

Acts Series Part 8

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[0 : 00] Amen. We're short of good news stories at the moment.

There seems to be a cloud of doom and gloom that's enveloping us as a nation and indeed the world over. And I don't need to remind you of the common themes on the news programs, the credit crunch and the resulting unemployment that many are having to face, maybe after many years, some for the first time.

And then, of course, we've had this swine flu epidemic, which it would seem, and we are grateful for this, would appear to be perhaps less widespread than had been feared, though there is still uncertainty and time will tell.

And that's to name but a few. No doubt the list could go on. And no doubt you've noticed that the news programs in the midst of bad news do try and introduce a good news story to brighten up the bulletin.

But I don't know if this is your impression, but the impression I get is that increasingly there are less good news stories and more entertaining trivia, just some trivial piece of news that can fleetingly entertain us rather than good news in any meaningful sense of the word, though perhaps on occasions there are indeed good news stories.

[1 : 41] As we think of good news, I wonder, is good news something that we passively have to wait for and just hope that, well, things will get better and there will be some good news stories that can warm our hearts?

Is it a case of, well, if there is good news, great, but if not, well, what can we do? What about making good news happen? Is that something we could do? Could we make good news happen?

How about we ourselves being actors in a good news story? The passage that we are going to consider this morning as we continue to study the book of Acts involves a good news story.

And we want to learn from the actors in this story, in this drama, the ones who made it happen. Now, this is a passage, Acts chapter 3, verses 1 to 10, and if you do have your Bible there, it would be good to have it open as we study it together.

This is a passage that we shared some thoughts on at a prayer meeting back in September. So, some of you may remember some of what I'll be saying.

[3 : 01] It may, some of what I say may be familiar to you, or the case may be, maybe you won't. But as we continue through the book, we certainly didn't want to skip this particular incident.

So, the passage has been read, and it's a great story. We have this cripple. His condition is a very sorry and a very miserable one.

He had been crippled from birth, as we're told there in verse 2. Now, a man crippled from birth. He had never known anything else other than this handicap, other than this impediment.

We wonder what his life had been like. We're not told. We meet him here for the first time, but we can maybe speculate how difficult a life he must have lived.

As a child, not being able to play with other children, being set aside, being cast aside. We know that in the society in which he lived, a physical condition of this nature was often unfairly and cruelly thought to be a reflection on some fault or sin on the part of the sufferer.

[4 : 12] It's particularly cruel when you think of this poor man who was born in this way. And so, his life would have been, I'm sure, a very difficult and painful one.

Suffering had been his lot for many, many years. We do not know the family that he was born into, what their attitude to him was.

But certainly, as he grew older, he would have been increasingly a burden for them. And so, the time came, we don't know when, when he had to make his own way in the world, even given his physical limitations.

And what way was open to him other than to beg? And so, he became a beggar. He'd been begging for how long, we don't know. We're told in the following chapter, in chapter 4 and verse 22, that he was over 40 years old.

There, as the whole consideration of this miracle comes to a conclusion, and we'll be thinking about this part subsequently.

[5 : 18] But there we're told, for the man who was miraculously healed was over 40 years old. So, how long had he been begging? 10, 20, 30 years? We don't know. But his was a sorry condition.

His was a very sad life. And yet, all is about to change. One day, a day that had begun as every other day in his routine life.

One day, that day, everything had changed. He began the day, we imagine, lamenting his accursed lot, as he waited on the pity of others to carry his unwieldy body to his patch at the foot of the beautiful gate.

But he ends the day, blessing God, and leaping and jumping like a spring lamb. What a day. What a good news story for this man.

And indeed, all those who were witnesses of it, recognized it as such. This miracle produced a very real and profound feel-good factor for all those who were privileged to witness it.

[6 : 33] They were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. This is good news. He is a man whose life was changed in such a wonderful and positive way.

And he had a whole new future and panorama before him. Well, how did it happen? And what can we learn from how it happened? What do we need to do to make good news happen?

Well, let's just consider Peter and John's involvement in this miracle. And we'll follow their steps, as it were. And as we follow their steps, so we can learn from them and from the manner in which they deal very particularly with this man.

Maybe the first thing that we can say, almost by way of introduction, is that Peter and John aren't trying to make something happen. They didn't get up in the morning and say, well, we've got to make something good happen.

We want to impress people. We want to convince people as to the truth of the gospel. And a miracle would come in handy for that purpose. Well, let's see how we could do that.

