

## *Miracle at the Gate • Acts 3:1-26*

Passover was only days away and by the tens of thousands they had come from all around Israel and far away to visit Jerusalem. There was already excitement in the air. But then a small column of people from Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem, marched through the city's eastern gate and crowded the streets of the capital. Shouts of excitement filled the air as they celebrated Jesus from Nazareth. They talked about his teaching and repeated the story of his miracles, especially about him raising the dead Lazarus back to life over in Bethany. Some said he was the Messiah. Others wanted to crown him king. It was a combination of political rally and religious revival. They tore off their coats and threw down a carpet of palms to cover the road for their new-found royalty. It was a Sunday to remember.

But crowds can be fickle. Political and religious loyalties quickly switch. By Friday of that same week it was a very different shout coming from the crowd around Jesus. Now they wanted him crucified. It was a strange demand, although those captured by political frenzy do some very strange things. When offered a choice between a guilty terrorist named Barabbas and an innocent preacher named Jesus they chose to set the guilty free and execute the innocent.

Fast forward almost two months. There's a new buzz in Jerusalem, but it is still about Jesus of Nazareth. The buzz about Jesus is that he had come back from crucifixion and burial as a live man and then disappeared to heaven taking his body with him. His once cowering followers had gained new courage and confidence and had picked up where their leader left off.

Two of them, Peter and John, were headed to the 3 p.m. prayer time at the temple. There was nothing unusual about that. After each of the three daily sacrifices there were always prayer meetings and religious people came like baseball fans to the home opener.

The temple was truly a wonder of the ancient world. It had taken two generations to build and cost a king's fortune, funded by the now deceased King Herod. With its high ground on Mount Zion, bright white marble, silver and gold it was a costly and dominant structure.

There were porticoes around the outside of the temple—actually a walkway named after an earlier king of Israel—called Solomon's Colonnade. It was a popular place for people to meet. Because it was on the outer perimeter of the temple Solomon's Colonnade was open to Gentiles as well as Jews. Jesus often went there, usually to teach but sometimes to chase away the merchants who multiplied until they crowded out the worshippers. The colonnade was loud and busy with conversations, teaching, animals, people praying and debating . . . and begging.

The temple was the logical place to go if you were a beggar because religious people from all over the world converged there. All good people of every religion are supposed to give to the poor and Jews were especially encouraged to give alms to those who begged.

*Salvation doesn't start when we die; it begins the day we change our minds and follow Jesus.*

Maybe you've been in a third world country, as I have, where you are thronged by beggars with their hands out asking for money. Frankly, it's hard to know who to help. There is a sense that if you put money into the hand of one you

will be trampled by all the rest. Yet, how can anyone be so hard-hearted as not to help the poorest of the poor?

That day there was a 40-something man in the sea of beggars who was born a paraplegic. He was something of a senior citizen by first century demographics. Never having walked a step in his life he not only needed to beg but needed to be carried to his place for begging. Getting a good spot was

important because he couldn't move with the crowd. Years of experience taught him that a space by the Beautiful Gate was as lucrative as any. And, it truly was a beautiful gate with its 75 foot high arch and wooden doors covered with expensive Corinthian brass.

It's hard to say what it was about him that attracted the attention of Peter and John. So many other beggars were there as well. Maybe it was the way he spotted them, shouting out at just the right moment in exactly the best tone of voice to get their attention. He asked for money. He knew it was a game of percentages. Probably only one or two percent of all the people who went by would give him a shekel as alms. If he shouted to a hundred people many he would get two shekels; if he shouted to a thousand people maybe he'd be able to get twenty shekels. He was a veteran shekel raiser.

Peter stopped and stared down at him. The man didn't usually have people make eye contact with him; after all, he couldn't linger long on any one passerby if he was going to target a thousand a day. Besides, most rich people don't like much eye contact with the poor and disabled. He knew he was expected to look down in humility, not up in confidence. But Peter said, "*Look at us!*" and probably pointed to his eyes trying to grab the man's attention. Beggars try to do what donors ask so he fixed his attention on Peter and John hoping to cash in with a bigger than usual contribution.

Peter held out empty hands and made a non-cash offer: "*Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.*" Peter wasn't joking. He really didn't have any cash because he belonged to a group that recently pooled all their money. He also wasn't joking about this man who had never walked in his life being offered a miracle.

So much happened in the next few seconds! The unnamed man must have been caught totally by surprise. He must have been disappointed that he wasn't going to get what he wanted and flabbergasted by the proposed miracle. It was more than he could have dreamed and an answer to a prayer he had given up praying decades earlier.

Before he had a chance to question what was being offered, before he had a chance to complain

that he wasn't going to get money or yelp with joy or laugh out loud, Peter grabbed him by the hand and pulled him up. Peter really cared for this beggar. Peter really believed a miracle was happening.

There was a lot of faith flowing in every direction. The beggar never asked for a miracle but when he heard the offer, when he saw the faith of his benefactors, when he heard the name of Jesus of Nazareth suddenly faith came into him and he believed in what just a moment before he had been unable to believe.

For the first time in his life of more than four decades the poor man stood at eye-to-eye level with other men. Feet that never felt full weight were firm on the ground. Ankles that never balanced a body became strong. With a helping hand from Peter he took his first steps. Without training or therapy he walked. Then he ran and jumped and shouted praises to God.

Isn't it interesting that we who have walked since our first year of life often never think about praising God for the steps we take? We might jump for joy when our team scores but who would think to jump for Jesus just because we can jump? But he did. He praised God with shouts because the totally unexpected had happened to him.

Running, walking, jumping and shouting the once disabled man drew attention and drew a crowd. Those who heard and saw him recognized him immediately and were totally amazed that the man who once sat and begged at the Beautiful Gate was now transformed.

