

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH SIGNS OF HIS FUTURE KINGDOM

Acts 3:1-10

INTRODUCTION

This morning we are going to talk about an issue that has been a source of great controversy throughout the history of the church. In the last 100 years this issue has been the cause of a multitude of church splits and Christians fighting with one another both within and between various denominations. The issue, to use the title of Dr. Wayne Grudem's 1996 book is this, "Are the Miraculous Gifts for Today?" The reason that we must face this issue is because in our text this morning the apostle Peter performs an astonishing miracle. He commands a man lame from birth to stand and walk and the man stands and walks. We saw last week that one of the features of the experience of the first local church which formed after the preaching of Peter was that "many signs and wonders were being done by the apostles." In our passage this morning Luke records for us an example of those "signs and wonders" that the apostles were doing. Events like this were the common experience of that first church in Jerusalem and so the question must be asked, is this to be the common experience of every local church until Jesus comes again? We said last week that other things that were the common experience of this first church should be common to us, such as devotion to the apostle's teaching and celebrating communion. On what grounds can we say that miraculous signs and wonders should not be common among us as well? Obviously these kinds of events are not common among us so does that mean there is something wrong with us? The same HS who came upon this church is upon our church and so should we expect these same kinds of "signs and wonders" to appear among us and through us?

According to Dr. Grudem's book there are four basic answers to that question. His book is a collection of four essays, each one written by a proponent of each of these four views followed by three critiques from the other three points of view. I highly recommend this book if for no other reason than so that you can see how people who all trust and love Jesus and view the Bible as God's written word have each answered this question differently. I'm not going to try and explain the differences between these four views this morning. What I hope to do is to seek to understand what Luke, the inspired author of the book of Acts aims for us to understand from his recording of this miracle. We will not this morning arrive at a final answer to this perplexing question. My aim is to carefully consider the point that Luke is seeking to make in recording this event and see if we can draw any conclusions from what we observe. As we work our way through the book of Acts we will add more to the observations we make this morning because this is not the last time we will have to consider it as there are 14 individual miracles recorded in the book of Acts and there are 10 summary statements regarding miracles like the one we saw last week in Acts 2:43.

As we begin this morning I want to remind us of the structure and purpose of this book that Luke has written under the sovereign influence of the Holy Spirit. If you will remember back in the opening two verses of this book Luke tells us that this is the second of a two volume work. The first volume, the gospel that bears Luke's name, was a history of what Jesus began to do and to teach. Thus this volume is the history of what Jesus continues to do and to teach. However, as we saw in those first two chapters, Jesus' doing and teaching is being done by the Holy Spirit through the apostles and the church that is formed by their word. 2:32-33 summarizes the point of these two chapters: "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we (the apostles and 108 other believers) are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear."

In other words, Jesus by his life, death, resurrection and ascension has demonstrated that he is the long promised Messiah who saves God's people and establishes God's kingdom. He is the divine Lord who grants salvation to all who call upon his name. This same Jesus who is Messiah and Lord is now, by the Holy Spirit, continuing to act and to teach God's truth through the apostles and the church which is formed by their word. Luke in chapter 2:1-41 explains what happens in one 24 hour period when Jesus pours out his Holy Spirit upon

the whole church, which consisted of 120 people at the time. Obviously, Luke cannot describe what happened in every 24 hour period of the church's first 40 years of existence, which is the time frame the 28 chapters of Acts cover. Therefore, like every good historian he uses summary statements throughout his account to show what was going on and then illustrates those summations with particular events. 2:42-47 is one such summary and what follows in Acts 3:1 through 6:7 illustrates the summary with specific events.

