

Belonging Together

Series on the book of Acts

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Bible Text: Acts 3:1-10

Preached on: Sunday, July 31, 2011

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Do turn in your Bibles or in the order of service to the reading we have from Acts 3. One of the things we're discovering on these Sunday evenings as we look at the book of Acts is the record, of course, of the beginning of Christianity as we know it. It is a remarkable thing, isn't it, that such a movement which has dominated the world in many ways for the last 2,000 years should begin in an inauspicious way as the religion of Christ has begun. Luke in his twofold account ends his first account with the record of the death of Jesus, the execution of Jesus; the humiliation of Jesus. And there is no avoiding the fact that as far as Judaism is concerned, the end of Jesus of Nazareth is the end of his qualifications to be the very Messiah that they were promised. And yet, yet this is the assertion of Luke and the other New Testament writers that, in fact, that is precisely what he is. The day of Pentecost and the sermon that Peter preached that day explaining the events of that momentous day, made that very clear. Beginning with an account from the book of Joel, he ends with this great statement from Joel, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." Then in a fast-paced, hard-hitting argument addressed to the men of Israel, he points out that it is this Jesus of Nazareth attested by God by mighty, mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him, it is through this Jesus of Nazareth that this very promise of God's movement in the last days has come true. And he comes to his high point in that sermon by clarifying who this Lord on whom we must call for salvation is, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him, this Jesus of Nazareth, him, both Lord and Christ. This Jesus whom you crucified."

It was an assertion of the reality both of Christ's resurrection and the primacy of Christ, the Messiah, in the place of the hearts of these Jews, therefore it is not surprising that it is in the heart of Judaism that we find Christianity taking root. We saw that at the end of chapter 2 when they are meeting together and they are devoting themselves to a number of practices: they devote themselves to prayer and to the apostles' teaching. There are wonders and signs being accomplished by the apostles daily. They are worshipping where? They are worshipping in the temple. They are going back to the very heart of Judaism. There are daily additions as people are being saved. And that is, if you like, the template for what is going to unfold in the rest of the book of Acts.

So we come to chapter 3 and we find many of those things, those subjects that were raised at the end of chapter 1 now illustrated in this very visual way in this great miracle that is performed by the early church. Here we see and I'll explore this in a moment, but here we see the disciples together. They're together. That was a big word. We noticed and we spent some time looking at the implications of the apostolic togetherness and we'll see that again here. They were together. There were signs and wonders being done by the apostles and these signs and wonders were signs of the last days predicted by the Scripture. We'll see all of that explained here or illustrated here in this miracle.

We've been reminded at the beginning of Acts, what is happening in this book. What's happening in this book is this: that we are observing the words and acts of Jesus, the heavenly Lord Jesus, accomplished in the world by the apostles, setting up the church for its global mission to the world. And the key phrase here in Acts 3:1-10 is the phrase "the name of Jesus." The name on which you must call if you're to be saved. The Lord and Christ that God has named him from heaven. It's in the name of Jesus that this mighty action is performed. So walk with me through the passage as we look, first of all, at the presence of the name, the power of the name, and the promise of the name because here we have Jesus present in power to fulfill his promise, the promise made in the Old Testament.

First of all then, the presence of the name. Now, I pointed out that according to Acts 2:43 and later on chapter 5, verse 12, the apostles performed many signs and wonders and this chapter records one of them and it falls into two sections. The chapter falls as Luke's Gospel does very often into two sections: there is a sign and then there is a sermon or there is an action and there is an explanation for the action. And it begins by seeing the disciples together. Here are Peter and John. These two men have a history and the recent history of these two men hasn't been particularly good in the sense that John is the one faithful to the end who was with Jesus at the cross. It was John who was there to comfort Mary, the mother of our Lord, as the Savior hung upon the cross suffering. Peter is the one who while this is going on has denied the Lord and is in hiding. So these two men had a bit of a history and it wasn't a good history but here they are and they are reconciled together and acting together. What a great picture of the Gospel that is, united in Gospel work, the two men are going up to the temple.

