

## Chapter 7: “The Lame Shall Leap”

*Acts 3:1–10*

Now that King Jesus has poured out his Holy Spirit from heaven, and now that the Holy Spirit has drawn in the firstfruits of his global harvest, the church begins her march forward through history. While Luke offered an overview summary statement of the activities of the church in the previous section (Acts 2:42–47), he now begins to narrate individual stories from the history of the church. As in the Gospels, we begin with miraculous signs and wonders that authenticate the message preached by those performing those miracles. Unlike the Gospels, though, the wonder-workers are not the source of the power they wield. Instead, what we see in the miracles in the Book of Acts are the continuing works of Jesus through his apostles (Acts 1:1). Here, we see that *Jesus our High Priest removes all barriers that keep us from God*.

### Powerful Barriers (Acts 3:1–2)

In the previous section, Luke provided a short summary statement that “many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles” (Acts 2:43). As Bruce observes, “Luke now gives us a fuller account of one of these, selecting one which received considerable publicity.”<sup>1</sup> In many ways, this story resembles the stories we read in the Gospels about Jesus’ own signs and wonders, particularly where Jesus healed a paralytic in Luke 5:17–26.<sup>2</sup> As in the Gospels, however, the stories of healings are not merely interesting tales of miraculous power. Neither are they only human interest stories of the power of God to rescue those who suffered long under some kind of malady. While these are indeed fascinating stories of power that draw on our heartstrings with sympathy for the figures who were healed, they do much more than that. Namely, these stories tell us something about Christ and something about us.

To begin, these stories tell us something essential about Christ. At one level, the great similarities between the miracles that Christ had performed and this miracle demonstrate “that the work of Christ begun in his earthly life (cf. Acts 1:1) continued in the work of the young Christian community.”<sup>3</sup> The Lord Jesus is continuing to exercise his reign of mercy by rescuing representative individuals who suffer the most visible effects of the destructive side effects of sin. Rather than doing this by his own, personal, bodily presence, King Jesus is now continuing his work by healing through the power of his Holy Spirit, whom he has poured out on his church. As we will see in our study of this story, Luke provides a multidimensional accounting of Christ’s power to heal through his Holy Spirit in this story particularly.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 82.

<sup>2</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 124.

<sup>3</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 125.

At another level, this story tells us something important about us. Calvin remarks that “we have in this history a type or figure of our spiritual restoring; namely, that as the Word, laid hold on by faith, did restore the cripple to his limbs, so the Lord pierceth into our souls by the Word, that he may restore the same.”<sup>4</sup> Not only does this miracle tell us something about Christ, but this miracle also tells us something about our own condition. The visible, external corruption of this man’s physical inability to walk represents the invisible, internal corruption of sin. While the congenital physical defect that made it impossible for this man to walk, all of us have inherited the congenital spiritual defect of original sin.

In this story, the tension of this man’s great need is magnified by the context. Luke deftly sets the stage by telling us that “Peter and John were going up to the temple, at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour” (v. 1). First, the location of the temple (which was in Jerusalem) reminds us, in part, that, “True to the mandate of Acts 1:8, the witness that began with Pentecost was pursued vigorously in Jerusalem. The events of chaps. 3–5 are set entirely within the holy city.”<sup>5</sup> More than that, Luke is putting an emphasis not so much on Jerusalem generally, but on the temple in Jerusalem specifically.<sup>6</sup> Second, this story takes place at a specific time, during the “hour of prayer” when the evening sacrifice would be offered, at “the ninth hour,” or 3:00pm.<sup>7</sup>

This raises a question, though, about what exactly the apostles were *doing* at the temple during the sacrificial services. Many have observed that “the largest crowds would thus have been found at the times of sacrifice, as Peter and John must have been well aware; for they went to the temple for prayer and for witness.”<sup>8</sup> This undoubtedly true; however, why would they participate in the evening *sacrifices* which would have been offered at this hour of prayer? We know that they were “attending [lit., ‘devoted to’] the temple together” (Acts 2:46). To what degree, then, is it true that they “adhered to the Temple and its services...until the Lord himself eventually made it impossible”?<sup>9</sup> Did they not yet understand that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins,” and that Christ, by his once-for-all sacrifice, “has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Heb. 10:4, 14)? On the contrary, their preaching demonstrates that they understand the sufficiency of Jesus’ sacrifice well (e.g., Acts 3:14–16, 19). Why, then, do they perform this miracle at the temple during the hour of sacrificial worship?

To understand the broader significance of this miracle, we must see how Luke describes the lame

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:140.

<sup>5</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 123.