The key question we must ask is this: why did Luke include this particular story? There were many signs and wonders performed, why this one? My goal this morning is to answer that question. This is, without question, a manifestation of the power of Jesus through the apostle Peter. Peter, in announcing the miracle cure declares it to be done in the name of Jesus, that is, by his authority and power. It is also the first point that Peter makes in the sermon that follows the miracle (vv. 12-13). It is quite clear that this crucified, resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus Christ is at work through this group of people, led by the apostles. Whatever your position on the presence or absence of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, all Christians agree that Jesus Christ is the Lord of his church and it is through his church that he manifests his power. How he does so may be debated but that he does so cannot be disputed and is clearly a primary point of Luke in recording this story.

MAIN POINT

Jesus manifests his power through his church in order to...

I. Authenticate the authority of the apostles

Everyone, regardless of their theological perspective on miraculous gifts agree that one of the primary functions of the miracles performed by the apostles in the early church was to authenticate their message. As we saw last week the teaching of the apostles was what created the church and what sustained the life of the church. It is the testimony of the apostles concerning the person and work of Jesus in light of the OT revelation that is the authoritative ground upon which the church is built. Thus, at the beginning of the church Jesus manifested his power through the apostles so that everyone would see that he was speaking through them. As Jesus told the apostles in Matthew 10:40, "He who receives you, receives me..." The only way to know God and to go to heaven is to receive the teaching of the apostles and so these signs demonstrate their authority.

One of the reasons Luke records this particular sign is because on at least two occasions in the gospels Jesus healed a lame man in much the same way. One of those occasions is in Luke 5:18ff. There a paralyzed man was carried to Jesus on a stretcher just as the lame man in this story was carried on a stretcher to the gate of the temple. Jesus, like Peter commands the man to stand up and walk which he does immediately in the sight of all. In Luke, as here, the people who witness the miracle are filled with amazement. Finally, Jesus uses the fact of his healing to demonstrate that he has the power to forgive sins just as Peter, in the sermon that follows this healing declares that through Jesus sins are forgiven. However, if you will notice there is one significant difference. In Luke, Jesus invokes no other name. He simply says, "Your sins are forgiven." "Rise and walk." Here Peter declares, "In the name of Jesus walk." "In the name of Jesus sins are forgiven." So we see that Peter's ability is a delegated ability, not inherent to him. He is acting as an ambassador of the king. He is exercising another person's authority, not his own authority.

In Acts, as in the gospels, miracles are followed by teaching. This is part of the reason the miracles are called "signs". A sign points to something else. When you see a sign on the highway with a curving arrow on it, you know that there is a curve in the road coming up. That is what signs do, they point beyond themselves to some fact or reality. So the miracles the apostles perform point away from the miracle to the truthfulness of what they teach about Jesus. The main thing in recording the miracles of the apostles is not the miracles but what the miracles point to, which in this case is the message which the apostles communicate about Jesus. Thus, the first response we should have to this story is that we should pay careful attention to the teaching of the apostles regarding Jesus as it is contained in the NT. They are the authoritative representatives of the king and they are speaking on his behalf and with his authority.

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II. Demonstrate that his kingdom is coming through his church

Throughout the gospels the most common description of the message that Jesus came to declare is “the gospel of the kingdom of God” (or “of heaven”). In Acts 1 we were told that Jesus, during the forty days he appeared to the apostles after his resurrection spoke with them about the kingdom of God. On the last day he was with them, they asked if it was at this time that God was going to restore the kingdom to Israel. In response Jesus said, it’s none of your business when God will establish his kingdom. Rather, the business of the apostles and the church is to bear witness, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the crucified, resurrected and glorified Messiah and king, who is Jesus. What we observe in chapter 2 is Christ coming by the Spirit to rule over and in and through his church. His kingdom, while it will not come in its fullness until Jesus returns to this earth, yet now is present and being testified to in and through the church. This is because Jesus is king and head over his church and through his church. The message of the apostles which we repeat is that Jesus is God’s king and he commands all people everywhere to repent of their rebellion and submit to him because he is going to return and establish his kingdom on this earth by force one day.