[7 : 40] No, they were simply going about their ordinary business. They were simply doing what they do. And what is it that they do? That in itself is, I think, significant and instructive for us.

Well, there in verse 1, we see what they were doing, what they were about. One day, Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer. A seemingly quite unremarkable activity.

They were doing what they did at the time of prayer. It was their custom. It was their habit to pray in the temple at the time of prayer. This is all the more remarkable when we consider the context in which this is all going on.

We have been considering the previous chapters in these last few weeks. And we know that these are remarkable times. We know that thousands have been brought to faith in Jesus by the preaching of the Word.

The Word has been sealed and has been confirmed by miraculous signs that have accompanied it. These are no ordinary times. There is a revival of very tremendous proportions that is going on and is ongoing.

[8 : 54] And yet, here Peter and John say, It's three o'clock and it's time to pray. And so they're heading to the temple as it was their custom. Because this was important for them.

This was a priority for them. And so, this is where we find them. Heading to the temple at the time of prayer. And as I say, before moving on to seeing how they deal with this man.

Or how they relate to this man, which is our primary concern. It maybe is helpful for us just to step back and ponder on this matter of Peter and John. In such circumstances, giving to prayer the priority that they consider that it was due.

What about us? Do we get the basics right? Studying the Word. Praying with God's people. Gathering in God's house. These ordinary and yet fundamental activities for us as Christians.

If we do crave that God would do great things in our midst, as I hope we do. Let us not forget that so often God grants the wonderful blessing upon His church and through His church.

[10 : 07] As ordinary Christians fulfill their ordinary Christian duties. And very particularly faithful prayer. Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer.

But let's move on and consider more particularly the manner in which Peter and John relate to this man. This man crippled from birth.

And as we consider how they relate to them, we can order our thoughts in the following way. Order our thoughts around three things that they do. Three things that Peter and John do as they approach the temple and as they meet with this cripple.

We can consider what they see. We can consider what they say. And we can consider what they touch. These three verbs that are easy to remember.

What they see, what they speak, and what they touch. First of all, what do Peter and John see? Well, as we read there in verse 2, we are able to maybe paint a picture in our minds.

[11 : 14] Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful. For he was put to beg every day from those going into the temple court.

So we can imagine the scene. Peter and John are heading to the temple. It would seem that this is the gate by which they were going to enter in to the temple.

And what is it that they see? Well, even as they approach, this man is being brought and is being placed there at the foot of the gate. So you have a rather telling contrast in the visual imagery before them.

On the one hand, you have this spectacular gate described in this way. The gate called Beautiful. And at the foot of this gate, you have this, we might say, at least this would have been the way many would have considered this man.

An ugly eyesore. Almost spoiling the scenery. This wonderful architectural wonder which was this gate, which is generally identified as a gate called the Nicanor Gate.

[12 : 22] The term Beautiful Gate would seem to have been its nickname, as it were, because it was so beautiful. But this gate, if indeed it is rightly identified, was very spectacular.

It was very impressive visually. Seventy-five feet tall, all shimmering, a Corinthian bronze. It was the gate that led from the court of the Gentiles to the court of women on the wall itself, on the east wall of the temple.

And it was a very dramatic and impressive gate. And anybody who saw it couldn't fail but be impressed by it. And yet there, at the foot of the gate, we have this poor man, this crippled beggar.

That is what they see as they approach the temple. And we can picture the scene as this man is being brought. He's being carried and placed there by friends or neighbors or in any case those who took pity upon him.

Maybe some felt that this was their good deed that they could perform without necessarily having any great affection or friendship with the man. We don't know. But whoever they were, they were bringing the man and placing him there.

[13 : 36] Now, this is of little importance, really, but a curiosity is he's being brought at three in the afternoon. I wonder if that was his usual shift. At this time, he's being brought.

He wasn't there from early morning. Why that was, we don't know and we probably can't speculate. Certainly, the time of prayer would have been deemed a profitable time to beg as pious men and women were heading to the temple so they would feel, if not willing, certainly a sense of obligation to throw a coin at this beggar.

Well, whatever the reason, there he is at three in the afternoon being placed at his patch. And imagine that you are Peter and John and you are approaching this gate and this is the image that you see.

This wonderful gate and at the foot of the gate, this poor man. What do you do? What do you do when you see a beggar? Well, I ask you, what do you do when you see a beggar?

