

The Covenant Context of the Gospel

By Phillip G. Kayser · Acts 3:1-10 · 2005-9-4

As you all know, the nation has been riveted by the footage coming out of New Orleans. The natural disaster itself was bad enough, but seeing arsonists setting fire to buildings and snipers shooting people has added insult to injury. I'm always fascinated to see the responses of people in the midst of such situations. Some people respond like the priests later on in this account and earlier like the beggar. One man and his son had been rescued in a boat, and was saying how he thanked God for His mercy. The rescuers asked him if he thanked God or the people who came along. He said, "I thank God. I thank God for sending you and I thank you for responding." But others were treating the state as God and were cursing their god for letting them down. One man said, "We have put all of our hope and trust in the Government to save us and they have let us down." And it is precisely in times when our false gods let us down that it is so crucial for Christians to point to the true God who controls storms like this, but ministers through people, and guarantees that both the goodness and severity of God work his purposes and are often designed to lead to salvation.

In these first few chapters of Acts we see the apostles imitating the Lord Jesus Christ in ministering to the whole man, and not just to their spirit. If you look at the Gospels you will find that Jesus didn't just teach. He also cast out demons, healed the sick, fed people, clothed the demoniac and provided a practical context in which the Gospel made sense. This is one of the reasons why I am so thankful that our denomination has a disaster relief team ready at a moment's notice to go in to disaster areas and provide relief. We have three churches in New Orleans area that had to be evacuated. And they need your continued prayers as some of the church members have not yet been found. Scott can tell you of other churches and of his own relatives who have suffered from this disaster. And both James and 1 John tell us that there is something wrong about our Christianity if we see brothers in need and shut up our hearts of compassion towards them. Teaching is good. Prayer is good. Saying, "Be warmed and be filled" is good, so long as it is also accompanied with action. And if there are some of you who desire to contribute to our denomination's disaster relief fund, make out your checks to MNA and memo it the Hurricane Katrina fund. I think MNA's approach to disaster relief is among the best in North American Christian disaster relief efforts. They have thought through relief in Biblical ways.

Today's passage is not about a huge disaster like that in New Orleans. But if you put yourself into the shoes of this man, his parents, his other relatives and friends, you might see parallels to both the reactions of people and the purposes of God. We also see the balance needed between having a passion for teaching and having good works to accompany it. Or as Titus 2 says, adorning or beautifying that teaching with our lifestyle of grace. That is the covenant context of the Gospel. Let's start at verse 1. Acts 3:1.

"Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour." The ninth hour (according to Jewish reckoning) was three o'clock in the afternoon, which was also the time of the evening sacrifice. Some have thought that this involved the apostles in sacrificing animals for their sins. I don't think so. The fact that they brought no money with

them to buy sacrifices shows that this was not really their purpose. Notice in verse 6 he says, "Silver and gold I do not have." He didn't bring any money with him. Calvin points out that once Christ, the final sacrifice had been slain, it would have been inappropriate to continue to sacrifice animals. That would imply that they were still looking forward to the Messiah, which the sacrifices all pointed to. So why *did* they go to the temple? There are three reasons why they went to the temple, and none of them had anything to do with making sacrifices. The main reason why the apostles went to the temple was to evangelize through preaching. In verse 12 he begins to preach. In chapter 4:17-18 the apostles insist that they had to preach and teach in the temple to be faithful to Christ. Look at God's message through the angel in 5:20. "Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life." It was a God-given purpose. 5:21 says, "And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and and taught..." You find the same thing later in verse 25. "So one came and told them, saying, 'Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!'" And what better time to go to the temple to evangelize than before and after the prayer meeting which attracted multiplied thousands. There was no compromise here on the part of the apostles. They were showing strategy in their outreach. They were seeking to be effective. And we need to think through effective strategies as well. Peter could have gone to the temple any time, but he went to evangelize when the crowds were present.