<sup>6</sup> “Spencer (2004: 51–53) notes that Acts 3–5 concerns the temple, alternating between the temple (3:1–4:22; 5:12–41) and private home settings (4:23–5:11). He points out that both temple scenes begin with apostolic miracles in the name of Jesus. Opposition is from the temple elites. Persecution includes interrogation and incarceration. The apostles consistently declare their loyalty to God. Both speeches issue a call for repentance.” (Bock, *Acts*, 157. Citing F. S. Spencer, *Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2004), 51–53.)

<sup>7</sup> “In [Acts] 2:15 we find mention made of the service held at 9 A. M., here the one held at 3 P. M. is referred to. The Jews counted twelve hours for the day, starting with 6 A. M.; so their ninth hour was 3 P. M. which was called the evening sacrifice.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 124.)

<sup>8</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 125.

<sup>9</sup> So Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 124.

beggar. If Luke gave us the background of this story in v. 1, he now introduces the main figure of conflict in v. 2: “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 to ask alms of those entering the temple.” At one level, it is not surprising that this man should be there during this hour, for he too understood that many people would be present, making it “prime time for receiving alms.”<sup>10</sup> Further, his “daily” placement “at the gate of the temple” would have been a key place to encounter the largest number of people possible as they made their way into the temple.

Most importantly, however, Luke draws a subtle contrast between this beggar and the people passing him by—not only between the obvious ability and inability to walk, but the fact that this beggar was placed “at the gate” of the temple, while all those who passed by him were “entering the temple.” There is some debate about the reason why the beggar did not enter. Polhill draws attention to Leviticus 21:17–20, which lists out a number of conditions which would prevent someone from entering the temple, including a prohibition against the lame (see also 2 Sam. 5:8).<sup>11</sup> Peterson, however, insists that “There is no ground for suggesting that he was prevented from entering the temple because of his condition, though it is true that the lame are included among social and religious outcasts in passages such as Luke 7:22; 14:13, 21.”<sup>12</sup> Peterson’s argument is that Leviticus 21:17–20 only provides prohibitions for priests, and “cannot be applied to someone born lame.”<sup>13</sup> To my mind, Peterson’s objection reads the Levitical code too narrowly. While it is true that the primary context for Leviticus 21:17–20 has to do with priests, it is also true that the disqualifying “itching disease” would disqualify *anyone* in the nation from entering the temple as unclean (Lev. 13:29–36). So, while the context of Leviticus 21:17–20 may have priests in view, this does not mean that the prohibitions did not extend

Regardless, however, of whether the letter of Leviticus 21 excluded *all* lame men from entering into the temple, it is clear that *this* lame man did not ever enter the temple, “whom they laid *daily* at the *gate* of the temple.” Here we see the powerlessness of Old Testament worship. The priests were charged with declaring certain men unclean, and they also had the power to declare those unclean men to be clean once the issues they faced had been resolved (cp. Lev. 13 vs. Lev. 14). The priests did not, however, have the ability to heal those underlying issues that disqualified them from entering into the temple. There is a vital connection between the powerlessness of the Old Testament sacrifices of the blood of bulls and goats to cleanse worshipers from sin and the powerlessness of the Old Testament priests to heal unclean afflictions. This worship represented the God-ordained means for cleansing and reconciling men and women to God after they had been healed from conditions that rendered them ceremonial unclean; however, the whole system highlighted its own inability to heal those who were excluded from worship in order that they might be cleansed. Thus, at the very time when the (powerless) sacrifices were offered, this lame man remained powerless to enter the temple to worship.

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<sup>10</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 126.

<sup>11</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 128.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 168.

<sup>13</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 168n14.

## The Power of Christ (Acts 3:3–7)

With the background and the main point of conflict sketched, Luke now proceeds with the narrative. As the powerless man sees Peter and John (among the many other worshipers) “about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms” (v. 3). Luke puts particular emphasis on sight in this passage, beginning with the beggar’s seeing Peter and John. Peter responds in kind by his own sight, but Luke puts a stronger emphasis on the sight of the apostles: “Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, ‘Look at us’” (v. 4).<sup>14</sup> The different strength of sight seems to reflect a different quality of expectation, as reflected in the next verse: “And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them” (v. 5). At first, the beggar had halfheartedly “seen” the disciples to ask alms of them; however, Peter and John gazed fixedly upon the beggar because they saw in him the dignity of a man on whom the Lord intended to demonstrate his power. Still, when the apostles call the beggar to “look” at them, the beggar’s expectation is fixed on the worldly hope of receiving alms—perhaps a particularly valuable gift on this day.

This difference in sight and in expectations further underscores the difference between the difference between power and powerlessness involved in this story. Giving this man alms would have perhaps met his need for a day—and, if the gift were large, perhaps for a few days—but it would do nothing to heal the underlying problem. Neither the temple sacrifices of bulls and goats nor the gifts of money that people had extended to this man day after day at the temple had any power to change his underlying condition. The temple worshipers were focused on one powerless thing, while the lame beggar was focused on receiving another powerless thing. Only the apostles saw the situation rightly to recognize the dramatic work that God was about to do in their midst.