I think most of us in those circumstances would say, well, the gate provides me with my pretext for not making eye contact with this man. I'll just pretend I'm a tourist and admire the gate and walk past and I don't even need to engage with this man.

[14 : 56] I can almost pretend that I didn't notice him. And is that not the way we often respond when we are placed in a similar situation? The last thing we want to do is to look at the man.

The last thing we want to do is to make eye contact because that eye contact becomes very compromising and demanding. And so Peter and John perhaps could have done the same.

Simply walked by and avoided the complication of having to engage with this man. But what do they do? What do they do?

Well, there in verse 4 we're told what they do. Having been asked by the man for money, we read, Peter looked straight at him. Peter looked straight at him, as did John.

They both looked straight at him. Then Peter said, look at us. So the man gave them his attention. Now here, even in this beginning of their connection with this man, there is much to ponder on.

[15 : 58] There is no doubt that the language being used here is very deliberate to express the manner in which Peter and John, in a very clear, a very deliberate, and a very focused way, look straight at the man.

They want to see him. They want to know him. They want to connect with him. And indeed, not only does Peter want to connect with the man, he is very concerned that this be reciprocal, that not only they look straight at him, but that he would raise his glance and look at them.

You know what it is when there is the encounter between a passerby and a beggar. There's almost an embarrassment at both sides of those who want to pass by and not see the beggar, and sometimes the beggar himself, who is reluctant to look up at the passerby.

And yet here, you have a very different scenario, a very dramatically different scenario, where Peter and John deliberately look straight at the man and require of him, ask of him, that he too would look at them.

And I think what it teaches us, maybe it teaches us many things, but it certainly illustrates to us how for Peter it was important and it was necessary to connect in a real way with this beggar, to relate to him, to know him in a meaningful way before he could hope to help the man in any way.

[17 : 28] And that is true for us. If we aspire to help anybody, we need to know that person. If we only have a superficial knowledge of them, a fleeting understanding of their circumstances, we won't be in any position to help in any meaningful way, other than in some symbolic way that so often is as far as we get in helping others.

That's a symbolic gesture, more to solve our own conscience than to actually help in any meaningful way the one who is in need. If we aspire, and if we are conscious that we have this calling, and this duty, and this privilege to help people in a real and a deep way, the first step is to know them and to connect with them and to relate to them and to know where they are and to know what they're feeling and to know what their problems are.

And that so often is a stage that we don't get to in our superficial relationships, even with those maybe quite close to us. But Peter knew that it was necessary to know this man and to connect with this man and be known by this man and that a meaningful relationship would be developed that would allow him to help this man in his situation.

And so Peter looks straight at him. And as he looks straight at him, he sees this man not only as he is, but he sees him with the eyes of faith as he could become.

And that too, I think, is a way of looking that we must cultivate and that God would cultivate in us, that we would see men and women not only as they are, in all their misery perhaps, in all their sinfulness perhaps, though I'm not saying that of this particular man, but not only see people as they are, but to see them as they can become by the work of God in their lives, to see the glorious and the wonderful potential that there can be even in those whose outward appearances and genuine, real situation and circumstances are very miserable and demeaning and desperate, as was the case in great measure for this man.

[19 : 38] But Peter and John did not see him only in that way, but they saw him also as he could become. And so they look at him and they connect with him and they, in that way, are then able to help him.

So that is what we can say concerning what they see. And again, as we think of ourselves, it is so important for us to know a people, even in our circle, even those people that we maybe relate to or work with or have contact with.

If we as Christians particularly aspire to be a blessing to them, and that is our calling, not only to be blessed, but to be a blessing, it is very difficult to in any meaningful way help somebody or serve somebody or minister to somebody if we don't know them, if we keep them at arm's distance, if we avoid a meaningful communication and knowledge of them.

Knowing is dangerous. Knowing can be compromising. Knowing can be demanding. How often has it been your experience? I can certainly say that it has been mine that I think, I wish I didn't know that.

Life would be so much easier if I didn't actually know that because knowing that information, knowing what that person is going through becomes much more demanding and we think, oh well, I wish I hadn't been told.

[21 : 00] I wish I hadn't found that out. Life would be so much easier. Knowing is difficult. Knowing can be dangerous in that sense. And yet, it is necessary in our relationships, in our daily witness, in our outreach as a congregation.