What Luke is at pains to do throughout his book is to connect what Jesus is doing through his church with the promises God made in the OT regarding his coming kingdom. Peter began his sermon by quoting the prophet Joel. Joel talks about “the last days”, which is a stock OT phrase referring to those days when God will establish his rule on this earth through his Messiah. Peter in quoting the prophet Joel proves that those days of God’s kingdom coming would be characterized first by God’s Spirit being poured out on all of God’s people without distinction. The fact that the HS had come to God’s people was evident in the the 120 Christians speaking in foreign languages. Joel also says that prior to the last of the last days there would be wonders in the heavens and signs on the earth. Peter says that Jesus performed those signs and wonders as that is the first thing that Peter says about Jesus in his sermon in v. 22. Also, Luke says that the miracles the apostles do, of which this event in chapter 3 is an example are also the signs and wonders prophesied by Joel. In other words, we are in the last days when God sends his Messiah to establish his kingdom and there is yet a final last day when that work will be finished. The kingdom is present here now and it is yet to come. The signs and wonders the apostles perform are evidence that this is the situation we are in now that began on the first Pentecost after Jesus was crucified.

But now also, in this story Luke gives us another clue to show that the rule and reign of God has come to this church when he says that the lame man entered the temple with Peter and John, “walking and leaping and praising God.” In Isaiah 34-35 we have a description of the “day of the Lord”, that period of time when God establishes his rule on this earth. Chapter 34 is a description of God’s judgment of the nations when he comes to establish his kingdom. Isaiah 34:1-4 says, “Come near, you nations, and listen; pay attention, you peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that is in it, the world, and all that comes out of it! The LORD is angry with all nations; his wrath is upon all their armies. He will totally destroy them, he will give them over to slaughter. Their slain will be thrown out, their dead bodies will send up a stench; the mountains will be soaked with their blood. All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.” In poetic language the prophet describes the coming of God to destroy his enemies, which are identified as all the nations of the world. Then in chapter 35 he describes God’s salvation for his people when he comes to establish his kingdom. Isaiah 35:1-6 says, “The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.’ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute

tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.” We have here, in these two chapters a poetic description of that day when God establishes his kingdom on this earth by destroying his enemies and saving his people into the kingdom of peace and prosperity.

But notice that what marks the coming of that kingdom is that the lame will leap like a deer, along with the blind being made to see and deaf being made to hear and the mute being made to shout for joy. Luke is using the exact same words as Isaiah 35:6 to show that the healing of this lame man who then leaps for joy at his healing is proof positive that the day of the Lord prophesied in Isaiah 35-36 has come and is coming. It is here and it is yet to come. When John the Baptist was in imprisoned by Herod he sent messengers to Jesus to ask if he was indeed the Messiah or if they should expect someone else. Do you remember how Jesus responded? He told John’s disciples to tell John what they saw, “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” Luke is simply saying what Jesus said as he reports this miracle: the kingdom of God is present in and through the church because the king is here and you know it because the lame leap at the command of the apostles.

The final day is not yet. There is a day coming when the fullness of all these promises will be made true by Christ for all of God’s people forever. In that day there will be no disease, no lame, no blind, no deaf, no crying and no death because Christ will put all of his enemies under his feet. But right now, in the church, Jesus is present to manifest his kingship, in and through his church. At this point in Luke’s story I don’t think we can answer with any certainty whether or not the same power to heal that Peter exhibits here is to be present in every local church. It is quite clear that he and the other eleven apostles are in a unique situation. They alone, along with Paul, as we will see later, have been appointed by Christ to be his special messengers and to have a unique place in the church. They alone, as we are told in the letter to the Ephesians are the foundation stones for the church. They alone, as Paul says in Ephesians 3:1-4, have had the mystery of the gospel made known to them. It would make perfect sense that they would exercise a delegated authority unlike the authority of any other member of the church. I am not saying that the miracles ceased with the apostles. I am merely making the observation which the text makes up to this point and that is that the signs and wonders are being done by the apostles only. The fact that the lame leap at the hand of the apostles does, however, point to the fact that Jesus is present in his church and is exercising his kingly authority through the church. His kingdom has come and it is yet to come in its fullness. The power of Jesus as king is present in the church yet today so that Jesus is able to exercise his authority over the forces of evil in us and in the world. In the next point we will see one of the ways all agree his power is being exercised in and through his church.