Going up to the temple, that is, to the very heart of Jewish worship. Malachi the prophet had spoken of the sudden appearance of the Lord in the temple in the last days to purify Israel's defilement and its compromised priesthood by a fiery holiness. And the Lord Jesus had come to Jerusalem as an infant and been presented in the temple and it was prophesied in his infancy that this child was destined to divide Israel; this child is appointed for the falling and rising of many in Israel. It was to the temple Jesus came in his adult life, full of zeal for his Father's honor to cleanse the temple and to cast out of the temple all those who were dishonoring his Father's name and dishonoring the sanctuary, cleansing it in order to reestablish it as a house of prayer for the nations, and he was daily teaching in the temple to the very last part of his earthly life. Now through Peter and John, what we're being led to understand is that by their being present, the risen Lord

Jesus is present again in the temple through his apostles and that will be demonstrated by the signs and wonders accomplished by them at the gate to the temple.

Now, it's true to say, isn't it, that Jesus by his death and resurrection has rendered the temple as a building and its sacrificial system obsolete. As the church unfolds, it will never look to the temple as its model for existence until the Middle Ages in which case they go down a wrong route when they do that, but in the early days, they looked to the synagogues, the basis for Christian worship and life. But now Jesus has died as a means of atonement; the sacrificial system is on its way out and would disappear eventually. On the day of Pentecost when the flames of fire fell upon the heads of the disciples, they marked how this new covenant community as God's new temple comprised of living stones, people, people in whom the Spirit dwells, upon whom the covenantal blessing of fire that once rested on the earthly sanctuary now rests on the heavenly people of God. The new temple.

But in God's plan, you see, there is connection as well as disconnection between the old and the new. There is not an obliteration of the old but rather the old is affirmed and fulfilled. It is transformed and transcended by the new and so in the early days the apostles continue as observant Jews, attending the set seasons for worship. That's why they're going up to the temple at the hour of prayer. For many years they started their missionary labors by going to the synagogue first and preaching there and then going to the Gentiles. As Paul continually says, the Gospel is for the Jew first and also for the Gentiles.

So one afternoon, Peter and John are going up about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. It's the hour of prayer that accompanied the evening sacrifice. Their approach to the temple that day took them up the stairs to the gate known as the Beautiful Gate. Josephus tells us of that great temple built by Herod, one of the great wonders of the world in its time, and this gate being the most beautiful of all, the gate of Corinthian bronze that far exceeded in value those gates that were plated with silver and set in gold, he tells us.

Now, we are meant to see the irony there of what comes next. Here is this gorgeous temple; here is this beautiful gate; here is the center of Jewish worship; here is the place on earth where God meets with his people and there outside the gate on the steps leading up to the gate of the temple, there is this sight, "And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate." One of the ironies of Acts is that while we have this record of the mobility and the movement of the church as it grows regularly and we have these little comments throughout the book of Acts telling us of the rapid expansion and growth of the church, here we find at the very beginning the story of a man who is entirely immobile. He cannot move himself; he cannot help himself; he is entirely dependent on others. His ankles and legs have been useless from his mother's womb.

Now, the rabbis taught that it was good to give gifts to the destitute. That was the thing that pleased God and what better place to sit than at the gates of the temple. Religious people are notoriously sentimental and a bit given to this kind of thing and this man

recognized that, so if you're going to have a spot in which you beg, that's the place to be purely from a worldly point of view. Others, however, in the Jewish establishment would have looked on this man with great disfavor because they would have argued, wouldn't they, "Didn't the psalmist say that he had never seen the righteous begging bread? There must be something unrighteous in this man's life. There must be something at fault somewhere in this man's past or in his parents' past, perhaps." They would've come away with some kind of rational argument that explained why it was that, frankly, you didn't have to bother with this man because this man might be a sinner.

There is something else here because where this story comes, you see, is immediately after the section at the end of chapter 2, you remember these chapters are not there in the original, therefore we just read, what have we read about? The new covenant community and what has the new covenant community been doing? Well, we're told that they were looking after one another. They had all things in common and they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. They were looking out for each other. Then you get to chapter 3 and what do you find? You find the old covenant community is failing its people. Remember the words of Deuteronomy 15, "There will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess - if only you will strictly obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today. If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be."