Verse 2. "And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried..." Here was a tragedy that had no doubt consumed the lives of many in his family. It mentions that he was lame from birth to show that this really was an amazing miracle. He had never known how to walk, so the miracle included not only the healing the unlearned ability to walk. And the word for "man" (ἀνὴρ) means a grown man. If you look at chapter 4:22, it says, "For the man was over forty years old on whom the miracle of healing had been performed." This was a tragedy that looked like it would never go away. We don't always understand why God allows personal tragedies like Brian to go on and on without relief. Or why a person could be born blind. We don't always understand why God allows tragedies like those in New Orleans. That affects not just the grossly unmoral unbelievers but it affects godly Christians as well. But we know that God has a purpose. And in this case, his very need became a vehicle for bringing great glory to God – greater, than if he had had a normal life for forty years. The very fact that God has a good and perfect purpose can give us encouragement in the midst of the things that we suffer.

The next part of the verse shows the Biblical balance between helping those in tragic circumstances and helping *them* to have some responsibility, and perhaps in some circumstances *forcing* them to have some responsibility and thus maintaining some dignity in their situation. "And a certain man, lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful to ask for alms from those who entered the temple." Money is often needed to minister to tragedies. But there are three things to notice about this passage that help inform us about our use of money. The apostles did not give money to *every* beggar that asked for money. We know this from verse 6 where Peter says, "Silver and gold I do not have." We know from chapter 2 that he had money in the church coffers – money which he could have easily have brought with him, especially since it was designated as charity. And we know from later chapters that there continued to be beggars at the temple. In fact, many beggars. Simple logic deduces that Peter did not feel compelled to give money to every beggar that came along, even if they were needy. He didn't even feel compelled to bring money with him just in case, when he walked past the groups of beggars

outside and into the temple. Growing up in Ethiopia you gave money to some, but couldn't possibly give to all. That was even true in China. If you gave something to one beggar you would find 20 more flocking around you in the next 15 seconds. They were everywhere.

The second thing to notice is that this man has been laid daily at the temple for umpteen years, yet Jesus did not heal him. Remember, Jesus has only been gone for a few days at this point. He ascended on the fortieth day, Pentecost starts on the 50th day and it appears that this is shortly thereafter. So Christ had to have known that this beggar was there on the times that he went into the temple. Matthew 21:14 says of Jesus, "Then *the* blind and *the* lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them." Why did He not heal this man? Well, I think that we can at *least* say that it is because it was not God's timing. God wanted this man to be healed by the apostles for the spread of the Gospel later. We may be discouraged at praying for healing in Brian's life or for other people. And we pray and pray and God does nothing. That does not mean that God does not love us, just as the fact that Jesus did not heal this man is no indication that God did not love Him. God had a far more glorious purpose for this man by making him wait.

The third thing to notice is that this man was not a believer. Those who were inside the church were provided for. And we looked at nine principles last week that showed that they were provided for in a Biblical free-market way rather than a socialistic way.

But even among Jews who were not yet Christians, there was a Biblical consensus as to how charity should work. And this verse shows that consensus on Biblical law. This verse indicates that there was family help. He was carried daily to this spot. There was some help from other people in the giving of alms. But people weren't going to come to this man's house to help him out. The Bible would require him to have some initiative. Likewise, the family is the first line of defense, not the government, and so the relatives no doubt helped him by bringing him back and forth from home. But the lame man was responsible for an 8-5 job too. So it says, "was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered the temple." He couldn't walk, but he could use his voice to raise finances. Those who had the ability to glean, were required to glean in the fields – and gleaning was hard, back-breaking work. Able-bodied beggars would not be given handouts. You didn't see people standing at the temple with a sign that said, "Anything will help." They wouldn't have gotten any money. It was those who could not glean, could not hire themselves out and could not sell themselves as indentured servants who begged – people like the blind, paralytics and the lame. Those who could not glean were still required to help the relatives who did glean. And those who couldn't even do that, were immediately taught to take their own responsibility as soon as they were healed. The paralytic in the Gospels was immediately told to pick up his bed and carry it. He couldn't expect the people who had just carried him in on his bed to carry it for him like they had been doing for years. Now it was his turn to carry the bed. The point is that *to the degree that a person has ability*, he must be given responsibility. The principle, "If a man work not, neither let him eat" does not apply to an infant, because an infant does not have the ability. But it would apply to a lazy four year old. Bad habits are learned young. "Until you get your job done, you have no supper" is a perfectly Biblical injunction for a child. What about for a paralytic? Well, Scripture would indicate that even a paralytic must be given some area of ministry or he will lose his sense of self-respect. One of the ministries that we may start in the near future is a nursing home ministry that gets people in nursing homes excited about sharing

