

TUTORIAL
2.13

God demonstrates His power through the Apostles' lives & words

This tutorial looks in detail at several incidents from the book of Acts, where God spoke and worked through His Apostles to make His message clear.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: ***Acts chapters 3 and 4, Psalm 118:22.***

Last time

We thought about how to glean principles from the book of Acts so that we can apply truth appropriately today. Luke gave a description of what was happening in the very early days for the Church in Jerusalem. The believers were keen to gather together and hear from the Apostles what the Holy Spirit had revealed to them. They enjoyed each other's company because of all they had in common. They often ate together and "broke bread", as Luke put it, to remember their Lord. And they put a real priority on prayer, spending time speaking to God.

A crippled man is healed through Peter and John

Now Luke describes an event that helps us understand how the Spirit was guiding the Apostles in their interactions with the wider community in Jerusalem (Acts 3:1-11). One afternoon, Peter and John are on their way to the Temple to take part in the three o'clock prayer service there. We know that these two guys are fishermen by trade, who responded to Jesus' invitation to follow Him, back in Galilee. By now they are some of Jesus' designated Apostles and key leaders in the early Jerusalem *Ecclesia*.

Both had the privilege later of contributing as authors to God's written Narrative in the form of letters they wrote to believers and churches...also in John's *Revelation* that records the amazing things God showed to him in visions while exiled on the Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

The fact that they are on their way to the Temple is instructive for us. Peter and John, and the other Apostles, know full well that a New Covenant has replaced the Old. They are no longer sacrificing at the Temple, but neither are they

rejecting, just for the sake of it, the practices of Judaism that don't contradict the Gospel. As time goes by, the Holy Spirit *will* open their eyes to some attitudes and practices they've wrongly brought over into the New paradigm - either through ignorance or fear of people...but that's in the future. For now, they continue to go to the Temple and join in the prayers which are, after all, offered to the true living God, who the believers know is the Father of the Lord Jesus.

This day Luke says that they are about to enter the Temple area by an entrance called *The Beautiful Gate*...well known by that name to his 1st century readers but not so easily identifiable today. It's safe to assume it is a well-used entrance because it's the spot where a crippled man chose to beg each day. This afternoon he's scrutinizing people, as beggars do, looking for someone to target. His eyes instinctively pick two men out from the crowd that is flowing past. They look like provincials, probably Galileans... weathered faces, and rough hands...no doubt fishermen. Perhaps he's seen them before...saw them before with Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe they'll feel generous, here in the big city to visit the Temple.

He gives his usual pitch, asking them for money. Oh, great, they're stopping, looking down. But no, it's a false alarm. They're saying they don't have any coins, but they'll give something else.

No thanks, don't need any clothes, or food...his eyes are already looking for the next target.

Now one of the fishermen is saying something about the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the One who created such a stir a few months back...the One the Romans crucified just outside the city wall. He'd thought a lot about that One. The guy called Jesus *the Christ*, the Messiah. Yes, that rings true. He felt sure He'd come from God. From all he'd heard, *that* One could heal him.

Now the man's telling him to get up and walk. Oh sure, I'd love to...what do you think I sit here for every day? But wait, what's going on? The fisherman has grabbed his hand, pulled him to his feet. For the first time in his life his legs are holding his weight! As he realizes what has happened he's flooded with a sense of elation and gratitude. He finds himself running, and jumping up and down, following the two men through the gate, yelling out to everyone about what's happened, praising God.

A crowd quickly gathers around them in the long porch on the eastern side of the Temple, the one called Solomon's Colonnade: "Hey, that's the guy who's always lying outside the gate begging." "No, that guy's a cripple, he can't walk." "I tell you, it's the same guy...says he's been healed." "It was those Galileans he's holding on to that did it. You know, from the group who claim Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. This is incredible...maybe God is showing something."

Peter lays it on the line with a crowd at the Temple

Peter isn't going to let the opportunity slip. He starts speaking to the crowd that's growing by the second...and he doesn't hold back (Acts 3:12-26). First, he calls them "Israelites"... reminding them of their heritage as God's chosen people, the ethnic group who entered into a Covenant with God, who'd been entrusted with His Narrative, who'd been chosen as the line for the Promised Deliverer to come through.

He and John didn't make the man walk, he says...it was God, the same One Abraham, Isaac and Jacob knew...it was to bring glory to His servant, Jesus. Then Peter refers to something many standing there were involved in. After Jesus' arrest Pilate examined Him, and realizing He was an innocent man, proposed releasing Him. When the despised Gentile occupier was prepared to let Jesus go, it was they, the Jews, who'd demanded His death. They, who prided themselves on following the Law, had rejected the "Holy Righteous One" in favor of a known murderer.

Peter's words are sledgehammer blows raining down... he charges them with the truth: they killed the Author of life! But you know what? God raised Him back from death. It's the truth. We saw it...saw Him alive again. And as a matter of fact, it was because this man believed in His name that he was healed. And Peter challenges them to repent, to turn to God.

It must have struck them as strange to be told to repent and turn to God when they've been thinking of themselves as good, religious people, here at the Temple for afternoon prayers.

But being religious isn't enough; even being a good Jew won't cut it. The advantage they do have as Israelites is that by sending Jesus to them, God has given them the first chance to recognize their sin and put their faith in the way God has provided for forgiveness.