Now, you see the contrast between the new covenant people and the old covenant community. But I think the next thing to notice about this man and the thing that is stressed in the story is his utter helplessness. He had to be carried every day to the steps of the gate. That would be as close as this man would ever get to the temple of the Lord. Now, what we need to understand as we come to this story is that every miracle that Jesus ever performed and therefore by extension the apostles ever performed, is not only a miracle, it's also an acted parable and this one is clearly so because in seeing this man outside of the temple, in other words, adjacent to the place where he might meet with God but excluded from it by his infirmity and excluded by the fact that a person in his position may not enter the temple of God which was not in the Bible but was the common view, what we are meant to see in this man's condition is an acted parable of the state of every person, man, woman or child, who is helpless and hopeless and godless apart from Jesus Christ. This is the human condition. We are by nature, all of us where this man was. We are excluded from the true and heavenly sanctuary every bit as much as this man is excluded from the earthly sanctuary. We are excluded and we are unable to help ourselves. We are unable to get into the sanctuary. We are unable to walk into the Holy of Holies. We are unable to come to God under our own steam and our own energy and by our own will. We are by nature outside. We may be brilliant people, we may be amazing people, we may be gifted people, we may be great musicians, we may be great doctors, we may be great leaders of the community, business people, we may be great people in ourselves personality wise and caring for others and be excluded from the

presence of God because by nature that's where we are, where this man is, excluded from the presence of God.

And all the man can do is beg. All the man can do is sit there where he is parked day by day by his friends and those who are passing by cannot give him the solution that he needs. They cannot give him what he absolutely needs. They may give him some money, they may help him out or they may not, but they cannot ultimately give him what he really needs. He needs his legs. He needs to be able to walk into the sanctuary of God until the day the Lord Jesus was present by his people, walking up the steps towards him.

So we move on to the second part of the story which is the power of the name. Most of us avert our eyes when we pass a beggar and Peter and John make eye contact. They have to get his eye contact. Seeing Peter and John are about to go into the temple, he asks to receive alms and Peter directed his gaze at him. Perhaps the guy has been doing this, you know, perhaps he's a bit cynical and he goes through the routine of begging but he's really not expecting anything from the people. Do you ever drive over Ben Franklin Bridge and there is a point where you slow down for some traffic lights and at those lights there are people who are begging. They seldom make eye contact with you. They walk along with their signs saying, "Homeless. Helpless. Anything," but they don't expect you to roll down your window and give them anything. Perhaps this man was like that because Peter has to say to this man, "Look at me. Hey, you just asked me for something. Look at me."

He gets his gaze. Peter directed his gaze at him and said, "Look at us." He wanted him to see who was speaking to him. They were ordinary people, these people, but they were ambassadors for Jesus Christ as he's about to find out. And that very action of getting his attention arouses an expectation in his heart. Do you notice that? He fixes his attention on them. You see, he wasn't really giving them his attention but now he fixes his attention on them and he is expecting to receive something from them and that's where he makes his mistake and it illustrates, I think, the tragedy of our lives and the tragedy of our times because he has noticed that all he expected from them was money. That's what he was asking for, wasn't it? He was asking for money. He was asking for some material help. That's really all he ever expected now from anybody. In fact, now that was all he wanted. That was the level of his expectation and that was the level of his desire. "Some money would help. Some money would get me out of this problem. It would help me to live, to pay the bills, buy some food, do what I need to do from day to day. That really is all I expect. I don't even expect very much money, just something."