in ministry through their prayers so that they don't feel like they are worthless. There is no reason they cannot be made to feel a significant part of the outside world, even though they are lying on their beds. Throughout the book of Acts you see the apostles seeking to help people help themselves rather than doing the work for them. This was even true of the paralytic in Acts 9. There was a man who was totally paralyzed and bed-ridden for eight years. It records, "And Peter said to him, 'Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise, and make your bed.'" Others had made that bed for him for years, and Peter was in effect making a statement now that this had to change. In contrast, much government welfare takes away initiative and encourages irresponsibility.

Verse 3 goes on to say, "who, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked for alms." What an amazing contrast. He is a Jew, but he feels left out. He is on the outside of the temple looking in. And even though the gate and everything about the temple was beautiful, it was a dead religion that had done nothing for him spiritually or physically. Israel had an outward form, but lacked the inward power that this remnant of Christians Jews had received. It was not until Jesus laid hold of this beggar that this man went into the temple.

Verse 4: "And fixing his eyes on him, with John, Peter said, 'Look at us.'" One side note that I probably should have commented on earlier is that Pentecost brought Peter and John together in ministry. Commentators point out that John and James are paired together as being alike and having a natural affinity. And Peter and Andrew. But John and Peter got on each other's nerves. If you read the biography's of the two men, they stand in remarkable contrast – Peter being outgoing, John reserved; Peter impulsive and John deliberative (thinking years ahead); Peter wanting instant action, and John analyzing. But in the Spirit these two were teamed up as two sides of an equation that needed each other. They are a great example of body life. And though Peter talked here, they were together.

But why did they fix their eyes on the beggar and say, "Look on us"? I believe it was in part to personalize the situation. When you are subdued to the grinding poverty of a beggar who is just living from hand to mouth, everything tends to be depersonalized, and the sea of people who come before you are just a potential handout. For that matter, when you run across thousands of beggars like I did in China, you tend let your eyes glaze over and skip past them. Actually, because we were foreigners, I had to frequently move quickly with a sideways dart to avoid being grabbed by beggars. But in the sea of people at a feast like Pentecost, you don't tend to see individuals. You see crowds. And Peter and John want to avoid that. They fix their eyes on this beggar to let him know that they are interested in *him*, not just alleviating their own conscience. And they want him to look at them, because they don't want to be lost in the sea of humanity either. They want him to pay attention to them as they proceed to give Christ the glory.

Verse 5. "So he gave them his attention, expecting to receive something from them." How his hopes must have been dashed when Peter said, "Silver and gold I do not have..." He had heard that a million times. So why were these people asking him to pay attention? But before the beggar can think too much, Peter hastened to add, "but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." There are three things that I want you to notice. First, this corrects a popular idea in the faith healing movement that if you aren't healed, it is because you lack faith. But notice that this man had zero faith. He was clueless as to what the apostles were planning to do. God healed through the faith of the apostles, but not through this

man's faith. He didn't ask for healing or even realize that there would be a healing. On the other hand, I have seen some make this a paradigm and go to an opposite extreme. In Acts 14:9 you have a correction of the other extreme that says that all that is needed is the *apostle's* faith. There it says, "observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, "Stand up straight on your feet!" And he leaped and walked." We can't pigeon hole God's sovereign acts of healing into a neat little formula that if this is followed healing will automatically result. It does seem that faith is usually present, which makes sense since God gives both the faith and the miracle. But lest we think those two paradigms are the only options, Scripture gives examples of miracles that had no faith at all. And as one example, 2 Kings 13:21 says, "So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of *raiders*; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let down and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet." There wasn't any faith involved in that miracle. And I mention this to caution the dogmatism that you see on both sides when it comes to miracles. God is sovereign, and He can do a miracle any way that He pleases.