And so, as we would participate this coming weekend in our conference on urban mission, the manner in which we've described it is this. Know the city. Love the city.

Transform the city. You see, we can't even begin to aspire to transform a city that we don't know. And we won't love a city that we don't know. The first step is to know. Be it an individual or in this case, as we think of ourselves as a congregation, seeking to know the city where God has placed us.

What do Peter and John see? What do they see? They see this man. Yes, in all his misery, but also they see him in all the glorious God-given potential that he has.

And they see him in this knowing way, seeking to know him and seeking to be known by him. But then we can move on and ask another question. What do they say?

[22 : 08] What are the words that they speak as they would speak to him? Well, we've already considered the first words that they address to him. Look at us. But then they continue there in verse 6 as the man looks expectantly, clearly hoping for a generous contribution.

But he is met with this unexpected reply from Peter in verse 6. Then Peter said, Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Walk. Or really if we want to get the impact that these words would have had on the beggar, but also on those around about who would have been listening. In the name of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

Walk. You see, this is the whole purpose of these first few chapters is to establish for those who are willing to listen that Jesus is the Messiah. And here Peter is saying this Jesus who died and rose again and is exalted on high, he is still working.

The Messiah is still working. In the name of Jesus. In the name of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Walk. These are the words that Peter speaks.

[23 : 19] What can we say about these words? Just notice some characteristics of them and I trust that even just in making reference to them, their application would be evident. The first thing that we can say is that these are very honest words.

These are very honest words. Peter is honest about his limitations. Silver or gold, I do not have. It's not the answer that the man wanted to hear. And yet, Peter is honest.

I can't help you in the way that you would like me to. That is beyond my possibility. Silver and gold, I do not have. Now, if we think a little bit about these words and I was just pondering on them for a moment.

At one level, I'm sure Peter was simply telling the truth that as he approached the temple on that occasion, he did not have silver or gold that he could have given to this man. And yet, if we just take a step back and consider Peter's possibilities, it wouldn't have been the case that Peter did not have access to any financial resources with which to help this man.

He did. Clearly he did. As one of the apostles, we've been considering even in these past weeks how the believers were selling their possessions that there would be a common pot precisely to help those in need.

[24 : 34] Now, Peter clearly had access to that common pot. Peter could have, if he had so wished, made a financial or a monetary contribution to this man. If not at that very moment, it wouldn't have been a complicated thing for him to say, well, just wait and I'll get you something.

I'll come back tomorrow. It's not that he had no access to silver or gold. So, given that that's the case, how are we to understand these words? Yes, it was a simple statement of the truth as he stood there before him.

But beyond that, what I think Peter is saying is, or what this reflects is that Peter knew that this man's problems could not be solved simply by silver and gold.

It wasn't a case that he had no access to silver or gold. He knew that this isn't actually what the man needed. It's what the man wanted. It's what the man thought was all that could help him.

But Peter knew more than that. He knew that this man's needs could not be met by the silver or gold that he aspired. And so there, we have an insight really into the discernment of Peter as he would meet this man.

[25 : 44] And God grant us discernment that we could see beyond the headline need, that we could see beyond the seeming circumstances or the felt needs of those around us and see to the core needs, indeed, of ourselves and those around us.

But he was honest. He stated things as they were. And in our dealings with people, how important it is to be honest. Let's not delude ourselves into thinking, well, as Christians, we have all the answers.

We have all the resources. And whatever the need is, well, we can meet it. Clearly, that is not so. We must honestly recognize who we are and what we can do and what our limitations are also.

But also appreciate that though there may be limitations, we have the core resources that Peter also had for helping this man.

He was honest. He was confident also in his words. His words ring of a solid confidence concerning the help that he can give to this man.

[26 : 47] In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk with great confidence and assurance he addresses this man and invites him to walk though he has been a cripple from birth.

Peter and John know what they don't have. But perhaps more importantly, they know what they do have. And what they have is the authority of Jesus. What they have is Jesus himself living in them through his Spirit.

And so, as Luke had said at the beginning of this book, that he would speak of the works that Jesus continued to do. Having spoken in the book of Acts of the works that Jesus did while he was on this earth, so in the book of Acts now, we're told of the works that Jesus continued to do through his people.

And Peter and John are confident that this is an authority that they have. And so, in that confidence, they address this man and provide the help that he needs.