He suddenly stopped jumping and grabbed onto Peter and John and wouldn't let go. The historian Luke uses the terminology of a police officer making an arrest in describing the way he held on to the two men. Even those just showing up had no doubt that a miracle had happened and that Peter and John looked like the miracle workers.

Peter heard what the growing crowd was saying and knew what they were thinking—that he and John had some magical power to perform miracles—so he said, "*Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?*"

They hadn't done this. God did it—the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. It wasn't about them; it was about Jesus. This was all about Jesus.

Now that Peter had everyone's attention he felt a sermon coming on. It was a good news sermon that started with the bad news of what those in the crowd had done. He said:

*“You handed him (Jesus) over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and ask that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life. . . .”*

Peter reminded them that the people who hailed Jesus on Palm Sunday were the people who condemned him the following Friday. They helped kill the Holy and Righteous One from God! Even after the Pilate had declared Jesus innocent they still demanded his execution.

Perhaps remembering his own triple denial of Jesus that same week Peter cut them some slack: *“Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders.”* It's true, they didn't fully realize what they were doing to Jesus. But just because they were ignorant in what they did does not make them less guilty.

In our country we have a legal principle that says “ignorance of the law is no excuse.” Last fall I was driving north of Bemidji in what I was sure was a 65 mph speed limit zone. The Minnesota state trooper insisted that it was 55 mph. The \$135 fine was bad enough but I had to sign a statement on the back of the ticket admitting that I was guilty. I wanted to add a little note that said, “I really did think it was 65 mph.” Ignorant, but still guilty!

Peter told the crowd to repent and turn to God. They were just like us—guilty. They needed to admit their guilt—sign on the back of the ticket—and turn to God.

Peter then switched from their bad news to God's news. The God news was and is all about Jesus. It's not most about Jews, not about sinners, not about repentance and not about salvation. It's all about Jesus. Without Jesus it's nothing but bad news.

Do you remember the words Peter spoke to the disabled man? He told him, *“In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”* For us a name is important, but it was far more important for them. They meant more by “name” than we usually mean. “Name” referred to everything about the person—reputation, family history, character, power and authority. Name was everything.

Sometimes we may ask if we can use a person's name when making a call or applying for a job. If I use your name then I'm gaining access on the basis of who you are, not on the basis of who I am. Your name means more and carries more weight than my name. If I call and say, “This is Leith Anderson,” the person on the other end might hang up; but, if I say you told me to call, I'll probably get in.

The name of Jesus is what the God news is all about. Throughout Peter's sermon there's a whole list of what this name means. Jesus is the *“Holy and Righteous One”* in verse 14. He is the *“author of life”* in verse 15. Jesus is the One who suffered on the cross, verse 18. This name of Jesus is about the One who was raised from the dead in verse 15. Jesus is the One who is in heaven and promises to return in verse 21. Jesus is the person who was predicted by Moses in verses 22-23. Jesus is the

One who was prophesied by every prophet from Samuel right on through the Old Testament, verse 24. He is the one who was promised to Abraham in verse 25.

***God specifically blesses all who repent of sin and turn to Jesus.***

The God news is that it's all about Jesus. The Old Testament is about Jesus. The New Testament is about Jesus. The gospel is about Jesus. Healing is about Jesus. Salvation is about Jesus. Heaven is about Jesus. Our eternal destiny is about Jesus. Everything is about Jesus.

This God news is good news! For those listening to Peter that day along Solomon's Colonnade at the Jerusalem temple it meant that the bad news of their guilt could be changed to the good news of salvation through Jesus. Acts 3:19 quotes Peter saying, *“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your*

*sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.”*

Repentance is changing one’s mind. Peter was inviting them to see Jesus differently. Not as someone to be hated and crucified but as someone to be loved and honored. If they would see Jesus’ crucifixion in a new way they would be given salvation from God. The new way was to see that Jesus died for their sins and rose from the dead to give eternal life and then to commit to follow him as their leader.

Let’s talk about “salvation” for just a minute. To be saved from anything assumes escape from something really bad (like drowning, a fire or getting fired). That’s true for getting saved by Jesus, too. We escape the consequences of our sins, including eternal death. And we avoid missing out on heaven.

But, there’s more, more for right now, not for later. When Jesus saves someone it is from leading a lousy life right now. Salvation doesn’t start when we die; it begins the day we change our minds and follow Jesus. Look again at what Peter says in Acts 3:19: *“Repent then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.”*

If you’re an Internet user you know that you can leave a website on your screen until it gets old and out-of-date (full of yesterday’s news). At the top of your screen there is a “Refresh” button. Click it and it’s the same website only fresh, new and up-to-date. That is what happens when we commit our lives to Jesus. We are still us but we are refreshed by God.

There’s more at the end of Peter’s sermon in Acts 3:26 where he says, *“When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.”* God specifically blesses all who repent of sin and turn to Jesus.

But listen carefully to a really big “IF.” If Christians just died and stayed dead without going to heaven forever it would still be totally good news to follow Jesus in this life. We would get God’s refreshing and blessing in our lives right now—in our relationships; school; marriage; parents; family; money; health; God; happiness; everything. But the really good news is that when we turn away from our sin and follow Jesus as Savior and Leader we get refreshing and blessing and heaven, too.

Put yourself in this true story. Today be a beggar. Ask God for money or whatever it is you want. But, listen up and hear that the answer to whatever you ask starts with Jesus. It’s all about Jesus.

Like Peter with the man by the Beautiful Gate, let me offer you a hand. My hand of help is in the form of a prayer. Right here, right now, pray: “Jesus, here is what I want . . . but I know that you are what I need. I repent of whatever I’ve done wrong. I believe in you. Refresh me. Bless me now and save me forever. I commit to follow you always. In Jesus’ name, amen”

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