The second thing to notice is that Peter takes this man's attention off of himself and puts it upon Jesus. "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." He doesn't want this man thinking that Peter is the source of power. Peter was merely a vehicle through whom Christ grace could work. And it is so important that we divert attention to the Lord when we minister to people. What did Jesus say in Matthew 5:16? He said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify" [you? No. and glorify"] "your Father in heaven." Now He is not denying that they are our good works or that people will recognize that they are our good works. But Jesus wants us to make it clear that we are doing what we are doing because of God's grace, God motivation; God's love shed abroad in our hearts.

The third thing to notice is that Peter once again uses the title of despicement: "Jesus Christ of Nazareth." He is the Christ, which is the Greek term for Messiah, but He came from Nazareth. Remember that he did that in chapter 2 as well. As I mentioned before, even righteous Nathaniel, whom Christ explicitly said had no exaggeration or deceit in his mouth, asked the question, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth." It was a title of being low, low, low. When others called Jesus the Nazarene, and when the Talmud to this day calls Him the Nazarene, they don't do it to honor Him. That is a put down. But what an encouragement this could have been to the beggar. He was being healed by a Person who identified with his shame and his despicement. You see, the beggar probably had not only financial and physical needs. He had emotional needs as well that God had sovereignly placed there to make him ready for the Gospel. And Peter ministered to those emotional needs in two ways: First, by using the title "Jesus of Nazareth," and secondly, by touching him. Verse 7 says, "And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up..." You just didn't touch beggars in those days. Actually, that is true today as well in virtually every country where you have beggars. They were unwashed and unclean. They've got lice, and they stink. They had no place to bathe. I kind of hated being grabbed on the arm by beggars in China, so I got good at side-stepping them. But I'm sure that I didn't make them feel too good. But they were just a little bit too aggressive for my liking. But Peter not only touches one, but lifts him to his feet. Which means what? He's pulling the beggar towards him. What a wonderful symbolic gesture of fellowship! And what a ministry to his emotional needs!

Now let's think about this whole issue of felt needs and how they can prepare people for the Gospel. *You can't shove religion down people's throats.* Or to use another metaphor: you shouldn't be picking green fruit. Instead, we should be trying to discern the multitude of ways that God prepares people to be *ready* for the Gospel. *He's plowing the soil.* He's making the soil ready for the planting of seed. And we need to be discerning of where it is that God has been plowing. Some people are prepared to submit their lives to the Lord through financial disaster. Others through their families falling apart. Others through divorce or death. In Ethiopia more people came to Christ through funerals than just about any other medium. And often, the disasters that they faced were God's attempts to destroy the idols that these people are trusting in. It took many years of pain before some of my friends finally came to their senses, like the Prodigal Son. And they finally realized that God wasn't being mean in making them miserable. God was preparing them by destroying idols. For others, it was rather quick. There was a person my parents knew up in British Columbia who kept praying that God would protect her wayward, backslidden son. She was so anxious that this or that would happen to him. "Please Lord, Protect my son from danger. Protect him from drugs. Please protect him from financial problems." And the pastor finally pulled her aside and said, "Look. Your prayers show that all you are interested in is your sons physical safety and not his spiritual safety. Think about eternity. Think about what your son really needs. It would be far better for your son if he were not protected by God if that would mean his salvation and growth in Christ. I want you to start praying that God would be hard on your son and do anything that it takes to bring him back to Himself." So she agreed. She started praying tht God would do anything it took to bring her son to his senses. Almost immediately her son got into a logging accident and became a paraplegic. And you know what? That son learned quickly. He told his mother that he was so thankful for the accident and for his paralysis. He said, "Without it I might be dead outside of Christ." And I would encourage you to pray the same way for your loved ones. What is life compared to eternity? Stop hindering God's work by praying against His will. ¹ Thesalonians 4:3 says, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification": Do you want to know what we elders are praying for some of you? That God would not prosper you financially, or in health until you come to your senses and desire holiness more than comfort; until you desire God more than your idols. It would be so much better if you were lame physically for the rest of your life than to be lame spiritually. Now God may cure both, but he is definitely more interested in your spiritual health than in your physical comfort. In fact, as I have mentioned, the physical discomforts are frequently God plowing up your field to make you ready for the planting of seed. Don't resist it. Welcome such plowing that you may be whole.