Time and space here don't allow us to glean everything we can from the words Peter spoke under the Holy Spirit's guidance. But as God's witnesses, we would be rewarded by reflecting on how he shapes his message so it *resonates* with his audience, *challenges* their existing worldview, gives the Spirit opportunity to *convict* them of their sin and lead them to *repentance*, and for them to face the stark *choice* the Gospel presents.

The Apostles are arrested, threatened, released

The commotion in the Temple area doesn't go unnoticed. Word quickly gets to the religious leaders that some followers of Jesus are making claims about Him having come back from death (Acts 4:1-22). Won't that troublemaker from Nazareth ever go away? Didn't they see to it that He was put to death?

That should have been the end of it...with His disciples just fading away. That's what happened with adherents of other populist leaders. But Jesus' followers suddenly seem bolder than ever.

Right! Time to teach these upstarts a lesson. They arrest Peter and John and confine them, probably within the Temple complex, in a chamber where guards can keep them under observation for the night. But although they've incarcerated the two apostles, they can't hold back the truth. In fact, this is a theme that flows through Luke's entire account. The Good News about Jesus continues to move out regardless of the obstacles put in its way.

God's Spirit has already used the words He helped Peter speak to the crowd. Luke records that many who heard his very direct challenge that afternoon put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

They realize they rejected the very One who fulfilled God's promises to their ancestors, the One the prophets had pointed towards, the Lamb of God who was the perfect sacrifice for their sins. Luke mentions that by now the believers number about 5000, enough to make the religious authorities nervous.

The next morning the entire Jewish Council meets. All the 'big guns' are present. The situation is obviously being taken very seriously. The two Galilean fishermen are brought in front of the formidable group of leaders, most of whom are highly educated, wealthy and self-assured.

They demand answers, their tone is menacing. "Whose authority do you think you're functioning under?" But the Apostles are not intimidated. God's Spirit is doing what He does... as an Insider, offering His help, encouragement, guidance and friendship...to God's people, as they go about God's purposes.

Peter, respectful but confident, tells the Supreme Jewish council that he and John are functioning under the authority of Jesus from Nazareth...the One they - those very leaders - had crucified, but who was also brought back to life by God. "If you want to know about how we helped the crippled man yesterday, if that's what you're asking about...well, it was in Jesus' name." And Peter quotes from a Jewish song that the leaders would have been very familiar with. He asserts with complete confidence that this song or *psalm* that is part of their Old Covenant Scriptures (Psalm 118:22) refers directly to Jesus when it says, "The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone." The message is clear. Because of their proud insistence on constructing something according to their own plans, these Jewish leaders had violently rejected the One God had chosen as the perfect, ultimate stone for His building. So whether it's about healing a crippled man or people being saved from their sin, God gives the authority through only One name in the entire universe - Jesus.

It's obvious that these two fisherman have not had specialized training in the Scriptures or in Jewish religious traditions. So that makes it even more amazing to the leaders that they can speak with such confidence. In a line of

text loaded with significance, Luke says that the leaders recognized that these guys had spent time with Jesus. Even they, full of their own importance, achievements and position, have to acknowledge that people who followed Jesus would, of course, know a lot about the Scriptures.

Really, the Council find themselves at a loss. The guy who'd never walked before in over 40 years is standing there in front of them on his own two legs. It's the talk of Jerusalem. It was the same dilemma they faced with Jesus a few months ago...if they punish His disciples now it will probably start a riot. All they can do is rather weakly order them to never, ever, under absolutely no circumstances, use Jesus' name as their authority again!

Peter and John's response is polite, but you almost hear the incredulous amusement in their voices, "Would God want us to obey you or Him? Do you really think we're going to stop telling everyone about things we've actually seen and heard?" The Master's command is still ringing in their ears. He said they were to tell people about Him so they'd become His disciples...first in Jerusalem and then moving out from there. They are hardly likely to listen to any voices over His. After another hollow threat, the Council has no choice but to let them go.

Peter and John immediately report all this back to the rest of the believers. Before long, they are speaking to God together, acknowledging His amazing part in all these events (Acts 4:23-37). They also ask Him for courage not to be deterred by the threats of people. They want to keep sharing the Good News with others...and for Him to demonstrate His power through them so that people will have their needs met and come to know His Son, Jesus the Christ.

All of what has happened, including the threats from the authorities, only serves to unite the believers. They no longer see what they each have as their own exclusive possessions...it's been given to them to be shared. Their witness is increasingly powerful and effective. God shows that they are lined up with His purposes by blessing everything they're involved in.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Without going beyond what we've covered in the Narrative so far, explain your understanding of why God gave the Apostles the power to perform miracles. Describe this in "Narrative terms" - in other words, in light of what has

happened previously and what we can see that God is doing at this particular time in history.

2. How do you think you would have responded to the Jewish Supreme Council's commands and threats about speaking in Jesus' name? Do you tend to be fearful when you have an opportunity to share about Jesus or would you say that you tend to be bold? Are there times when we should speak out and others when we shouldn't? Please explain your answer.



ACTIVITIES

God demonstrates His power through the Apostles' lives and words

1. Carefully read what Peter said to the crowd in the Temple. In a few sentences for each point, describe in your own words how he:
 - Contextualised his message (i.e. described things in terms that would resonate with them)
 - Built on Narrative foundations (i.e. what they already knew of God's Story)
 - Challenged their worldview (i.e. assumptions that underpinned their beliefs, values and actions).