too. The question that we must ask ourselves is if we love Jesus enough to offend others for His sake.

Peter and John's willingness to offend had some significant consequences for them. They are arrested, jailed overnight, and the next day, hauled before the entire Sanhedrin, the 70 most important men in the Jewish nation. In this intimidating setting, the chief priests demand an accounting from two Galilean fishermen. This is a lot of pressure piled on Peter and John. None of us like to have anything to do with the police. Several years ago, I let my license-plate sticker get out of date, and a cop saw me and pulled me over on one of the side streets near the church building. That's about as minor a legal difficulty as it is possible to get into, and yet, I was horribly embarrassed. I kept thinking, "I hope nobody from church sees me!" I can't even imagine being thrown into jail or dragged into court to explain my conduct. And yet, this shameful situation is precisely the one in which the two apostles find themselves. Are we as willing to suffer shame for the sake of the gospel as Peter and John? If not, we need to ask why not.

In this shameful situation, faced with an intimidating question, Peter makes one of the best **DEFENSES** we ever see in Scripture. We read it in Acts 4:8-12. Make no mistake about it, friends—this is a devastating counterattack. Rather than trying to back his way out of trouble, Peter hits back with everything he's got. First, he points out that he's in court in the first place because he healed a crippled man. The Sanhedrin ought to be praising him, not bringing him up on charges. Second, Peter says the unutterable. He attributes the miracle to Jesus and goes on to list a whole bunch of other attributes of Jesus that the Sanhedrin doesn't want to hear about. Jesus is the Christ, raised from the dead, the cornerstone, and the hope of salvation for everyone—all of which is proved by the miracle done in His name. Basically, the Sanhedrin stuck out a hand to torment Peter the little kitten, and they just drew back a bloody stump.

We have a lot to learn from Peter about the way we should make a defense. Whenever somebody gets upset at our teaching the Scripture, we have a tendency to crawfish and hesitate and back off our point. We don't want to make anybody mad or hurt anybody's feelings. Now, we have to be careful in how we present God's word, but if people get mad at the message itself, that isn't our problem. We're not here to make friends. We're here to make disciples. If we're teaching the truth, and we get pushback on it, we need to own that truth. That's what first-century Christians did.

This unexpected trip through the wood-chipper **DUMBFOUNDS THE SANHEDRIN**. Luke presents their reaction in Luke 4:13-18. They were hoping to bluster their way through this confrontation with Peter and John, because they were educated and sophisticated and the apostles weren't, but Peter has just clobbered them. The Sanhedrin hangs

out at the temple all the time. They recognized the formerly lame man just as well as everybody else did. They could tell he was healed, and as long as that piece of evidence was standing up in front of everybody, there was not a single argument that the enemies of the gospel could make. They were beaten, and they knew it. The best play that they could make from such a weak hand was to rely on more bluster and demand that Peter and John stay silent.

There are two applications for us here. First of all, if we are bold enough to take a forthright stand for the truth, opposition will often crumble. On the other hand, once we start to wiggle around and back down, that's when the people who oppose us will start scenting blood and press the attack. Whether the issue is anything from salvation to homosexuality, we need to know what the Bible says and we need to proclaim it without apology.

Second, the devastating logical impact of the healing of the lame man highlights the weakness of the claims of so-called miracle-workers today. The Sadducees knew that if they tried to deny the miracle, they would look like fools. That's why Peter acted so openly in the first place. Today, by contrast, there is no solid evidence that any faith healer for the past hundred years has performed a single genuine miracle. Until they give us reason to believe, we shouldn't.

Finally, we see **THE APOSTLES' ANSWER** to the Sanhedrin's latest bluster in Acts 4:19-22. The council has tried to put a gag order on Peter and John, but the apostles reply about as defiantly as they possibly can. Sarcastically, they ask whether they should obey the Sanhedrin or obey God. I'm sure that at this point the chief priests would love a reason to squash these annoying Galileans, but they know that if they punish the two miracle-workers, the people will turn on them. With egg all over their faces, the Jewish leaders release Peter and John to continue preaching.

This is what made the gospel so dangerous in the first century. The only thing that the enemies of Christ could do to shut Christians up was to kill them. There was no amount of intimidation that they could apply to keep Peter from preaching. How do we measure up to that standard? Are we fearless in expressing our convictions, or do we allow the mere possibility of social awkwardness to pressure us into silence? How important is it to us to follow Jesus?