Thus, Peter told the man exactly what Christ would do for him: “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong” (v. 6–7). The Old Testament sacrifices were powerless to heal him, and even all the money in the world was powerless to buy his healing. Nevertheless, the authority of Jesus Christ of Nazareth was powerful to do what all of these powerless solutions could not: the man now arose miraculously with strong feet and ankles. As we further consider the “spiritual type” of this story, it is worth noting that the word for “raised him up” is the same word commonly used to describe *resurrection*—not only Christ’s resurrection, but ours (19x in 1 Cor. 15).

## Empowered Worship (Acts 3:8–10)

We must notice two crucial details in v. 8 as Luke completes the narrative part of this story, before moving into Peter’s explanatory sermon of what everyone had witnessed in the next section. First, Luke tells us twice that the man responded by “leaping,” using a “rare word (*hallomai*) for the man’s jumping, a word found in the Septuagint text of Isa 35:6 with reference to the messianic age:

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<sup>14</sup> Lenski is correct that “This earnest look of the apostles does not mean, ‘looking through to the innermost bottom of the heart in order to discover the proper receptivity.’” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 126.) The point is not that they saw something in him, but that they gazed upon him as a recipient of Christ’s grace and mercy.

‘Then will the lame leap like a deer.’”<sup>15</sup> This was no mere miracle, but a sign of the coming of the Messiah. Here, we have the fulfillment of prophecy to indicate the same thing that “Jesus’ personal mighty works had signified,” albeit not by Jesus’ bodily presence, but “by his mighty work performed through His disciples: He was indeed Lord and Messiah.”<sup>16</sup>

Second, we also see the spiritual restoration of this man who had so long languished at the gates of the temple: “he stood and began to walk, and *entered the temple with them*, walking and leaping and praising God” (v. 8). Not only is he able to enter in a formalistic, external way, but he demonstrates the full spiritual sense of his transformation by “praising God” as he does so. Christ has powerfully transformed this man in his body and in his soul. Polhill makes this point powerfully: “At this time not only had he received physical healing, but he had found spiritual acceptance as well. For the first time he was deemed worthy to enter the house of worship. This theme will repeat itself in Acts. Those who were rejected as unworthy for worship in the old religion of Israel found full acceptance in the name of Jesus, whether a lame beggar, an Ethiopian eunuch, a woman, or a Gentile.”<sup>17</sup> While the spiritual gift of healing ended with the age of the apostles (individual miracles of healing that God continues to perform notwithstanding), we should see a correspondence between the way that the apostles remove the physical barriers that prevented this man from worshiping and the ongoing work of deacons, who continue to work to remove physical barriers that keep people from worship today.<sup>18</sup>

The reaction to this powerful miracle is widespread: “And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him” (vv. 9–10). As the people’s confusion opened the door to Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:12–13), so now their confusion “prepared them for Peter’s explanation”<sup>19</sup> in the next section.

## Discussion Questions

1. Read Luke 5:17–26. How many parallels can you find between that story and this one? Why is it so important to see that the apostles are continuing the same works that Jesus had done during his earthly ministry (Acts 1:1)? What is the setting (place and time) of this scene (v. 1)? Why is that setting important in this story? Where is this lame man (v. 2)? How does his location help to see a spiritual significance to this story, beyond the fact of the physical healing?
2. How many ways does Luke talk about sight in the interaction between the lame man and the apostles (vv. 3–5)? What significance does this emphasis on sight have? What might account for the differences we see between what this man sees and what Peter and John see? What is significant about Peter’s healing this man “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” (v. 6)? What is significant about the word “raised...up” (v. 7)?

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<sup>15</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 128.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 85.

<sup>17</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 128.

<sup>18</sup> This is the basic characterization of the office of deacons in Cornelis Van Dam, *The Deacon: Biblical Foundations for Today’s Ministry of Mercy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 129.

3. Why is it important that this formerly lame man not only walks, but is “leaping” (v. 8; cf. Isa. 35:6)? How does this detail extend the significance of Jesus’ healing of this man through the apostles? How does this detail extend the physical story of healing into a story that serves as a type of our spiritual healing through faith in Christ? Importantly, what does this man do once he is able to walk (v. 8)? How do the people respond?

4. What barriers keep you from Jesus? Physical barriers that prevent you from coming to worship? Intellectual barriers of doubt? Heart barriers of desire? Willful barriers of stubbornness? How does the High Priesthood of Jesus promise to overturn even the most powerful barriers that we may face? What barriers prevent those around you from Jesus? How might God use you (as he used Peter and John) to remove those barriers to help others come to worship Jesus?