The level of his expectation is right down here and, you see, what he thought was his problem wasn't really his problem, you see. There is a sense in which he had given up hope of ever having, I don't suppose he had ever had any hope of being healed. And in many ways this man represents the world. It represents the world in the way it looks to the church sometimes, the way the expectations of your friends of the church, what do they look to the church for? Do they simply look for moral advice or to provide great music or philosophical speculations or psychological support or political pronouncements or whatever it may be? They look to the church and they say, "You know the church should be doing something about this or that or the other thing." They have all kinds of

expectations about what the church can or cannot do or should or shouldn't do. People come to church and they come for all kinds of reasons: they come to be cheered up; they come to be entertained; they come to see good art or they come to hear good music; or they come to have their social problems met; or they come to get a husband or a wife. It's not a bad thing to come for but they have all kinds of reasons for coming. The problem of humanity runs deeper than any political, social, philosophical or intellectual problem. For this man, it was the problem of his crippled state that kept him from getting into the temple. For humanity, it is the sin problem that keeps us out of the temple and away from God.

So Peter in his response makes it clear. You can almost sense the man's heart sinking when he hears Peter's words, "I have no silver or gold." Or the way I like it is the way that it is in the old version because I was brought up singing songs about, "Silver and gold have I none." It sounds much better, doesn't it? Silver and gold have I none. I'm sure Peter had money. He would've been happy to give the man money but, you see, he had something else in mind. Silver and gold have I none and I guess the guy is thinking to himself in frustration, "Well, what are you talking to me for?" That was a phony American accent. Because, you see, all the cash in the world and all the care given by people who shared in the compassion of the loving Creator would never, ever have gotten this man a solution to the problem of his limbs.

You see, his plight raises a problem. What is this situation doing, existing within sight of a temple dedicated to a God of compassion who is a loving Creator of all things? Doesn't it? I mean, you would have to be insensitive never to have thought, wondered, why it is that here was this man in this condition for over 40 years and he is on the gates of the temple of the God who delivered Israel from Egypt; the God who did so many remarkable things; the God who had been acting in Jesus Christ. Why? To put it another way: how can a loving Creator allow this sort of thing on his property whether it's the temple in Jerusalem or the world we live in which was created as his temple? And you really only have a couple of options, don't you? The option that is being sold to us on the market is that the atheists are right and that the condition of this man, the condition of everybody else in this position is the product of blind, impersonal chance; evolutionary forces that doom us to a random destiny and that there is no comfort, there is no meaning, there is no indication from anybody anywhere because there is no one anywhere to give you an indication of why it should be that a person, any person anywhere in the world, should be in the state this person is in in this story.

That's one option. I don't think there are many other options except this: that this is absolutely criminal; that this is absolutely beyond explanation; that this is an evil intruder into God's good world; that this is not the way it was meant to be. This is not the way it's meant to be. That sin and all the things sin brings with it, decaying bodies, broken minds, death, all of it is an intrusion into God's world. This is not the way it was meant to be. And if all we can do, if all we have as Christians is to lecture people on being good Samaritans, can you imagine anything more demoralizing if that was all we had to say to people? If all we had to say to people is to throw up our hands in horror and to say, "We'll get along beside you and we'll help you and we'll show our acts of mercy towards you

and give you our gifts of charity and offer our words of sympathy." If that is all we have to say to the world and do for the world, is that anything that other people couldn't do?

Well, we must do all of those things. Don't misunderstand me, but if that was all we did, if that was all we had, then we might as well be nothing other than be Christian. What do we have to say? And as the world looks on, if all we have to say is, "Try harder. Care more. Give generously. Work harder." Then the world has a right to be cynical and you have the right to lose your faith. But I want you to notice what Peter does. "Silver and gold I have none but what I have I give to you." He gave this crippled man something better. Do you notice, without any request for it, without the man seeking it, without him even asking for it, as an act of sovereign grace, the God who gives gifts freely. Peter responds, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" and the man gets up and he's leaping like a deer. In other words, this is a complete miracle. This wasn't a gradual thing that he gradually got better and then went for some physical therapy over several months in order to regain some of the muscle loss and all the rest of it. This man instantly feels his feet and ankles become strong enough to walk and jump. His brain signals to his feet and ankles that they can do this and catapult him off the ground onto his feet while he praises God. This is not simply a healing of his body, this is the creation of nonexistent muscle tissue; the training of the brain to use and direct limbs that they had never done before. This is a complete miracle and when you realize this man is over 40 years of age, then we learn in chapter 4, verse 22, it makes it even more remarkable.