They're honest and they're confident. It's important for us to be aware of the resources that we do have. And our resources are great and ample. Our spiritual resources, the God whom we serve, is the same God who can help us serve those in need as he helped and used Peter and John to do so.

[28 : 05] Honest words. Confident words. Also, Christ-glorifying words. In helping this man, they also are enabled or are able to reveal the power and the identity of the one who grants them this capacity in the name of the Messiah, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Walk. And as, and this we'll be considering on another occasion, when they are challenged by the religious leaders as to what they had done, and we read the passage, they are at pains to emphasize that it was Jesus who had done this work.

That he is the one who had healed this man. That he was the one who was at work. The one, these religious leaders had crucified. He is the one who had healed this man. And so, it is their great concern that the glory would be granted to Jesus.

That he would be the one who would be honored and praised by this marvelous miracle. May it be so for us as we would seek to serve and to help others in need.

That we would not take the glory that indeed our congregation would not be praised for what we may be able to do, but rather in all that we do we would seek to glorify Christ and that he would be honored, that he would be glorified, that he would be lifted up as we do all that we do in the name of Jesus.

[29 : 27] And how important it is in the work that we do as a congregation as we seek to become engaged in what is sometimes called mercy ministry and seeking to help the physical and material needs of our community.

that we would do so in the name of Jesus, that the ministry of word and the ministry of deed would go together, not as things that are separate, but rather together, all that we do in the name of Jesus, in the authority of Jesus, in representation of Jesus, and indeed by Jesus himself through us.

What else can we say about these words of Peter and John? Honest words, confident words, Christ glorifying words, and of course, the words and the act, a compassionate act, compassionate words.

It's interesting how Peter himself describes this miracle in chapter 4 and verse 9. We read there he's having to adjust himself before the rulers and elders and what does he say there in chapter 4 and verse 9?

He says, if we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple. An act of kindness. kindness is quite low-key in a sense.

[30 : 38] The manner in which he describes it is what have we done? What we have done is simply an act of kindness. What motivated us? Our motivation was to help this man. That was what we motivated us. That is why we did what we did.

This was an act of kindness. And yet, how powerful can an act of kindness be? And so for us too, as we are placed where we are placed and as we go about our daily business, let us not underestimate how in God's purposes a simple act of kindness can be powerfully used.

Not only to help the one that we are kind to, but indeed to reveal the glory of God to those who may witness that act of kindness. Not that we do it, but they would see, and yet it can be the means for convincing others.

So these are some characteristics of these words that Peter and John address to the man. That is what they say. Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give you in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Walk. But then finally, not only what they see, not only what they say, but what they do, what they touch. And just very briefly noticing that there in verse 7, having addressed these words to the cripple, we read, taking him by the right hand, he helped him up and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.

[32 : 03] The words have been addressed. Peter could have said, well, I believe in the power of God. It's not necessary for me to stretch out my hand. The man is healed. He simply needs to stand up to believe and all will be well.

But no, in a very touching and in a very sensitive way, in a very kind way, taking him by the right hand, he helped him up. He helped him up and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.

Is it not reasonable to presume that even the man's faith is cultivated by the hand of Peter? He wants to believe and something seems to be going on in his ankles that he's never experienced before but it's still very difficult to believe but as that hand is stretched out so his faith is also strengthened and he is enabled to believe and he's enabled to make that effort to stand up with the help of Peter.

Peter's hand touching him is an important and integral element of this incident that we have before us. And so he touches the man, he helps the man, he affirms the man as he stretches out his hand.

As it has been put rather pithily and dramatically, I suppose, by one commentator, the power was God's but the hand was Peter's.

[33 : 21] The power was God's but the hand was Peter's and there is so much there for us. I think it's probably not necessary to apply it to death. I just leave that with you. The power was God's but the hand was Peter's.

And God's power, has it changed? No, it has not changed. God remains as powerful today as he has ever been. But maybe the question, the sobering question for us is where are the hands? Where are the hands?

Where are your hands? Where are my hands? What are we doing with them? Well, I trust that as we ponder on the challenges that we are faced as a congregation in seeking to reach out and to help those who are in need and we are surrounded by so many in need that we would learn from Peter and John, that we would learn how important it is to know as we've expressed it, to know the city but let's not worry about a big city quite yet in all that dimension but even just to know that person, to know that neighbor, to know that colleague, to know that person who crosses your path, to know and only knowing can we then love and only as we love can we be used by God to transform and that God would help us do so.

Let us pray.