But Peter, led by the Holy Spirit, knew that it was this man's time to be healed both physically and spiritually, and verse 7 says, "And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength." When we deal with sickness, it is important that we not only submit to God's timing, but that we identify with the suffering of people, that we seek to lift them out of that suffering if we are able, and that we trust that God is sufficient for any problem that we face. Does God continue to miraculously heal? Absolutely yes. I have seen many miraculous healings. In the OPC church we went to in California, I watched a man who had terminal cancer, on whom chemo therapy had failed, who was waiting to die, be healed with the prayers of the elders, and to minister for years without any relapse. I saw the same thing happen at the PCA church I attended up in Canada. I have seen many other examples. But let me caution you to realize that even though healing is in the atonement, just as the rejuvenation of the universe is in the atonement, that any healing we receive now is only

a tiny foretaste and downpayment of the time of all healing: the resurrection. We can't demand healing. It is a mercy when it is given now. Romans 8:22-23 says,

For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

He doesn't deny that our bodies have been included in the atonement, but Paul says that redemption will be applied most fully in the resurrection. That helps us to keep in balance that we can rejoice whenever God brings a miraculous healing, but at the same time remember that God has not failed should Brian not be healed now. He will eventually be healed by the very blood that sealed His redemption.

Look at how immediately this man was able to walk and leap. He didn't have to learn how to crawl and then walk as a baby does. It was instantaneous. Verse 8. "So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them – walking, leaping, and praising God." Christ healed a man in John 5 and warned Him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." That man did not have a heart changed by grace, and the first thing he did was to turn Jesus into the authorities. Perhaps he hoped to gain favor with them. We aren't told why. But here is a man whose heart was changed just as His body was changed. And the immediate impulse of His heart was to praise God and to follow Peter and John and to fellowship with other believers. Notice too that he doesn't praise Peter. He praises God. Don't be upset when you minister to people God's grace and people forget all about you because they are so wrapped up in God. You should glory in that. What an awesome thing that is. One of John's disciples was upset because everyone was following after Jesus rather than following after John. And John said:

He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.

May we have the humility to be able to say the same. Our heart's desire should be that all praise and glory and honor go to Jesus. Don't get bent out of shape when they forget to thank you for the awesome service you have made as a wife, a mother, a father. Enjoy the fact that you are laying up treasures in heaven.

And that is exactly what happens in verse 9. "And all the people saw him walking and praising God." Just as a side note, even though it may have been easier to praise God after a healing like this, notice that this former beggar was rejoicing in simple things like being able to walk and jump and run. God's preparatory work had made him thankful for such simple things that we take for granted. But we ought not to take for granted that we can walk and jump. We ought to daily praise God for such simple things as well. Our tendency is to feel bad because we don't have this, that or the other thing. It is a lack of contentment. There was a missionary lady (I think it was Amy Carmichael, but I'm not sure) who said she was grumbling to God that her shoes were old and she didn't have money for new ones. She was feeling sorry for herself until she noticed a person who had no feet on which to put shoes, and it instantly sent her into repentance and praise to God for her feet and for her old shoes. Don't allow yourself to be forgetful of the blessings you do possess.