What's going on here? This is a remarkable sign as we are going to see of restorative creation. This is it. When God heals, do you notice, he deals with all of the things that need healing and he does it instantaneously and the man is up there on his feet. Hence, Luke's repetition, three times his stress on the man's walking. To Luke, the physician, that was the most remarkable thing. Not just that the man's ankles and feet were healed but that instantly he was able to walk and leap. Not even a miracle in our age, the very idea of miracles defies the credibility of some of our friends. They have seen nature locked into a course of action from which it is unable, really, to fluctuate. And even those who talk about miracles often talk as if it requires a suspension of the laws or even the breaking of the laws of nature. Now, we believe the laws of nature are helpful. They are helpful in terms of making predictions and so on and we depend on them and as Christians we believe that these laws are, in fact, our observation of how God normally works and so sometimes there are exceptions to the laws because God doesn't always work the same way but usually he works the same way so that you and I can actually plot and plan much of our lives.

The God who does things in a normal way is free to take another route. He is free to have exceptions from the way he normally works. So normally if you are ill, you go to the doctor and the doctor prescribes medicine. You take the medicine or you have an operation and that medicine and that operation are a means to an end and that plus the therapy that flows from it helps you to recover and gradually you get back to health again and you go out into the world. That process of healing which they have facilitated, that is God's work. I don't know how many times physicians have said to me, "All we do is put things in place and then we watch. We observe this healing take place. We actually don't

do the healing, all we do is facilitate the act of healing." It is an amazing thing to observe healing take place in bodies. It is a remarkable thing. It is a God thing and God can do that through physicians, through means and he can do it without means. It's up to him which way he does it. There is no more expenditure of effort on God's part to do it directly and immediately as he does here, than it is to do it through the means that he normally uses. It's no more effort for God to do it one way or the other. He sustains the universe by the word of his power. There is no effort from God to do anything that he does because God can do it without effort. He is God. So what is a miracle? A miracle is merely God doing it a different way than he normally does it and that's what he does in this story here.

Well, this is the first example of someone being healed in the name of Jesus in the Bible. The name of Jesus represents his divine authority and his continuing power to give the blessings of salvation to people. You can see the whole Gospel in this reply in verse 6. Jesus, the baby of Bethlehem, Jesus of Nazareth, despised Nazareth of the Gentiles, this Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried and who was raised and is our contemporary, this Jesus who is a living person, the one who said, "All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth," this Jesus, we are now going to find out whether it's true, does he have all authority in heaven and on earth? As we read the book of Acts we discover that mighty works are done in the name of Jesus or by means of the name, and baptism takes place in the name of Jesus or into the name of Jesus. And believers witness on behalf of the name and they suffer on behalf of the name and opponents of Christianity do many things opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And believers go out and in, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And they command a demon in the name of Jesus and that name has authority and power. And in the name of Jesus, a disabled person is enabled to obey the word of command that he is given. All of this takes us back to the Old Testament where the name of the Lord is of great importance. Peter has already spoken about the name of the Lord, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." And he has identified the Lord as we have seen, "He is Jesus who is both Lord and Christ."

Later on in Peter's speech, we won't look at that this evening, and its follow-up in chapter 4, he focuses on the power of Jesus' name to bring the blessings of the last days and this miracle points forward to the day when all sickness and even death will be addressed in the name of Jesus. This miracle is in the Bible to reassure you that there is nothing that afflicts you today physically that God will not one day totally heal. That there is no suffering that God will not one day address. What will the Maker do about suffering in the world? This is what he will do: one day as we're going to see later, he is going to restore all things. There is to be a restoration of all things: a resurrection of the dead; a restoration of the universe; a transformation of everything. The name of Jesus, like the name of Yahweh in the Old Testament, represents the person himself. It demonstrates that he is present in power to act in this case.