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III. Save the powerless by his mighty word

There is another connection that Luke is making to the OT with this story. We are told on several occasions in the Law of Moses that people who are lame cannot enter into the temple. That is why Luke makes the point that the lame man is placed outside the temple, at the gate, at the time of prayer. While all other Jewish people are entering into God’s presence in the temple for the purpose of prayer, he is left to sit outside and beg for people to give him money. He has been lame from birth and thus he has never been able to enter into the temple. He has never come into God’s presence. He is forbidden to draw near to God because of his lameness. As we’ve seen in our studies in the OT the physical disabilities and deformities and bodily emissions that made people "unclean" and thus unable to enter into the presence of God were symbols of the deformity caused by sin. Only what is perfectly holy can come into God's presence and in the OT law God demonstrated that fact by forbidding what was not physically perfect from entering into his temple.

Here we have a man who from birth is excluded from God's presence. As John and Peter approach the gate called "Beautiful" to enter the temple to pray they notice the lame man and they stop. In some way Peter knows that God intends to heal this particular man right now. Peter fixes his gaze upon him and commands the man to look at him. The man looks up at Peter, expecting to receive money. Then Peter tells him two very disheartening things. First he tells him that he doesn't have any money to give him. The second disheartening thing is he commands the lame man to walk in the name of Jesus, the Messiah, who is from the town of Nazareth. Peter commands the lame man to do the impossible. He has never walked in his life. How can this be a good gift? How is it a good thing to command someone to do something they have no ability to do?

This is a good thing because in the command is the power to obey the command. Peter reaches out his hand and begins to pull him up. As he does, the man's feet and ankles become strong and so he, literally, jumps to his feet and starts walking. Then he accompanies Peter and John into the temple, for the first time in his life, and he walks and leaps in the air and praises God with loud shouts and exclamations. By a command given in the name of Jesus, that is, as an expression of his will and power, this lame man's life is entirely transformed. He has been given a new life by the command of Jesus. It is a life full of new ability and joy in the saving power of God through Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

As I indicated before, a "sign" points beyond itself to the thing it signifies. When you are driving down the interstate and your child tells you she has to go to the bathroom and then you see a sign for a rest area you are glad for the sign but only because it points to what you really need. The sign is quickly forgotten as you arrive at what the sign signifies. This healing of a lame man is a sign. It is a sign that points to the authority of the apostles. It is a sign that points to the fact that King Jesus is ruling in and through his church. It is a sign of that future kingdom when there will be no physical disabilities or illnesses or death. But also, this sign points to that greater miracle that is performed by the word of Christ's command. People who are lame from birth, who disfigured by sin and forbidden from entering God's presence are healed by the word of Christ. What you are witnessing here is the same power of God which called 3000 people to Christ when Peter preached and the same power that the Lord exercises day after day as he adds people to the church in Jerusalem.

Christ commands men and women and children to repent of their sins and trust that his life, death and resurrection has secured for all who believe life with God forever. When you and I hear that gospel we have no ability to do what is commanded. We are dead in our transgressions and sins. We are hostile to God. We hate him. We love sin. We have no ability to repent or to believe. Yet, by means of the word of Christ's command and through the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit, we lame ones, who cannot walk are given the ability to walk. We are given the ability to repent and believe. Just as in the ministry of Jesus himself, so now in the ministry of the apostles, the power of God's word to do the impossible is demonstrated. God commands humans to do the impossible and then he gives to those humans upon whom he fixes his gaze the ability to do what he commands. So I command you, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, repent of your sins and believe this great and glorious good news: God is willing to forgive you and to bring you to heaven because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection upon the condition of your repenting and believing. The God who gave you Jesus to believe in is able to also give you faith in Christ.

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