Verse 10 says, "Then they knew that it was he who sat begging alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him." They knew him before the transformation and they knew him after it. No doubt the miracle was the thing that most attracted their amazement. But they could not help but see that a man who had previously been outside the temple was now inside engaging in prayer, praise and fellowship with the believers. His mind, his will and his emotions had all been touched. His very face and eyes no doubt spoke of an amazing change. This is what the world should continue to see: When the blessings of salvation come to a person's life, they won't see perfection, but they should see change; they should see transformation; they should see a man or a woman or a child who day by day is impacted by the cross of Christ. They should see a person who is filled with joy. They should see a man who no longer has interest in his old way of life. What a ridiculous thing it would be for this beggar to say, "Thanks for the healing Peter. Now I need to get back to my spot before another beggar edges in on my territory. I can't waste time. I need to get back to my job of begging." To even think such a thing would be worthy of a rebuke. Yet that is exactly the way many so-called Christians act. They say they are saved, but their whole life seems to show an ignorance of the Gospel and how it works out day by day. They show little interest in prayer, praise, worship, fellowship and the teaching of the apostles and the other disciples of grace that Jerry Bridges talks about. Instead, they find their solace and encouragement from other things. And those other things are idols that God is in the business of destroying. So they go on in the misery of God's preparatory work of plowing rather than enjoying the harvest that comes from planting. They are sitting in their beggar's spot and doing what they are most comfortable with or at least are most used to doing. For such a beggar to witness to other spiritual beggars of the wonder of the Gospel would not be very convincing. It was the covenant context of the Gospel's transformation in this beggar's life that made his testimony have power and credibility. This is what Titus 2:10 says when it tells servants that they need to be the best in their jobs that they can be, so that "they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things." Now hear me: their good works was not the Gospel. That is the mistake that liberals have made in the Social Gospel. They think that doing good things is the Gospel. No. That is a denial of the Gospel. Peter is going to go on to preach about the Gospel, but Peter in his own life and in this beggar's life show all kinds of things that Titus says adorn or beautify the Gospel by making the Gospel look credible. This is why the same chapter in Titus says that women who fail to live by the power of the Gospel every day, and instead reject the hard work of being homemakers, discreet, chaste, lovers of their husbands, obedient to their husbands, etc are said in verse 5 to be blaspheming the Word of God. Why? Because they have taken the easy way out rather than living by the Gospel. Their testimony won't be credible. Because the Gospel that they preach is not transforming *them*. Paul says the same thing to the men who were living like the world rather than manifesting to the world a transformed life. Those men were failing to adorn the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We will be seeing in the book of Acts that the whole Christian life becomes a covenant context in which the Gospel shines brightly because the Apostles don't see the Gospel as something that is restricted to conversion. We are saved by grace alone, but that grace continues its powerful work of transformation if we are truly saved. I recommend that you read Jerry Bridges, *Disciples of Grace*. It was the Gospel that moved the apostles to touch a beggar and to heal him. It was the Gospel that moved them to other mercy ministries in this book.

Does your life show forth the covenant context of the Gospel? Does it show that the Gospel makes a difference, or do you handle conflicts the way the world does? Do you handle your sins

with the cross of Christ or by sweeping it under the carpet? You have been raised from the ashheap to sit with the princes of the land. You have been raised to the heavenlies where you are seated with Jesus on His throne. You have no right to act like beggars any longer. It is the context of a transformed church and an involved church where the Gospel shines the most brilliantly. And, in line with the story of this healing, it is in mercy ministries where the Gospel shines so amazingly. James 1:27 says, "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." If we don't live by the Gospel, we can't credibly preach it. May our church be more and more effective in not only preaching the Gospel (as the next verses do), but also living out the covenant context of the Gospel as verses 1-10 do so well. Amen.