When they moved into the Promised Land, Israel was to worship him together at one place, "the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his name there for his dwelling." Peter was saying, "The Lord is here. He put his name here

in Jerusalem. Here is the name of the Lord who put his name on Jerusalem. Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." And that name is Jesus, the name of the Lord Sabaoth, the God of the battalions of Israel. The name of the God of Jacob who protects you. The name of the Lord who is a strong tower. It's the name of the Lord Jesus Christ."

So the Lord's name is nothing less than his powerful presence with his people, openly claimed so that they might place their hope and their trust in the God who is with us. And Jesus who is present with his people, in his name heals this man and Peter takes him by the right hand and raises him up and immediately his feet and ankles are made strong. Peter couldn't help the man but Jesus did and his power exceeded all the man's expectations. What a surprising God. Immediately power surged through his being and he was well. I want to say to you that's what happens when the Gospel works in your life. Immediately. You would think your problems are this or that or the other thing. You need to know your real problem is that you're outside the temple of God and that immediately in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, by believing in his name, you will be healed, restored, brought in. Immediately power will come into you and you will be absolutely restored. Made whole. Saved.

Christ is present in power to fulfill his promise in the life of this man, the promise of the name. He took the man. The man gets up and leaping as he stood, he began to walk and enter the temple with him walking and leaping and praising God. The man leapt for joy and that echoes a promise that we find in the Old Testament in Isaiah, "Behold your God will come with vengeance and with recompense. He will come and save you and the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy." Here's Isaiah's promise in those passages where he's talking about the coming day, the final days of which Peter has spoken and in which context he has put all the book of Acts. He is saying in that final day, "Here is a hint of what's going to happen on the final day. God is going to bring judgment to the world but he is going to suspend his judgment for a period of mercy and in this period of mercy the lame will leap like the deer." Here is this man at the Gate Beautiful and the change is worked in him. This man is living, leaping, praising proof of the fact that God has kept his promise. This is just like God. This is typical of God's saving acts promised for the last days.

When the imprisoned John the Baptist had earlier sent disciples to Jesus with his general question about whether Jesus was the one they should expect or not, Jesus replied, sent word back to him, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised up. The poor hear the good news of the Gospel preached to them." The miracles of Jesus confirmed his identity as the promised Savior. When this lame man walked and leapt, this was a more powerful miracle even than Jesus had performed as he leaps for joy. And in chapter 3, verse 16 of Acts, we're told that faith in Jesus' name restored this man to complete health and just as God accredited Jesus by signs and wonders, so now the apostles are accredited by such signs and wonders.

It was this great action in fulfilling the promises of the Old Testament and because no longer were his limbs defective and this man is now healed, what does he do? Well, he's no longer excluded from the sanctuary. He immediately goes up with Peter and John into the temple to praise God. He immediately has access. When a person believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, they have immediate access into the presence of God and when that day comes when God raises the dead and transforms and heals his people, he will bring them immediately into his presence, his real presence.

Now, what does all this have to say to me tonight and to you? Well, those verses in Isaiah put in a wider context where Isaiah says, "Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees and say to those who have an anxious heart, be strong, fear not, behold your God will come and the lame will leap like the deer." In other words, it is something to say to you and me this evening, we read this story and we are meant to feed our faith with this story. We are meant to feed our faith as we read this account. We're meant to strengthen our resolve and have our hearts delivered from paralyzing fear: fear of tomorrow, fear of the future, fear of death. It's meant to release us from fear and empower timid spirits to leap in the praise of God. It's meant to point us forward to that day when God will do on a massive scale what he does for this one man here.

I want you to look at this story and as you read this story, he wants you to look around this wasted, broken universe and remind yourself there is coming a day when all the brokenness will be fixed and all the disease will be cured and all the dead will be raised. There will be life and there will be joy and there will be leaping and there will be praising in the kingdom of God when the Son of Man comes.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that we have in this story a miracle that Luke points us forward to that great day that's coming but also a parable of salvation, a picture of our human condition outside of your temple, unable to come in ourselves but by the name of Jesus, able to draw near with boldness. We pray this evening that we would take hold of that promise, make it our own, come near to you through our Savior, the Lord Jesus, and leap with joy in his presence. Amen.